CHAPTER – 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 WOMEN

Women represent the better half of India and emancipation of this better half is to be achieved with a view that our sisters should actively participate in all our social, political and economic activities that are necessary for nation-building.¹ In a developing country like ours the obvious inequality of women vis-à-vis men is subsumed under the more pervasive inequality between various sections of society. Further in Indian society where stratification through caste is a marked feature, where privileges and discrimination get entrenched through custom and usage, acceptance of equality of status and opportunity becomes a significant landmark. Further, persistence of gender bias in terms of inequality of opportunity is further accentuated by operation of policies which lead to marginalisation of women. Thus poverty and deprivation accentuates gender inequalities.²

Gandhi played a pivotal role in making the traditional home bound women to come out of their homes to participate in the freedom struggle. Gandhi’s basic ideas on women’s rights were equality in some spheres and opportunities for self-development and self-realisation. He believed that the decline in women’s position and status lay in male...

prejudice and arrogance. The All-India Women’s Conference entered the political arena in 1928 by pledging its support to the cause for independence, and by calling for equal rights for women, so that they might add their votes to the cause. Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women by saying: “I am uncompromising in the matters of women’s rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality.”

Women constitute around half of the total population in India but even after more than sixty years of Independence, they continue to live in a state of neglect and exploitation. Scientific achievements and modernisations are yet to make an impact on them. They generally have lower incomes and seldom have equal opportunities to develop their capacities. It is vital for a nation to have a significant involvement of women in the process of change as they constitute a very significant proportion of human resource in our nation. Women in general play a very important role in all walks of life, in other words, half of humanity and their strength cannot be ignored.

According to the Human Development Report (1994), women perform approximately two-third of the world’s total work but own only ten percent of the world’s income and one percent of world’s lands. The recent attempts towards globalisation, economic liberalisation and structural adjustment programmes and policies have led to the ‘widening of gender disparities’ in advanced countries and ‘feminisation of poverty’ in

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4 S.R. Sharma: op.cit., p. 158.
the developing countries. Bandyopadhyay mentioned that traditionally women are seldom economically active in many countries. Gender inequalities in terms of economic and educational opportunities are persisting to a great extent in these countries. Men and women in India mostly undertake distinct types of work reflecting their culturally determined roles within the home, or access to education. There are far fewer women in India in the paid workforce than there are men. Women’s work is undervalued and unrecognised though many of them work longer hours than men, and carry the major share of household and community works that are unpaid and invisible. Despite this, many women and girls are also deprived of educational opportunities leading to their exclusion from economic activities.

The first World Women’s Conference was held in Mexico in 1975 on the eve of the celebration of International Women’s Year. As a follow-up of the conference, the United Nations declared 1976-1985 as the Decade of Women. The 2nd mid-Decade Conference was held at Copenhagen, Denmark in 1980 to review the programmes undertaken by different countries during the preceding five year period 1976-1980. The 3rd Conference was held at Nairobi, Kenya in 1985 and in 1995, the United Nations organised the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing. Some of the main Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies was elimination of illiteracy, women’s education and training, economic security and autonomy, basic health care services, women’s rights to control their own

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fertility, men and women to share caring of home and children and women’s equality in decision-making.  

Fighting gender discrimination has far reaching positive effects, not only for women and girls, but also for society as a whole. Women are the primary caregivers for children and they ultimately shape children’s lives. This is especially true in traditionally patriarchal societies where roles and responsibilities are strictly delineated by gender. Asia has made great advances in the last fifty years and on the whole the region has been moving towards greater economic growth and growing political and social openness, yet in many Asian societies (both modern and traditional), much still remains to be done to improve the standing and rights of women. Empowering women and achieving gender parity will ensure that children thrive and in the long run, their families, societies and countries flourish. This goal is what UNICEF calls the ‘double dividend of gender equality’.  

1.2 WOMEN EMPOWERMENT  

Empowerment is an ongoing and dynamic process, which enhances women’s and any other marginalised and alienated groups’ abilities to change the structures and ideologies that keep them subordinate. It is a process of making present power structures more inclusive, including all women and men, senior citizens, dalits, indigenous people and people with disabilities (Bhasin and Dhar 1998). Empowerment is therefore clearly concerned with power, and particularly with the power relations – and the distribution of power – between individuals and groups (Kahlon 2004, Batliwala 1994:17). The

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Empowerment process may be broken down in three dimensions, economic, social and political, which reinforce each other. While the economic aspects would include increasing women’s access to and command over tangible and intangible resources, such as wealth, property, employment, knowledge and information, social aspect would include changing the existing discriminatory ideology and culture, which determine the environment for women’s existence. Finally, political process must increase women’s presence and influence in the power structure. Political ability to bring about changes in women’s legal status, to direct resources to women and to get access to positions of power is of crucial importance.  

