Meghalaya is a state in North East India. The word ‘Meghalaya’ literally means the ‘Abode of Clouds’ in Sanskrit and in other Indian languages. It is a hilly strip in the eastern part of the country about 300 km. long (east-west) and 100 km. wide, with a total area of about 22,720 km². The state is bounded on the north by Assam and by Bangladesh on the south. The capital is Shillong also known as the Scotland of the East, which has a population of 260,000.

Shillong is a popular hill station. There are several falls in and around Shillong. The Shillong peak is the highest in the state and is good for trekking. It is also known as the ‘Abode of the Gods’ and has excellent views. If one is not in a mood for camping, the state also offers many good hotels and lodging facilities. It was previously part of Assam, but on 21 January 1972, the districts of Khasi, Garo and Jaintia hills became the new state of Meghalaya. The town of Cherrapunji in the Khasi Hills south of the capital Shillong holds the world record for most rain in a calendar month, while the village of Mawsynram, near the town of Cherrapunji, holds the distinction of seeing the heaviest yearly rains. The best time to visit Meghalaya is during the months of March to July. During the Colonial rule, the British and Assam Tea Estate owners would shift here during the summer months to escape the heat of the Indian Plains.
About one third of the state is forested. The Meghalaya subtropical forest eco-region encompasses the state; its mountain forests are distinct from the lowland tropical forests to the north and south. The forests of Meghalaya are notable for their biodiversity of mammals, birds, and plants. Nearly 10% of the total geographical area of Meghalaya is under cultivation. Agriculture in the state is characterised by limited use of modern techniques and low productivity. As a result, despite the vast majority of the population engaged in agriculture, the contribution of agricultural production to the state’s GDP is low and most of the population engaged in agriculture remains poor. A substantial portion of the cultivated area is under the traditional shifting agriculture known locally as ‘Jhum’ cultivation. Climatic conditions in Meghalaya also permit a large variety of horticultural crops including fruits, vegetables, flowers, spices and medicinal plants. These are considered to be higher value crops but traditional values and food security concerns have prevented farmers at large from embracing these crops. The important fruits currently grown in the state include citrus fruits, pineapple, papaya, banana etc. The mandarin orange grown in Meghalaya is considered to be of very high quality. In addition to this, a large variety of vegetables are grown in the state including cauliflower, cabbage and radish. Areca nut plantations can be seen all over the state, also around the road from Guwahati to Shillong. Other plantation crops like tea, coffee and cashew have been introduced lately and are becoming popular.

The partition of the country has created severe infrastructure constraints for the North-eastern region, with merely 2% of the perimeter of the region adjoining the rest of the country. A narrow strip of land, often called the Siliguri Corridor, or the Chicken’s Neck connects the region with the State of West Bengal. Meghalaya is a land locked state with
a large number of small settlements in remote areas. Road is the only means of transport within the state. While the capital Shillong is relatively well connected, road connectivity in most other parts of the state is relatively poor. A significant portion of the roads in the state are still un-metalled. Most of the arrivals into Meghalaya take place through Guwahati in neighbouring Assam, which is nearly 103 km away. Meghalaya does not have any railhead. It has a small airport at Umroi, about 40 km from Shillong on the Guwahati-Shillong highway. The small size of the airport does not allow the operations of large aircraft and only small aircrafts operate from Kolkata and Agartala.

