CHAPTER V

KHASI WOMEN IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

In the previous chapter an attempt was made to study the attitude of the Khasi women towards politics and its various activities. In this chapter an attempt will be made to study women who actually take part in the political process, that is, women who contested in the elections (Legislative Assembly and Parliamentary), women who had become and are members of the Legislative Assembly and women who held ministerial berths (having contested and won from constituencies within the Greater Shillong Area). There is no doubt that the number of women politicians remains very negligible throughout the world and the picture in Meghalaya is no less different. The representation of women in the actual decision making process (that is, as Members of Legislative Assemblies, of Parliament and as Ministers) has been and is very negligible. A generally held view is that women participate less than men in political activities, but there are interested and qualified women, who if given the right opportunity could take on more political responsibilities, than is commonly believed.
An important indicator of women's participation in a democratic society is the degree to which they seek and gain public office. An individual contests an election to get into the government and to become an active participant in the decision-making process. Whether one gets elected or not, contesting an election in itself is a very important mode of political participation. Standing for office is the most intense form of political activity. Seeking an elected post invariably takes time, money and energy, besides exposing the individual to the public eye, a situation that gives rise to its own peculiar stresses and strains (Taper, 1976). Moreover, there seems to be many obstacles that women face when they think of a political career. To quote Short (1996, 13-14), "The narrow path leading to a political career is usually risky, grueling and unglamorous, requiring stamina, optimism and dedication as well as considerable resources. These are less available to women than men. Parliamentary careers are facilitated by the resources that certain middle-class occupations offer: flexible working hours, useful political skills, social status and political contacts, all enhanced by what have been termed brokerage occupations. The argument is simple but the insight is important. To run for Parliament an individual must have financial security, public networks, social status, policy experiences,
technical and social skills. Those who have brokerage jobs – barristers, lecturers, trade union officials, journalists, political researchers, work in fields that are complimentary to politics. Their skills translate between public and private life. Women and members of ethnic minorities are often concentrated in low paying occupations or in small businesses. Such jobs combined with family responsibilities, mean long hours which do not fit in with the demands of political activism. Moreover, "powerful socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers seem to have blocked all, except for the most tenacious women, from the public spheres" (Reynolds, 1999). Rule briefly sums up the obstacles as "narrow gender roles, restrictive religious doctrines, unequal laws and education, discriminatory socio-economic conditions, male-biased party leaders or other political elites and some voters, and ‘women-unfriendly’ election systems. Such barriers are “typically interrelated and mutually reinforcing” (Cited in Reynolds, 1999). Could these be some reasons as to why very less women actually pursue a political career?

There is no doubt that there are women who have held the highest posts (prime minister or president or chief minister) in their countries though this not a very common trend. What has also been observed is
that as one proceeds up both the administrative and elective hierarchies the presence of women declines, until at the very highest levels there are either no women or they are present merely in token numbers. Women politicians whether at the local or national level do not commensurate with their number in society.

Keeping the above stated reasons in mind an attempt will be made to study women who take part in the most intense form of political participation, which is, contesting for elections, irrespective of whether they won or lost. By understanding the success or failure of women in the political field, it is hoped that it will throw light on women's place in the political arena. The participation of the Khasi women in the most intensive form of political participation is very negligible (as mentioned in the earlier chapters). So far only 12 women have been elected in the past 7 general assembly elections held. For the purpose of study nine women within the Greater Shillong Area were taken for case study, out of which only two of them have been members of the Legislative Assembly. The others are women who have contested but have not been able to win the elections.
Case 1:
Name - Mrs. Roshan Warjri
Age - 56 years
Marital Status - Widow
Educational Qualification - Graduate
Occupation - Housewife
Source of Income - Rent.
Constituency - Mawkhar

After the demise of her politician husband, Late Korbar Sing, the party, Hills People Union, as well as well-wishers approached her to contest from the Mawkhar constituency in the 1993 Assembly election. She won the election and served as an MLA for the next five years. Again in the year 1998 she contested from the United Democratic Party and won for a second consecutive term. This year she was inducted as a Cabinet Minister and was given charge of the following departments in different periods of time between 1998 and 2002 - Urban Affairs, Tourism, General Administration Department (GAD), Municipal Administration and Co-operation. According to her the reason for winning the election was due to her sincere and dedicated service to the people of the constituency during her initial term. Her method of campaigning was door to door, she made no promises but said would do...
her best. However, in the 2003 Assembly elections she did not contest and since then has resigned herself to being only a party member of the UDP. Her interest in politics started back in the 1960s. She was a party worker of the Hill State Movement of which her mother was one among the pioneers.

