Chapter-VI

CONCLUSION

Prior to the advent of the British into the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills, these areas remained isolated from the plains and hardly any contact existed with their neighbours except in isolated incidents such as whenever the people from the hills ventured into the plains to plunder, loot and declared internecine wars against the people of the plains. The societies in the hills had a grass root system of democracy and were administered by their traditional chiefs and institutions.

It was only after the colonial expansion to this part of the region that the hill areas were formally united under the British rule. In 1864 the district headquarters of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills were shifted to Shillong which also became the headquarters of the new province of Assam in 1874. These hill areas became a part of the province of Assam in 1905 when Bengal was partitioned and they were tagged to the newly created Assam province and Eastern Bengal. However in 1912, the British Government reversed the partition of Bengal and these areas became part of the revived province of Assam.

In 1921, following the Montagu-Chelmsford Report of 1917,* and the Government of India Act of 1919, empowering the Governor-General-in-Council to declare any territory in British India as a backward tract, this Council made a declaration in 1921, that the Garo Hills, the British portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills other than the Shillong Municipality and the Shillong Cantonment were declared a backward tracts. Following the Simon Commission Report and the Government of India Act, 1935, the British portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills became Partially

* This Report made a specific recommendation that “the typically backward tracts should be excluded from the scope of the Reformed Council.”
Excluded Areas within this Act. These areas were represented in the Assam Legislative Council since 1920 and subsequently also in the pre-independence Assam Legislative Assembly.

The interim period in India was eventful as the Khasis States’ Federation managed the affairs of the Khasi states according to the powers derived from the Instrument of Accession and Annexed Agreement signed with the Dominion Government. The Khasi-Jaintia National Conference, however, was opposed to the continuance of the Federation and came forward with a plan for the Autonomous District Council, and during the final arrangement, the Sixth Schedule was implemented which applied to both states and British portion in 1952. The developments in the re-organisation did not end here as agitations for a Hill State originated and reached a climax in 1954-55 when the States Reorganisation Commission visited these areas, on which occasion the Hills Union and other parties, submitted their respective memoranda in favour of a Hill State. After more than a decade of peaceful constitutional agitation for a separate Hill state, the Government of India partially conceded to this demand and Parliament passed the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act, 1969, constituting the Autonomous State of Meghalaya within the existing State of Assam. The then Prime Minister, Smti Indira Gandhi inaugurated the Autonomous State on 2nd April, 1970. The old Council Chamber in Shillong was selected as the legislature of the Autonomous State constituting 38 elected members who were indirectly elected by the two District Councils of Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills and 3 members nominated by the Governor bringing the total to 41 members. In 1971, the Parliament passed the North Eastern Areas Reorganisation Act 1971 which conferred full fledged statehood on the Autonomous State. Meghalaya became a state on 21st January, 1972. The formation of
the new State ushered a new era for the people of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills and secured for them an opportunity to govern themselves through their own legislature comprising the ruling party and the Opposition. This study focussed on the role of the Opposition party or parties in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly within the purview of the three successive Legislative Assemblies from 1972-1988.

The role of the Opposition in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly denotes a difference from the two party system as is prevalent in the Western countries. It was found that no party remained in the Opposition for a longer period even during the fixed term of the Assembly. Rather, the Legislative Assembly in Meghalaya is marked by frequent changes in the groups of the Opposition parties during the period under study. The Opposition in the State was numerically weak and divided into groups and a number of independent members within the period of 1972-1988. But inspite of being numerically weak particularly during the period 1972-1978 (First Legislative Assembly), the Opposition accounts for a good record on ventilation of public grievances with regard to the specified issues through discussions, motions, questions on matters of public importance indicating the importance of these issues, by the different political parties since most of these issues were the objectives of these parties as reflected in their Constitutions. Instruments such as no-confidence motions were tabled by the Opposition citing the weaknesses or the inability of the Government in power to attend to or solve some of the pertinent problems. There were instances of staging of walk-outs of members of the Opposition in protest against any adverse actions of the Government in power. On the other hand, it may also be stated that the regional political parties had not been able to hold out the threat of an alternative Government. There was no party which could provide an alternative Government and dislodge the Congress party from the seat of power. However, the
same cannot be said of the Congress party whenever it was in the Opposition. The Congress though being a national political party, often managed to successfully project itself as an alternative and managed to wrest power from the ruling party in the state politics of Meghalaya. This indicated that the Congress though it was not a regional political party had somehow managed to gain a strong foothold in the State and provide stiff competition to the regional political parties. There was lack of an effective democratic Opposition in the sense in which it is understood in the West.