Earlier, foreign tourists required special permits to enter the areas that now constitute the state of Meghalaya. However, the restrictions were removed in 1955. Meghalaya is considered to be one of the most picturesque states in the country. It has enough tourism content to attract tourists of many different interests. Shillong Golf-Course, one of the oldest golf-courses of India. Meghalaya also offers many adventure tourism opportunities in the form of mountaineering, rock climbing, trekking and hiking, water sports etc. The state offers several trekking routes some of which also afford an opportunity to encounter some rare animals such as the slow loris, assorted deer and bear. Meghalaya is also known for its ‘Sacred Groves’. These have been preserved by the traditional religious sanction, since the ancient days. The Mawphlang sacred forest also known as ‘Law-Lyngdoh’ is one of the most famous sacred forests, it is located about 25 kilometers from Shillong and it is a must to visit for nature lovers. Near the Indo-Bangladesh Border there is a small beautiful village known for its cleanliness, it is called the Mawlynnong village. It has earned the distinction of being the cleanest village in India. It is situated 90 kilometers from Shillong. Some of the interesting features are the
presence of living root bridge and another strange natural phenomenon of a boulder balancing on another rock. Meghalaya also has many natural and man-made lakes. The Umiam Lake (popularly known as Bara-Pani meaning Big-Water) on the Guwahati-Shillong road is a major tourist attraction. The Umiam Lake has a water sports complex with facilities such as rowboats, paddleboats, sailing boats, cruise-boats, water-scooters and speedboats. Meghalaya has several parks; Thangkharam Park, the Eco-park, the Botanical Garden and Lady Hydari Park to name a few. Dawki, which is located at about 96 Kilometers from Shillong is the gateway to Bangladesh and affords a scenic view of some of the tallest mountain ranges in Meghalaya and the Bangladesh border lands.

Like most other states in India, Meghalaya has a unicameral legislature. The Meghalaya Legislative Assembly has 60 members at present. Meghalaya has two representatives in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Parliament of India; one each from Shillong and Tura. It also has one representative in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Parliament. The ceremonial head of the State is the Governor appointed by the Government of India. However, the real executive powers are held by the Chief Minister. Meghalaya does not have a high court of its own. The Guwahati High Court has jurisdiction in Meghalaya. A Circuit Bench of the Guwahati High Court has been functioning at Shillong since 1974. In order to provide local self governance machinery to the rural population of the country, provisions were made in the Constitution of India and accordingly the Panchayati Raj institutions were set up. However, on account of the distinct customs and traditions prevailing in erstwhile state of Assam (of which Meghalaya and most of the North East were a part), it was felt necessary to have a separate political and administrative structure in Assam. Moreover, some of the tribal communities in the region also had their own
All the three major ethnic tribal groups, namely, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos also have their own traditional political institutions that have existed for hundreds of years. These political institutions are fairly well developed and function at various tiers, such as the village level, clan level and state level. In the traditional political system of the Khasis each clan has its own council known as the Durbar Kur, which was presided over by the clan headman. The council or the Durbar manages the internal affairs of the clan. Similarly, every village has a local assembly known as the Durbar Shnong, i.e. village Durbar or council, which is presided over by the village headman. These councils or Durbars play an administrative role in issues of common interest, such as sanitation, water supply, health, roads, education and conflict resolution. However, the inter-village issues are dealt with through a political unit comprising adjacent Khasi Villages. This political unit is known as the Raid. It has its own council the Raid Durbar, which is presided over by the elected Headman known as Basan, Lyngdoh or Sirdar. Above the Raid is the supreme political authority known as the Syiemship. It is the congregation of
several *Raid* and is headed by an elected chief known as the *Syiem* (or the king). The *Syiem* rules the Khasi state known as the *Durbar Hima*. Most of the elections are through adult male suffrage. No male is allowed to enter the *Durbar* (Assembly) without a moustache which is the rule of Khasi tradition.¹

The Khasi woman is considered as the ‘mistress of the household’ and the sole custodian of wealth and not just a proprietress. The father on the other hand is provider, master and guide of the family with the uncle as the undisputed director of the ancestral property. Though it is a matrilineal society the authority and control are in the hands of the maternal uncles. Hence, the women have responsibilities over the house and properties sanctioned by customs and religious traditions. She is thought as the preserver of her clan family and lineage. In the Khasi marriage system, it is usual for the husband to live with his wife in his mother-in-law’s house. He does not take his wife home as is customary in other communities. The institution of bride price does not apply in a matrilineal society like that of the Khasi because of its incompatibility with a system in which the woman plays a more important role in the social system than the mass. This is often exaggerated and women are believed to rule the roost in the family. In a typical Khasi household, accountabilities are shared between the maternal uncle and the father. The father earns for his own wife and children not in matters affecting the clan or the family, such as the arrangement of marriages, management of ancestral property and performance of religious duties, it is the uncle who makes the decisions though generally in consultations with other members of the family.