Empowerment of women as a concept was introduced at the International Women’s Conference in 1985 at Nairobi. The Conference defined empowerment as a redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women. It encompasses many other aspects in addition to the economic self-sufficiency. It entails education including self-confidence and ability to take decisions about their own lives. Majumdar defined the term ‘empowerment’ as a concept which is more context-driven rather than theory-driven, it is necessary to focus on the context in which discussion on women empowerment takes place. It is the process that helps people gain control of their lives, through awareness and to take action and work.  

11 M. Bandyopadhyay: op.cit., p. 16.
According to the Oxford Dictionary, to ‘Empower’ is to give authority to. In Meghalaya, authority in its real sense is the exclusive preserve of men. They are the sole inheritor of power. Politics and Administration are considered the prerogatives of men. A Headman inevitably heads the village level traditional administration called Durbar. Thus, this level of administration is completely under the domain of men. Women are restricted from attending Durbar unless specifically called for specific purposes when the services of women are required. While women have a say in household matters, men hold all major areas of decision-making. Nehru pleaded that women must be trained “in every department of human activity” so that they can play an effective part in professions and other spheres. He wanted women to be assertive and fight for their own rights. This emphasis on equality and independence led him into abandoning some of the existing conventions, regarding nominating a woman to the Congress Working Committee. Faced by the criticism of women’s organisations, he retorted sharply: “It would be wrong to imagine that your rights will be given to you or that they will drop down from somewhere, if you simply sit at home.”

International Women’s Day was first observed in Germany on March 19, 1911. It started as a celebration of working women. Demonstrations marking International Women’s Day in Russia proved to be the first stage of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Thirteen Air India flights will have an all women crew on Women’s Day. Indeed International Women’s Day is the story of ordinary women as makers of history; it is rooted in the centuries-old struggle of women to participate in society on an equal footing with men. Last year on Women’s Day the Rajya Sabha sought to pass the Bill for 33 percent

Reservation for Women in Parliament and State Legislatures. But the Bill was passed a day later. This time Parliament session is on but the Bill which is still to be passed by the Lok Sabha is not even mentioned. It only goes to show just how interested political parties across the spectrum are about pushing the Bill to make it an Act.¹⁴

At the international level, India has also unreservedly endorsed the Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the Platform for Action (1995). India has also ratified various international human rights instruments, notably the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1993, as a mark of its commitment to human rights and the advancement of women. The paradigm shift in the country’s approach to women’s issues from welfare to development as demonstrated in the plan documents from the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-978) onwards. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognised as the central issue in determining the status of women. The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001 states in unequivocal terms that “the raising of women’s status cannot be singularly achieved by improving their position in one sphere, institutional mechanisms; appropriate resource allocations are pre-requisites for the implementation of an effective programme”.¹⁵

¹⁴ Editor’s Column: “Women’s Day – A Ritual?” Shillong Times, Dated: 08.03.2011, p. 4.
1.3 EDUCATION

Education has always been accorded an honoured place in Indian society. The great leaders of the Indian freedom movement realised the fundamental role of education and throughout the nation’s struggle for independence, stressed its unique significance for national development. Gandhi formulated the scheme of basic education, seeking to harmonise intellectual and manual work. This was a great step forward in making education directly relevant to the life of the people. Many other national leaders likewise made important contributions to national education before independence.¹⁶

In the post-independence period, a major concern has been to give increasing attention to education as a factor vital to national progress and security. Problems of educational reconstruction were reviewed by several commissions and committees, notably the University Education Commission (1948-49) and the Secondary Education Commission (1952-53). Some steps to implement the recommendations of these Commissions were taken; and with the passing of the Resolution on Scientific Policy under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the development of science, technology and scientific research received special emphasis. Toward the end of the third Five Year Plan, a need was felt to hold a comprehensive review of the educational system with a view to initiating a fresh and more determined effort at educational reconstruction; and the Education Commission (1964-66) was appointed to advise Government on “the national pattern of

education and on the general principles and policies for the development of education at all stages and in all aspects.”\(^{17}\)