As to her choice of opting for politics as a career, her family supported her totally. She has grown up children, which according to her could be the reason as to why she did not face any problem in fulfilling her family duties. Even as a minister she did not neglect her family and made it a point to cook for her children when at home.

Women according to her would make good political leaders as they are sincere and dedicated and have the instinct of motherhood. However, there are very less women in politics due to responsibilities of home and family besides traditional ethos. As such she feels that reservation of seats would encourage more women into the electoral fray.

According to her men and women do not necessarily have different attitudes when it comes to public issues, though to some extent
women may look more into women issues. As a woman working in a male dominated field she said that she faced no problems. She feels one has to do a lot of hard work, be identified by the people, be a peoples' person if one wants to pursue a political career. Regarding politics she says that as long as one stands by certain principles and more importantly on the mandate of the people, then politics is not dirty. At the moment she is a house-wife and has not yet decided to get back to active politics.

Case 2:
Name – Mrs. Nara Langstieh
Age – 60+
Marital Status – Married
Educational Qualification – Graduate, B.Ed.
Occupation – House-wife, Social worker.
Source of Income – Being the youngest and only daughter, she has inherited property, land and houses from which rentals are obtained.
Constituency – Laithumkhrah

This lady contested for election twice but lost on both occasions. She is more or less a housewife intermittently doing social work. It was through social work that she got involved in politics. People who knew her wanted her to stand for elections. She was also approached by the
Congress party. As such, she contested on an Indian National Congress ticket in the year 1983 but lost the elections, the reason according to her was that she had no political experience then. In 1996 she contested in a bye-election following the death of the sitting MLA of 17-Laithumkhrah constituency but lost this election too. She observes that there are a number of factors that may affect one's failure or victory in elections. One reason why people do not cast their vote in favour of a particular candidate could be out of jealousy, another could be a candidate's ability to spend which according to her plays a very important role. She also observes that the votes of ignorant or illiterate people can be bought very easily.

When she decided to join politics her husband and children were very supportive. She notes that she would not have joined politics if she had minor children for she knows that family life would be affected. Family according to her is very important and it was very important to bring the children up in the right way. To quote her, "The children suffer very bad psychological affects when left to fend for themselves. A mother is a mother; she should be there for the children when she is needed. As such if a woman has minor children, getting involved in
political activities certainly affects the home. Moreover if the family is not totally in favour of one's involvement in politics, problems will arise”.

To the question as to whether women would make good political leaders, she notes that women are basically more honest and righteous than men. An honest woman would certainly make a good political leader, though of course she should have experience in this field, the ability to deal with situations and people, be capable of analyzing human relationships, have the guts to stand up for what is right besides possessing other qualities of a leader. According to her politics has been a male dominated field for ages and hence marked by low representation of women. Women according to her are so used to such patterns of functioning that they more or less accept this as a reality and hence have very little interest in politics. To the question of reservation she is not in favour of it. This is so as there is every possibility that the wrong women would become ministers, women who are uneducated, ignorant, who have no idea of dealing with situations that may arise and that there is always the possibility that unscrupulous politicians will put up women
candidates to contest elections and if victorious dictate these women to their terms.

**Case 3:**
Name - Mrs. Amanda Pathaw
Age - 47 +
Marital Status - Married
Educational Qualification - B.A.
Occupation - Business and Social worker
Source of Income - Business.
Constituency - Mawlai

This lady stood for election twice, once in 1998 and again in 2003, but lost on both occasions. She was nominated by party members (Congress). According to her there were many factors responsible for losing the election. It was not because she was a woman but had to do mainly with party rivalry, preference of the electorate for regional parties, a view held by many that her party was considered to be an 'Indian party', money power and muscle power. Before contesting she was already involved in politics helping out a relation who was actively involved in politics.
When she decided to contest her family stood behind her. She feels that women can also do what men can, understand problems better, are not corrupted and are less likely to use unfair means in elections. The Khasi women according to her are equal to men and as such should contribute to society even in the political affairs. She notes that if more educated women of substance and who have good understanding are given a chance in this field, politics would not be regarded as bad or as dirty. As such she feels that there should be reservation of seats for women.