¹ Website meghalaya.nic.in webbed 2nd Oct. 2011.
According to census returns, the Khasi population in Meghalaya numbered 1.12 million in 2001. The current estimated total population of the Khasi is around 1.34 million. The homeland of the Khasi lies on the Assam or Meghalaya plateau, an upland area some 240 kilometres by 100 kilometres located between the Brahmaputra Valley to the north and the alluvial plains of Bangladesh to the south. With summit levels at 4500–6000 ft, the region experiences a temperate climate. Maximum temperatures during the hottest month average around 27°C (80°F), while during the winter months temperatures rarely drop below 5°C (40°F). The plateau stands right in the path of monsoon winds blowing in from the Bay of Bengal, and the region experiences heavy rainfall during the summer months.

Khasi religion may be described as animistic, focusing on the propitiation of spirits—both good and evil—especially in times of trouble. The particular spirit to be appeased is identified through an egg-breaking ritual, and the appropriate sacrifice is performed. Fowls and goats are the principal sacrificial victims. The priest (lyngdoh), who is appointed from a special priestly clan, is the principal person responsible for performing ritual functions. However, the presence of a female priest or priestess (ka-soh-blei or ka-lyngdoh) is necessary at all sacrifices. This is, perhaps, a reflection of the matrilineal nature of Khasi society, as is the assigning of a feminine gender to the Khasi creator goddess. Other religious practitioners, such as diviners and elders skilled in sorcery, play a role in Khasi religious life. Family ceremonies are performed by the head of the family or clan. Ancestor worship and the worship of natural forces and gods and goddesses of nature form an integral part of Khasi religious practices. Although many aspects of traditional Khasi religion survive, the majority of the Khasis have adopted Christianity. Missionary work began in the region during the late 19th century and has been so
successful that today over 80% of the Khasis profess to be Christians, belonging mostly to the Presbyterian or Roman Catholic churches, although there are a few Unitarians in the mix. There are a few Hindus and Muslims among the Khasis, the latter coming primarily as traders from other parts of India and intermarrying with local Khasi women.

The most important of the many festivals celebrated by the Khasis is the Nongkrem Dance. This is held in autumn (usually in November) and is part of a ceremony performed by the Syiem (chief) of Khyrim State (one of the former Khasi states) and his priests. Goats are sacrificed to Ka Blei Synshar, the ruling goddess of the Khasi, for an abundance of crops and for the prosperity of the people. Various ritual dances, some performed by the chief and his entourage, are part of the ceremonies. This is followed by the great dance by Khasi girls and men before the house of the high priestess. People come from all over the region to participate in the festival and its activities.

Khasi villages are built a little below the summits of hills to protect them from the elements. A marketplace and a sacred grove of trees may be found outside the village, along with numerous Khasi memorial stones. The village itself may contain schools and Christian churches, as well as homes. The Khasi house is an oval-shaped, thatched structure, with walls of timber or stone. It is usually divided into three rooms: a porch, a living room and sleeping quarters. Furnishings are a mixture of traditional and modern, reflecting the strong influence of the British in the region. Wealthier families have more substantial houses, with comfortable European-style furniture.
The Khasi are divided into a number of clans, each of which traces their descent from an ancestress. The clans are exogamous, with marriage within a clan strictly prohibited. Members of a clan are bound together by ties of religion, ancestor worship, and funeral rites and even Christian Khasi preserve their clan structure. Descent is traced through the female line. Marriage is by choice and usually takes place during early adulthood. Omens are read and an auspicious day fixed for the marriage ceremony. The ceremony itself is performed by a priest and is accompanied by animal sacrifice, feasting, and much drinking. In the Christian community, the marriage ceremony is performed according to the rites of the Church. The newlyweds usually reside with the bride's mother until children are born, when they set up their own household. The Khasi are monogamous in their marriage relationships. However, divorce is frequent and easily obtained, and remarriage of divorcées is permitted. The youngest daughter inherits ancestral property, and daughters receive preference in any division of property. Women enjoy a high social status and play a significant role in managing the household's social and economic affairs.