Making Elementary education child-centred will be to make education a joyful, inventive and satisfying learning activity, rather than a system of rote and cheerless, authoritarian instruction. Much of it would depend on reform of the curriculum and co-curricular activities.\(^{18}\) Secondary and Higher Secondary education is on the one hand terminal for those who enter the world of work after this stage. For such people a strengthened vocational scheme should form the main plank of strategy. For the rest it is preparatory to higher education and therefore a good grounding in the subject area should be provided along with learning orientation.\(^{19}\) Therefore there is a need “to achieve a profound transformation of higher education in order that it becomes an effective promoter of sustainable human development and at the same time, improves its relevance with closer links with the world of work and achieve quality in its teaching, research, business and community extension functions including lifelong learning”.\(^{20}\)

Radhakrishnan Commission on University Education had set up goals for development of higher education. While articulating these goals, the Commission put it in the following words: “The most important and urgent reform needed in education is to transform it, to endeavour to relate it to the life, needs and aspirations of the people and thereby make it the powerful instrument of social, economic and cultural transformation

\(^{17}\) Ibid.


\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 28.

necessary for the realisation of the national goals. For this purpose, education should be developed so as to increase productivity, achieve social and national integration, accelerate the process of modernisation and cultivate social, moral and spiritual values.”21

1.4 EDUCATION IN MEGHALAYA

Before the advent of the British, there was no formal education system in any corner of the area now known as Meghalaya. The education system in Meghalaya was nurtured by the interest and efforts of the Christian missionaries, though, during the British Raj, its progress in the region was very slow. Educational development mainly started after independence, especially after the area attained full statehood in 1972, the growth of school education in Meghalaya picked momentum. The progress of education was further enhanced with the launching of the First Five-Year Plan and the state and central governments’ efforts to fulfil the aims enshrined in the Constitution of India.22

The Government of Meghalaya has played a crucial role in developing the system of education in the state. According to 2001 census report, the state has a literacy rate of 63.31 percent. The literacy rates for males and females are 66.14 percent and 60.41 percent respectively. In order to improve the academic scenario of the state, Meghalaya has introduced compulsory and free education for students up to 14 years of age. It

21 Ibid., p. 3.
follows the 10+2 pattern of education and the state schooling system includes primary schools, middle schools, secondary schools and higher secondary schools.\textsuperscript{23}

North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) is the regulatory authority for the academic courses offered by the colleges. According to the courses prescribed by the university, there are two years of Higher Secondary course after Class X followed by the three-year degree courses with major in various subjects at the degree level. To provide degree level training to graduate teachers, the state has four Colleges for Teacher Education (CTE) and in addition to meeting the training needs of teachers in service, the colleges provide pre-service training to graduates and post-graduates. These colleges follow the course prescribed by NEHU which awards the degree to the successful students.\textsuperscript{24}

NEHU has been providing facilities for post-graduate studies in certain subjects to the students of Meghalaya. Now, there is scope in the state for pursuing M.Ed., a teacher training course at the post-graduate level. North Eastern Indira Gandhi Regional Institute of Health & Medical Sciences (NEIGRIHMS) is a premier institute which offers MBBS and B.Sc. (nursing) courses. It is the third Post-Graduate Medical Institute in the country. Shillong Engineering & Management College offers 4 years B.Tech degree courses in Engineering and 3 years BBA and BCA courses. Recently the state has also been blessed with an IIM in Shillong. This is the seventh IIM in India and has since increased the education potential of the state by many folds.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{23} [www.indiaedu.com/meghalya/schools/](http://www.indiaedu.com/meghalya/schools/), browsed on 04\textsuperscript{th} February 2011
\textsuperscript{24} S. Majumdar and T. Mark: \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 60, 63-64.
\textsuperscript{25} [http://megeducation.gov.in/dhte/acts](http://megeducation.gov.in/dhte/acts) browsed on 20\textsuperscript{th} January 2011
Presently, education in Meghalaya is being supervised and taken care of by three
directorates, namely,

1. Directorate of School Education and Literacy (DSEL)
2. Directorate of Educational Research and Training (DERT)
3. Directorate of Higher and Technical Education (DHTE)