Case 4:
Name _ Mrs Margaret Mawlong
Age _ 64+
Marital Status _ Married
Educational Qualification _ Graduate
Occupation _ Retired I.A.S. officer
Source of Income _ Pensioner.
Constituency _ Laitumkhrah.

This lady stood for the Legislative Assembly election in the year 1998 but lost to a male candidate who she notes had a better electoral base than her. It was only after retirement that she began to take an
active interest in politics. She stood for elections because well-wishers as well as party workers of the United Democratic Party approached her. The reason as to why she lost she notes was due to the fact that the late father of one of her male opponents was already a well established, well known politician of the constituency, the State as well as a Parliamentarian. This familiarity of the electorate was a boon for the son who was to secure his maiden entry into electoral politics of the constituency. Moreover, rumours had been spread to tarnish her image by party workers of the other political parties. This occasion was also her maiden entry into politics. Before joining politics she had been active in advocating women issues and continues to do so.

When she decided to contest her family gave her their full support. Nevertheless, she notes that active participation could possibly affect the family. For married younger women problems can arise as politicians belong to his/her voters. Single women or women with grown up children can do better.

To the question if women would make good political leaders she feels that they certainly can as they are more sensitive to peoples' daily
problems. But family obligations and a general bias that people have towards women have resulted in their low representation. Moreover, she feels that authority and politics in matrilineal societies rest completely with men. As such, she feels that as there is no other option to get more women to participate in electoral politics, there should be reservation of seats for women. This would give women encouragement in the initial stages, then after a few years when women are more confident, reservation can be done away with. Women, according to her, generally have to work very hard to be accepted as an equal.

Case 5:
Name – Mrs Irene Hujon
Age – 51
Marital Status – Divorcee
Educational Qualification – B.A.
Occupation – Housewife
Source of Income – House Rent.
Constituency – Laban.

This woman stood for elections (Laban bye election) for the first time in September 2003, but subsequently lost. Her brush with politics began when she was enrolled as a primary member of the Bharatiya
Janata Party (hereinafter, BJP). She held the post of Vice President of the Laban Mandal Committee. In the year 1997 she held the post of District Vice-President of Mahila Morcha (Women’s Wing). She held the post of President for a short term after the expiry of the then President. She stood for the bye-election not on a BJP ticket but on a Meghalaya Democratic Party (hereinafter the MDP) ticket.

When she decided to stand for elections her family fully supported her. She has four grown up children and as such was free to join politics. She notes that active participation would to some extent affect the family life.

To the question as to whether women would make good political leaders, she notes that they certainly would as women are more sincere and honest in the work they do and as efficient as the men. She laments about the low representation of women saying they have not been motivated enough. More women should come forward as there are enough capable women with leadership qualities. According to her reservation of seats for women is a necessity.
Case 6:

Name - Mrs. Jopsimon Phanbuh
Age - 54
Marital Status - Widow
Educational Qualifications - B.A., B.Ed.
Occupation - Member of the Legislative Assembly
Source of Income - Salary
Constituency - Laban

This lady recently got elected in a bye-election held on September 26th 2003, from the Laban constituency, following the demise of her husband, Late Thrang Hok Rangad, who was the then MLA of the constituency. She stood for election as she was guided by the urge to complete what her husband had left undone for the constituency. It has been suggested that this lady won the election solely on the wave of sympathy that had spread across the constituency following the death of her husband. She has no political experience as she was just a housewife looking after the family needs. At present she is trying her level best to look into the immediate requirements of her constituency, which she notes is not an easy job. She observes that her joining politics would not have been possible if she had minor children to look after. She
makes it a point to spend time with her children at least once a week, which is usually only on Sundays.

To the question as to whether women would make good political leaders she notes that women certainly can and that more women should take part in politics.