The traditional dress of a Khasi man consists of a sleeveless coat (jymphong) that leaves the arms and neck bare. It fastens across the front (braided loops that slip over buttons) and has tassels on the chest and a fringe at the bottom. This is worn over a loincloth that wraps around the waist and is drawn through the legs, with one end hanging down in front like an apron. A black cap completes the outfit. Elderly men sometimes replace the cap with a white turban. Males wear earrings, armlets, and necklaces made of gold, silver, and semi-precious stones. For women; typical clothing is a dress or a blouse with a skirt and over this is worn two pieces of cloth which are fastened at the shoulders that hang
down to the ankles. Another long piece of cloth often striped or brightly coloured, is
thrown around the shoulders like a cloak and tied at the front. A wrap is worn over the
head and shoulders. Women wear a variety of jewellery made from gold, silver, and
stones such as coral and carnelian.²

There are lots of good schools and colleges in Shillong. As part of the developmental
program in North-Eastern states, Ministry of Human Resource Development opened the
seventh Indian Institute of Management in Shillong which is named as Rajiv Gandhi
Indian Institute of Management. This institute started admissions from the academic year
2008. Recently, North East Indira Gandhi Regional Institute of Health and Medical
Sciences (NEIGRIHMS) and National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) were
opened in Shillong. Shillong is fast turning up as the centre of learning in the North-
Eastern region.³

Having no written script until 1842, when the Roman alphabet was introduced by a
missionary, the Khasi lack any significant body of literature. However, this is more than
made up for by their oral folk traditions. Singing and dancing are of particular
importance, accompanied by music played on drums, pipes, flutes, and stringed
instruments like guitars. Dancing accompanies all Khasi festivities and plays a role in
some of their religious ceremonies. Only unmarried girls participate in the dance of the
women. They don spectacular costumes, dressing in rich silk clothes that extend from
their neck to the ground. They are laden with a profusion of jewellery, bead necklaces,

³ Website meghalaya.nic.in webbed 2nd Oct. 2011.
silver and gold chains, bracelets, and earrings. On their heads, they wear silver crown (gold crown is only for the Syiem). The girls dance in a circle, taking tiny steps to the beat of the music, barely lifting their feet off the ground. The hands are held straight down at the sides, with the eyes downcast. The men dance around the circle of girls, waving fly-whisks and prancing around with huge, ungainly steps. There are also dances performed only by men.

The Khasis enjoy pastimes such as hunting and archery, as well as their folk traditions of singing and dancing. Modern mass media such as radio and television have become increasingly popular. Although they manufacture items ranging from simple metal agricultural implements to cane baskets and sieves, Khasis can hardly be said to have any distinctive arts or crafts. They are skilled in basketry, net-making, carpentry, weaving cotton and silk cloth, and the manufacture of various utilitarian goods.

The Khasi, like many other tribes in India, are undergoing changes that have led to internal social stresses as well as to problems in relations with other ethnic groups. The community is designated as a Scheduled Tribe and is entitled to the benefits that accompany this status under the Indian Constitution. The predominantly ‘tribal’ nature of Meghalaya, however, has led to problems with non-tribal groups. Non-governmental organisations such as the Khasi Students Union (KSU) and the Federation of Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo Peoples (FKJGP) actively review policies of the Government that are aimed at not preventing illegal trading of non-tribal peoples in the state. The need to present a united tribal front, however, has to some degree clouded internal social tensions. The undifferentiated Khasi society of former times has now become stratified, with new
classes of landlords, white-collar professionals, and agriculturalists all competing for limited resources. There is particular resentment by traditional Khasi against the Christian Khasi, who are seen as becoming increasingly dominant in the political, economic, and social arenas. This accounts for the rise of movements such as Seng Khasi, aimed at preserving the traditional Khasi religion.