1.5 WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

Education has been perceived to be a significant instrument in improving the status of
women and consequently there have been efforts to improve the access of girls and
women to education. For a country which has accepted the goal of a democratic,
egalitarian society, promotion and development of women’s education is foregone
commitment. Policy makers have recognised that, apart from the political structure,
corrective legislation and economic transformation, the formal education system has to
be made more democratic and change-oriented. It is a fundamental prerequisite for
participation in the various developmental activities of society. The level of recognition
of the crucial significance of education for women is dependent upon societal
expectations of women’s roles.26

Education is a major instrument of social change and transformation. Realising the
importance of this aspect NPE (1986) has emphasised that “Education will be used as an
agent of basic change in the status of woman. In order to neutralise the accumulated
distortions of the past, there will be a well conceived edge in favour of women. The
National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment

26 Quoted in N. Desai: op.cit., p.1392.
of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, text books, training and orientation of teachers, decision-makers, administrators and the active involvement of educational institutions.\textsuperscript{27}

Women become empowered through collective reflection and decision making and the parameters of this are building a positive self-image and self-confidence; developing ability to think critically; building up group cohesion and fostering decision-making and action; ensuring equal participation in the process of bringing about social change; encouraging group action in order to bring about change in the society; providing the wherewithal for economic independence.\textsuperscript{28}

National Policy for the Empowerment of Women will ensure equal access to education for women and girls. Special measures will be taken to eliminate discrimination, universalise education, eradicate illiteracy, create a gender-sensitive educational system, increase enrolment and retention rates of girls and improve the quality of education to facilitate life-long learning as well as development of vocational/technical skills by women. Reducing the gender gap in secondary and higher education would be a focus area. Gender sensitive curricula would be developed at all levels of educational system in order to address sex stereotyping as one of the causes of gender discrimination.\textsuperscript{29}


Evidently, in Meghalaya, representation of girl students in educational institutions at all stages of education is low. Efforts therefore need to be made to improve the literacy rates with particular reference to female literacy as women in Meghalaya tribal society enjoy quite an empowered position, and their literacy is vital for the all-round development of the society.\textsuperscript{30}

Women’s empowerment is possible only if we pursue the path of holistic development in which full justice is meted out to women in all walks of life, where women share not only the obligations but also power on an equal footing with the men folk, where gender divisions no longer exist and where both men and women are equally free to engage into leisure activities they enjoy the most, where politics is made possible for women because of parallel shifts in child-rearing, domestic responsibilities and caring of the elderly and sick. Only such an approach towards the women can enhance their self-respect, self-reliance and self-dignity. Education in general and higher education in particular, can play an increasingly vital role in inculcating the right values in commensuration with the new status of the women.\textsuperscript{31}

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In some ways, the condition of matrilineal women could be even more precarious than that of their counterparts in patriarchal societies. A significant reason for this has to do with the fact that these women experience what could be called ‘double negative effects’: the universal discrimination experienced by all women, to which is added the burden of living under the assumption that women control everything. This in turn is taken to mean

\textsuperscript{30} S. Majumdar and T. Mark: \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 21 and 23.
\textsuperscript{31} A. Gupta: \textit{op.cit.}, p. 294.
that these women do not need any special attention to ensure their rights. The state of Meghalaya also has the dubious distinction of having a high rate of domestic violence. Besides vulnerability to violence, political right is another sphere where women are not empowered. While women in the rest of the country have long got the right of 33 per cent representation in the Panchayats (local self-governance), women in Meghalaya have only recently woken up to the need to seek representation in such middle-level political institutions at the district councils. Politically, women in Meghalaya are nowhere. They can neither become tribal nor village chiefs, leave aside occupying these positions; they do not even have the right to elect candidates to these posts.  

The position and status of women in Meghalaya reveal that while the system of matriliny is being followed, patriarchal ideologies and patrilineal principles operate within the system and ultimately define how men and women play out their roles and responsibilities in a way that allow room for inequality among the genders. Moreover, poverty cuts across the society where it is the womenfolk in particular who become vulnerable with little or no bargaining power to fight it. The absence of well managed health care services and access to efficient transport systems has accentuated the marginalisation of women. These have also been compounded by the fact that desertion and other forms of violations and violence against women are very much present in the state.