Case 7:
Name – Mrs. Maya R. Kyndiah
Age – 58 years
Marital Status – Widow
Educational Qualifications – B.A., B.Ed.
Occupation – Retired teacher, at present is a house-wife and social worker
Source of Income – House Rent.
Constituency – Jaiaw

This lady stood for elections thrice but lost on all three occasions. Her first brush with active politics began in 1983 when she contested on a Congress ticket. Initially she was not that keen to contest but as her party members approached her she agreed. She however lost the election. According to her the reason for losing was because voters tended to see her party as a national party and not a regional party. She
again contested on a Congress ticket in the year 1998 but once again lost. In the last election held in 2003 she contested on a UDP ticket but lost this election too. This time she notes that she did not have enough time to go campaigning and as such could not meet enough people to secure more votes. Asked if she would again contest in future she said that she was reluctant. Old age and the need to spend more time with her grandchildren are some of the factors that will probably not permit her to contest again in future.

This lady was involved in politics since her youth (her father was once the president of the Congress party) and as such faced no opposition from her family when she decided to stand for elections. Her husband and children gave her their full support. She notes that she would not have taken active part if she had minor children to look after. According to her good virtues are cultivated within one’s home and as such it was very important that children be brought up in a right and conducive atmosphere. One reason, she points out, as to why there are very few women in politics is due to family responsibilities. Women are too caught up with looking after the welfare of the family and children, besides working, that they have no time to get involved with politics.
To the question as to whether women would make good political leaders, she is of the opinion that women certainly would as they are more honest, soft hearted and easy to approach. As such she feels that reservation of seats for women is a must as it would give them a chance to participate in the political process.

Case 8:
Name – Dr. (Mrs.) Elizabeth Laitphlang
Age ~ 47
Marital Status – Married
Educational Qualifications – Post Graduate, Ph.D.
Occupation – Lecturer
Source of Income – Salary

Unlike the other ladies who contested in the various Assembly elections, this lady stood for the Parliamentary election from the Shillong Parliamentary Seat in the year 1998 but lost. She stood on a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ticket. The reason for not winning according to her was that her party was new, was not strong enough and moreover voters were not familiar with this national party. She was not new to politics as her grandparents and uncle were fore-runners in the Hill State movement and as such, was more or less involved in political activities.
Initially she was associated with regional parties of the State eventually joining the Congress party as an active member. She held a number of posts as an active member of the Congress party. She was the General Secretary of the City Youth Congress, Vice-President and later President of Mahila Congress, General Secretary of the State Congress, and then General Secretary of North East Mahila Congress Coordination Committee of India. In later years being disillusioned with the party on various issues she joined the Bharatiya Janata Party and eventually stood for election from the BJP ticket. At present she is the Vice-President of State BJP unit (Meghalaya) as well as in charge of the Mahila Morcha (Women’s Wing). In the recently concluded Parliamentary elections of 2004, she had applied for a party ticket to contest from the Shillong Parliamentary constituency but her application was not approved.

Her main reason for contesting was because she felt that if one is in a position to make policies, then it is better than being just a member. Only as a representative can one bring issues into focus. In future if the opportunity arises she plans to contest again. Her family gives her their full support in her political pursuits. Moreover as she does not have
children to look after, she notes that she is more or less free from family responsibilities and is able to pursue other avenues of interest.

According to her women would make good political leaders. Yet she does point out that women need a lot of encouragement in this arena which is regarded as a male domain. As such she feels that though she is not totally in favour of reservation of seats for women, in a way it would ensure women’s involvement in politics.

Case 9:
Name – Dr. (Mrs.) Tiplut Nongbri
Age – 53 years
Marital Status – Married
Educational Qualification – Post Graduate, Ph.D
Occupation – Professor
Source of Income – Salary
Constituency – Laithumkhrah

This lady stood for elections under unexpected circumstances. She had been residing in New Delhi and came to Shillong in August 1982 following the sudden demise of her elder brother. After this tragic loss, Mrs Nongbri stayed back in Shillong for a few months to be with her family. It was in early 1983 that the Congress party was searching for
candidates to contest the forthcoming assembly elections. Having been persuaded and convinced by friends and well wishers, against the backdrop of a sudden loss to the family less than a year ago, Mrs. Nongbri in an unsettled mind applied for a Congress ticket. Her application was accepted and she was given an opportunity to fight the elections from the 17-Raithumkrah constituency on a Congress ticket. She however lost the elections though she did not lose her security deposit. This election was to be her first and last brush with electoral politics till date.