Khasi society is matrilineal and so women enjoy many advantages they lack in other South Asian societies. A 2007 study from Germany concluded that the tribes of Meghalaya, such as the Khasi, whose societies are organised on matrilineal and matrilocal principles have obtained much greater gender equality than the other societies of South Asia (e.g. Hindu and Muslim) that are organised on the patriarchal principles. Khasi women enjoy a high social status and play a significant role in socio-economic matters and household management. Many Khasi women have taken up professions in the civil service and in industries besides agriculture. The youngest daughter inherits the ancestral property and daughters are given preference in the division of property while males can own only self-acquired property. Even so, there are many male heads of families among the Khasi and women tend to lag behind in terms of socio-economic standing. It is possible for males who have no living female relatives to adopt a female as a younger daughter (a Khasi custom known as Rap-iing) to ensure property passes down from generation to generation (viz. Khasi Hills Autonomous District [Khasi Social Custom of Lineage] Act of 1997).

Though females in Meghalaya are aware of their rights and position in society, hardly any Khasi woman actively participates in the world of politics. Khasi society does not
even allow women to participate in political decision-making. It is only recently, despite their status in society, have women been allowed to participate in the Durbar. The Durbar continues to be dominated by males. Of course most females exercise their franchise in the elections and that percentage increases with the rise in educational levels. However, in general, women in Khasi society enjoy an enviable freedom and equality vis-à-vis males compared to other women in South Asia.⁴

Short, muscular, robust and of complexions that vary from fair to dark brown, the tribal people of Meghalaya are sociable, cheerful, hardworking and great lovers of music and beauty. A unique characteristic is their habit of chewing betel-nut, betel leaves with lime and dried tobacco. The traditional costume of this place is the ‘Jainsem’ and the ‘Dhara’, though the younger generation has now taken to western clothes. The common food of the people is rice with meat and fish preparations. Rice beer is a favourite drink among the men folk.

A common cultural tradition of all the tribes of Meghalaya is the matrilineal law of inheritance by which, custody to property and succession of family position runs through the female line, passing from the mother to the youngest daughter, instead of the male line as is common elsewhere in the country.⁵ As in other matrilineal organisations, in Khasi Society; name, status and role are determined through females. Property, more significantly ancestral property is transmitted through the youngest daughter (ka khatduh). Like patrilineal societies, major decision making is vested in males, but in


Khasi matriliny, it rests with maternal males. They may be the oldest brother or the oldest maternal uncle (*u Kni Rangbah*). Patterns of residence are also female oriented.⁶

The prominent place being given to women in the Khasi society was probably compelled by a number of reasons. Primarily, it might be recalled that the Khasi race was basically a warlike people. Earlier there was no standing army for the defence of the state. All able bodied males were duty bound to respond to the call for providing security to their state, their properties, their women and children. Hence, when the men were beset with such a great task, it was inevitable to hand over to the women the duty of the family.

Most of the people in these hills were either agriculturists or traders who spent days and days in their fields or away from home. They traded in a number of items like iron, gold, limestone etc. with the people of the plains. The scanty communication network and the difficult and hazardous terrain of the hills often alienated these agriculturists and more so the traders from their hearths for a long period of time. It is in this context too that the women were given the power of economic management at the home front. Over and above these, the Khasis well understood the values of division of labour. Women who were considered fragile and known as ka *shibit shibor* (one trick and one power) were given easier tasks to perform while the men, the *khatar buit khatar bor* (twelve tricks and twelve powers) were entrusted with more difficult tasks.⁷