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Although the women in the state of Meghalaya enjoy a little more mobility and visibility than their counterparts in the rest of the country, their life, however, is not free from violence. Desertion is a common phenomenon in the state especially in the villages where de-facto marriages (unregistered marriages) and teenage pregnancies have perpetuated the problem. Rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence are very much in existence and dealing with them has been made even more difficult because it is dismissed as an issue that cannot and does not exist given the matrilineal set-up. The idea in operation is that matriliney as a system inherently guarantees the rights of women and accords them a status higher than that of the men folk who many believe are the ones being discriminated against.34

Even matrilineal Meghalaya has its male preserve which women do not have access to. Women are excluded from decision-making in their traditional institutions. Although the culture is matrilineal, the worldview is very much patriarchal. Except for the fact that lineage is from the mother’s clan line and ancestral property passes through the youngest daughter, every other aspect is the same as in the other states of the region. Meghalaya, in fact tops the list in terms of domestic violence.35

The status of women in Meghalaya has come under critical analysis in which indicators (of their access) to health care, decision making, employment and literacy have been rather low in comparison to some other states in India. Women in Meghalaya contribute largely to agricultural production to the local market as sellers in unorganised sector.

34 Ibid., pp. 15-16.
There has been a general notion that women of Meghalaya are privileged because it has a matrilineal society and because they enjoy inheritance rights. However, major decisions on women’s mobility, their social obligations and socio-political actions are made by their maternal uncles.\textsuperscript{36}

It has been realised that a society cannot progress in a sustainable manner unless prevailing inequalities are not removed from it. The International Education Commission mentions that, “Providing women and girls with an education which will, as quickly as possible, bridge the gap separating them from men and give them the chances for action and empowerment hitherto withheld from them in the workplace, in society and in sphere of politics, is more than an ethical imperative.” The countries across the world now need to consider education of girls and women as an important investment in human development as well as human right.\textsuperscript{37}

In the light of the above stated dismal situations of women in the matrilineal society of Meghalaya on which this study is intended, it provides a strong base for the investigator to examine the present status of women and to study the role of education in empowering the same. Hopefully the major findings will contribute significantly and help with the conclusions leading to implications of the present study and suggestions for further study.


\textsuperscript{37} M. Bandyopadhyay: \textit{op.cit.}, p. 2.
1.7 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem under study is titled as:

A Study of Women Empowerment through Education in the Matrilineal Society of Meghalaya

1.8 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study has the following objectives:

1. To study the enrolment trends of both women and men at Higher Levels of Education.
2. To study the status of women in Khasi Matrilineal Society on areas like education, social, economic and political spheres.
3. To study the opinions of both men and women towards empowerment of women in Khasi society.
4. To find out the extent of participation of educated women in different walks of life.
5. To offer suggestions for enhancing empowerment of Khasi women.

1.9 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are some of the research questions posed for the present study:

1. What is the enrolment trend?
2. What is the status of women in Khasi Matrilineal Society?
3. What are the opinions of women and men?
4. What is the extent of participation of educated women in different walks of life?
5. What kind of suggestions need to be offered for enhancing empowerment of Khasi women?

1.10 OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF THE TERMS

The present study involves the following key terms which are operationally defined as follows:

**Women Empowerment**: It is a process of mobilising and activating women’s power so as to enable them to claim their own power and status in the socio-economic and political spheres.

**Matrilineal Society**: This term refers to the society with a matrilineal system whereby descent and succession are from the mother’s clan and the ancestral property passes through the youngest daughter.

1.11 DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

- The lowest rung of the educational level required for the study is from graduation onwards as mentioned in the objective.

- The study of the enrolment trends at Higher Levels of Education is delimited to the Scheduled Tribes female and male of Meghalaya because segregation of the Khasi tribe is not possible and the data are not available.

- The delimitation of the years for the enrolment trends is from 2001 – 2009 i.e. eight years altogether.
The collection of data for the enrolment of students in Higher Education is from the Annual Reports maintained by the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) and not from any other private university due to non-availability of the required records.

- Around 1,800 Questionnaires and Opinionnaires were distributed for the study but approximately three-fourths responses were returned.
- The Interview-Schedule was delimited to ten professionals and nine responded.

1.12 CONCLUSION

Chapter One portrays the background, justifications and delimitations of the topic under research. The next stage is the study of literature related to the topic. This will help to sort out materials which are closely connected to the problem being tackled.