When she contested the 1983 elections, her family members were very supportive of her decision. However she believes that every profession has its own demands and politics too, like any other profession, has its own demands. What is ultimately required is a balance between the home and the profession where the support of the husband and the family is very crucial.

Mrs Nongbri believes that “honest people should get into politics though she concedes that it becomes very difficult for them to survive”. Politics requires the incumbent to fulfill numerous demands in spite of
the fact that these demands may, on many occasions run contrary to what the incumbent stands for. Hence to fulfill them the incumbent will have to make compromises even at the cost of the ideals that she/he may stand for. This then becomes a very difficult proposition for women to enter the political fray.

On being asked whether women in a matrilineal society enjoy a better position than others when it concerns their political participation, Mrs. Nongbri observes that the chauvinistic ideas prevailing in such a society provide no support/advantage to women’s participation in politics. She contends that few women participate in politics because they are hindered by the prevailing gender bias, the traditional ethos and also because of the flawed and biased socialization process. Nevertheless she feels that when it comes to women’s participation in the traditional political institutions, they should actively participate in the dorbars not because they are women and need to be ‘accommodated’ but because they are competent to do so and have the ability to fulfill the responsibilities attached to the office.
A common trend observed here is that all these women have been approached either by party workers or by well-wishers to stand for elections and none stood as independent candidates. These women either had families with political backgrounds, or had been doing social work or fighting for the cause of women and eventually getting involved in politics. Another common characteristic feature of these women is that they are all educated, married and above 40 years of age indicating that they, more or less joined active politics somewhere near their forties. Yet another common trait is that these women have no minor children to look after. All have children who are grown-up who are either college going, working or settled down thereby leaving free time for them to pursue other avenues of interest. During the interview all had agreed that the family was their first priority and that they would not have got involved in politics if they had minor children to look after. As such they all had the support of their family when they decided to stand for elections. Economically, these women came from the middle and upper-middle class families. These women are all very dynamic and active individuals that one is left to wonder as to why they were not elected. But as some of them noted, financial investment in politics plays
a very big role here. Money power, muscle power, besides many other factors have been seen to play a major role in electoral preparations.

An interesting observation made here is that the two women who were elected are both widows of successful politician husbands. They contested after their husbands passed away and both were elected. Their husbands had been elected representatives of their respective constituencies and as their wives, they were well known to the people of the constituency. Initially, it is possible to assume that the sympathy wave that spread across the constituencies was responsible for seating these two ladies in the legislative assembly. However in the case of Mrs Warjri it was her dedication and commitment to the constituency that returned her a second successive time (in 1998) to the assembly. It however remains to be seen if these traits will also favour Mrs Phanbuh in the next assembly elections.

A number of observations can be noted from the above cases. One is that, not every and any woman totally commits herself into active politics. Most of these women entered politics due to the encouragement they received from their family members, their neighbours and well
wishers of their respective constituencies, the warm response of various
political parties and above all their personal desire and interest to
contest the elections. It can also be said that their personal desire and
interest were reinforced by the above factors. Women who are active
and involved in social work, women who have no minor children to look
after, women who are retired or are wives of politicians, seem to look
towards a political career. Moreover, age also seems to play a major role
in one’s entry into active politics. A common pattern observed here is
that women entered into active politics after 40 years of age. This
seems to be an indication of the ideal age for women to take up political
offices, a time where one is relatively free from familial responsibilities
like reproduction or nursing of children. This indicates that women take
their responsibilities as home-makers seriously and are willing to
venture out into the political domain only if they are confident that they
can strike a balance between familial responsibilities and the demands of
active politics. Politics, to these women is an activity undertaken only
when they are confident that they are buoyed by financial stability. The
various political parties were also influenced by the above factors when
it came to the choice of candidates for various constituencies – elderly
literate women, lesser degree of family responsibilities, well developed
inter-personal relationship, stable income and capability to mobilize people.

The Khasi women are yet to make their presence felt in the political arena. They are no doubt aware that the pursuit to rigorous politics is unglamorous, requiring untiring effort and self dedication, and the need of inculcating political skills in oratory as well as in their day-to-day association with the electorate. Being women they need to infuse extra effort in sharpening their political skills so as to be taken seriously not only by their male counterparts but by women as well.