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Traditionally in a matrilineal society, the maternal uncle had a lot of say in his clan’s home. His presence was required for the conduct of all ceremonies. His valuable advice was also sought on all important matters. He used to be the final arbiter in matters concerning sale of property, the engagement and marriage of his nieces and nephews and settling of family disputes. His time was thus gainfully occupied. He shuttled between his parental home and his own home and fulfilled the roles of uncle and father with equal responsibilities. They gave him a sense of importance. But with the advent of modernity and cessation of wars, men took up steady professions as tillers of the soil and later on as salaried employees. They had enough time for themselves and their families but lesser responsibilities. Just as the joint family system among Hindus has given way to nuclear families, Khasi society is also passing through a transition. The influence of the uncle has dwindled while the role of the father has assumed more importance.\textsuperscript{8}

In the absence of the uncle as the centre of authority and economy, of discipline and government of the family, the father of the family has to step in and endowed as he is with gifts of mind and heart for rule, for government, for discipline, he is well aware that authority and discipline in the family depend on his manifesting those signs of a genuine sense of responsibility in his task as procreator, as provider and protector of his wife and children who by nature do feel the need of protection and security in life. The reckoning of descent apart, the father of the family is convinced that this is a new responsibility imposed on him by history, a responsibility that he cannot possibly shirk if he does wish to become full-fledged a man, with a dignity and honour proper to him. He firmly

\textsuperscript{8} P. Mukhim: “Crisis of Authority in the Khasi Matrilineal Society”. In M.B. Challam (ed.): \textit{The Dynamics of Family System in a Matriline of Meghalaya}. Shillong: Tribal Research Institute. 1999. p. 36.
believes that, in this way he can acquire genuine authority, spontaneously recognised by his wife and children; and with authority spontaneously recognised, he can have that necessary power of discipline, indispensable for the smooth running of the family.\textsuperscript{9}

The man in Khasi society is still the connecting link between his wife’s clan and his mother’s clan. The children belong to him through birth and he is the ‘father’, the giver of life and one who feeds and risks himself for them. The ‘mother’ is the custodian of the clan in the family and ‘mei-kha’ when her sons get married and have children. Again in the family there is the self-acquired property where the father has a right to have access to it through his hard earned sweat for the children. As to his status as ‘maternal uncle’ in his mother’s clan, socially he has a sacred duty towards his sisters, brothers, nephews and nieces till today. Herein lies the strength and status, the dynamics of the Khasi man as being ‘father’ and ‘maternal uncle’ in the family, the womb, the clan and the society.\textsuperscript{10}

Sir K. Cantlie’s Notes on Khasi Law edited and reprinted by Late A.S. Khongphai, on the chapter: Principles of Khasi Custom, contributed by Late Mr. David Roy, ACS when he stated about ‘Niam’ or Religion. “The Khasi male position in the Khasi Family is an honoured one as the bread-earner and as the protector of the person of his mother, his sisters and younger brothers and later in life of the person of his wife, daughters and young sons, and his position as the exalted defender of his ‘Niam’. He is the Kni (uncle) and he is the Kpa (father) without whom family worship and religion would be an act of

\textsuperscript{9} S. S. Lyngdoh: “Breakdown of Authority and Discipline in the Hynniewtrep present family set-up”. In M.B. Challam (ed.): \textit{The Dynamics of Family System in a Matriliney of Meghalaya}. Shillong: Tribal Research Institute. 1999, p. 45

\textsuperscript{10} H. Giri: “The Dynamics of Being U Kpa (Father) and U Kni (Maternal Uncle) in Khasi Society”. In M.B. Challam (ed.): \textit{The Dynamics of Family System in a Matriliney of Meghalaya}. Shillong: Tribal Research Institute. 1999, p. 54.
sacrilege”. Further, the author wrote – “These families have their own family religious duties and obligations, where he is the *Kpa* (father). Thus, man does not keep the house and the *Niam* (Religion) and the property, for he is a shedder of blood (*Nongialehthma*) and a person who will be a father in another family, the generator of life and destroyer of life. This person cannot therefore, be the fit person to keep ‘*Niam*’, who can then be more fit than his mother, and after her his sister and who can be more fit than his youngest sister, who will remain longest with his mother, taken care of the aged parents and himself to be the keeper of his ‘*Niam*’ and who is more fit than his wife, the mother of his children, and his youngest daughter, the keeper of her parents, to be the custodian of the ‘*Niam*’ of his wife and children. Therefore, he leaves his earnings, his acquisition and his possessions with his mother and his sister and later with his wife and daughter – to them not as heirs and inheritors and absolute monopolisers of his possessions, but to them as custodians of ‘*Niam*’ and of his possessions for his ‘*Niam*’.  

Lack of education and illiteracy in Khasi mothers make them blind and indifferent to the plight of their sons. Rather the sons are constantly reprimanded and called ‘good for nothing’ fellows. The Khasi male then must be very resilient to be able to withstand these dubbings and maintain his equilibrium in the midst of so many pressures. And one must certainly admire those who have been able to triumph these setbacks and emerge from the trauma unscathed and as wholesome personalities. Perhaps these are the few who still contribute to the growth of society and because of whom matriliny still survives. Those whose personalities are deformed are the ones who come across as irresponsible, weak and unassertive. They drink away their woes, desert their wife and children and

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curse the system that has warped their personalities. Obviously such people cannot be of much use to society, much less contribute anything to it. One must acknowledge the farsightedness of those who propagated the matrilineal system. It has an in-build mechanism for safeguarding the rights of women. In a system where divorce is common and may occur for a variety of reasons such as adultery, barrenness, incompatibility, etc., matriliny ensured that every child born is legitimate because it belongs to the mother’s ‘Kur’ or clan and whatever be the circumstances, they will be cared for by the mother and her clan.12

The majority of people living in urban areas do not own property and therefore the facility of children (both male and female) inheriting property is not there. Even in some families who own a house, the house is inherited by one daughter only, the youngest. The other children both male and female if they are not well off have to start their families in rented houses. If the older daughters of the family can cope with this system, the sons should not feel deprived and reduced in status and show signs of undesirable behaviour in society. Families of modern age invest their savings on the education of both sons and daughters to equip them for a good livelihood. In fact, both in urban and rural areas, sons are now given equal or even more encouragement to study as their sisters. Therefore men folk have no reason to feel marginalised within the family. Even though, sons as well as older daughters of the family go out of their parents’ houses to find their own dwellings, the houses of their parents and youngest sisters are traditionally thrown open to them to come and go as they like, they are considered to be always part of the family. In the Khasi indigenous religion, even their bones, when dead and

12 P. Mukhim: op. cit. pp. 35 and 37.
cremated, are brought and kept in the family vault. Some men feel that they would be more responsible heads of the family if the matrilineal system is converted into the patrilineal one. Noting the increased presence of divorces in patriarchal societies, it is doubtful that the natural instinct of closeness between mother and child can shift to father and child relationship. Men will be men after all, and their ‘at will’ attitude will prevail no matter what. Women need to respect their men folk and with conscientious deliberation of their directives, obey them if found viable but they also have the right to refute them if found otherwise.  

East Khasi Hills District has been the pioneer in the field of female education almost since the first educational institutions were established by Christian missions in the nineteenth century. In the beginning, the people showed no inclination to allow their daughters to attend the schools but after the initial doubts and fears were proved to be groundless, more girls joined these institutions. For a long time, the only girls to do so were from Christian families. In fact, these have always been in the majority. The report for 1874-75 submitted by the Inspector of Schools for Assam had this to say: “The Khasi and Jaintia Hills is the only district of Assam and one of the very few throughout all India, in which female education can be said to exist.” The adoption of the Roman script since the 1840’s made it comparatively easy to proceed to the study of English which immediately became popular. The Census Report for 1931 gives a glowing picture of the extent to which Khasi women took to English education. “In female literacy in English, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is an easy winner with 86 literate females in every 10,000. No other district (i.e. in Assam) has more than 23 women in every 10,000 who can read and

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write English, and most have less”. The reasons are not far to seek, Khasi Society has always been singularly free of restrictions on women and this fact, coupled with the obvious advantage of schools within easy reach, gave Khasi women opportunities which their sisters elsewhere were not to have for many more years to come.¹⁴

Education has not only inculcated certain values, predominantly western, it has also brought occupational and spatial mobility. By the first, we mean Khasis have taken up other occupations which are non-agricultural and non-traditional. This has brought not only the concept of the emerging middle class, where there is status differentiation among members of a maternal kin, and in the very little stratified Khasi Society at large, in terms of education and wealth. It has also necessitated moving to other places of work. The work (occupation) may be in another village or increasingly in the urban centres, inside Khasi territory or in other parts of India.¹⁵ With the advancement of civilisation caused by many factors including education, the aspiration of the Khasi people further increases. They expand their business and take up various enterprises. Their entrepreneurial activities improve further; their level of aspiration also increases. This led to the expansion of business either in trade and commerce or in production or in industrial trade and supply and so on. On the average, their economic status has improved over the years.¹⁶

¹⁵ I.M. Syiem: op. cit. p. 33.
¹⁶ C. Wolflang: “Property Rights and Entrepreneurship in a Matriliny”. In M.B. Challam (ed.): The Dynamics of Family System in a Matriliny of Meghalaya. Shillong: Tribal Research Institute, 1999, p. 17.
Customs and beliefs often create misunderstanding in the family regarding property rights, attitude of male members towards women in decision making at the family level, women members participating in different social and political activities in the society. Traditionally, women in Meghalaya are not allowed to attend Durbar (traditional administration) but it is quite evident that in today’s world there is no activity that can be achieved without women’s participation. Regarding political participation of women, women’s attitude in particular and public in general need to be changed. Presently, political parties are simply using women for their political gain and rarely give them a real chance to involve in politics and become leaders. Regarding participation of women in decision making bodies from the grass roots to the national and international levels, women are capable of taking up the assignments as chairpersons and members, however, nomination would be on merit, sincerity, dedication, etc. for the purpose of development if the authority concerned is sincere enough.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1935 prior to independence, the then Governor of Assam created a reserved seat, the Shillong Assembly Constituency, Assam. In the election held in 1937 two women candidates, Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh and Berlina Diengdoh contested the seat; the former won and became a minister in the Muhamad Sadullah Ministry from 1939 to 1941 and again from 1942 to 1945. She was the first lady in the North East and the second in India to hold the office of a Minister. In the election held in 1946, Mrs. Bonily Khongmen won the seat. In the first general election in 1952, the Shillong Lok Sabha seat was contested by six women, two of whom were Members of Parliament (MP) from the then state of

Assam. Since then, there has been no lady MP from the state until 2008 when Shri P.A. Sangma’s daughter, Agatha K. Sangma was elected in the bye-election to the Tura Lok Sabha seat which became vacant when her father returned to state politics. Since the time Meghalaya achieved its statehood (1972), only eight women were elected to the State Assembly, namely, Mrs. Percylina Marak (1972), Mrs. Miriam D. Shira (1978), Mrs. Maysalin War (1984, 1988), Mrs. Roshan Warjri (1993 and 1998), Mrs. I. Lyngdoh (2003), Mrs. D. Marak (2003), Mrs. Jopsimon Phanbuh (who won the bye-election after the death of her husband in July, 2003) and Mrs. M. Ampareen Lyngdoh (2008).\footnote{C. Nongbri and V. Pakyntein: “Women’s Empowerment in Meghalaya”. In *Meghalaya Human Development Report* 2008, Shillong: Government of Meghalaya. 2009, p. 204.}