The regional political parties irrespective of whether they occupy the ruling seat or in the Opposition were characterised by infighting and internal conflicts. In the process the regional political parties were dragging the State into the problem of political instability whenever they were in power. The Congress party, therefore, managed to capitalise on the unstable nature of regional political parties and engineered floor crossings, thereby strengthening its own stable position.

For the most part of the period within the purview of this study (1972-1988), the regional political parties were in the Opposition. In the rural areas of Meghalaya, most of the people being illiterate, party manifesto and propaganda literature could not wield much influence on the electorate unless the top leaders visited them for canvassing. The regional political parties also lack ideology and their organisation was also weak. The electorate were also influenced by leaders rather than by the party, though in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, regional political parties had great influence on the electorate.

Two political parties — the Congress and the APHLC capitalise on the sentiments of the people with regard to the attainment of statehood to strengthen their position. The Congress through forging an electoral alliance with the APHLC managed to secure a foothold in Meghalaya politics by securing 9(nine) seats in the
First General Elections 1972. Then after its merger with the APHLC in 1976, the Congress further consolidated and strengthen its position in the State in particular in the Garo Hills. The APHLC fought the First General Elections on the plank of a party synonymous with the attainment of statehood, emerging victorious with absolute majority. But this victory was not able to be maintained by the party. When Capt. W.A. Sangma along with his followers decided to merge with the Indian National Congress in 1976, the prospects of the APHLC dwindled seriously leading to its split and subsequently its disappearance from Meghalaya politics. The merger of the two political parties in 1976 proved advantageous to the Indian National Congress but was a disastrous experience with catastrophic implications for the APHLC. It indicates a contrast in the performances of the two main political parties which had entered Meghalaya politics simultaneously.

The multi-party system dominated the political scene in Meghalaya during these years (1972-1988) with one strong party in power, the Congress, and several minor parties and groups in the Opposition comprising the regional political parties and some independent members.

In Meghalaya, the Opposition parties have never formed electoral alliance with the exception in 1984 ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. The two main Opposition parties — the APHLC and HSPDP came to an understanding prior to the elections under the banner of the HPU and together fought the 1984 Lok Sabha elections. This alliance was, however, short-lived as after the defeat of its common candidate in the elections, the HSPDP decided to retain its own identity, whereas the APHLC submerged itself in the HPU. Both the parties were concentrating and engaging in their own internal problems instead of presenting a unified Opposition, thereby ensuring smooth victory for the Congress party. Another factor contributing
to the lackluster performance of the regional parties and which hampers their effectiveness, is the presence of many independent candidates in the electoral arena, and they are largely responsible for the fragmentation of the Opposition votes.

The Opposition accounts for a substantial performance though at times their fragmentary nature of approach hampers their effectiveness in performing their role in the House. Though weak and fragmented, the Opposition were vocal in expressing and ventilating public grievances and bringing out in the House the acts of omissions and commissions of the Government. But another factor which went against them was their inability to sustain a united front against the party in power.

On the three issues — land relations boundary dispute between Meghalaya and Assam, law and order problem together with the problem of influx during 1972-1988 have been taken up by successive Opposition. In the three successive Assemblies these issues were taken up almost in all sessions generating intense debates and discussion in the House with the Opposition placing the Government in a difficult situation, whenever needed, though they were unsuccessful in securing the Government to concede to their demands. The Opposition were, however, successful in their endeavour of playing the role of a watchdog by ensuring that every action of the Government was well scrutinised on the floor of the House. It may also be stated that successive parties whenever they were in Opposition voraciously followed any move of the Government by raising questions and generating criticisms. But the reverse was followed whenever these parties were in the ruling seats. This could be one of the reasons why permanent solution of the issues concerned have been eluded so far without any tangible solution.

The Congress had devoted its energy to raising the issue on land relations when it sat on the Opposite benches. Its role as an Opposition was the role of a
conciliator in the conflict of interests between tribals and non-tribals. This was because its members are drawn from constituencies where non-tribals form a sizeable number. The party successfully opposed the law passed by the APHLC Government in 1972 and refused to withdraw their motion resulting in stalling the Bill from being passed. However, this action earned the aversion of the tribals wherein the party’s performance in the Khasi Hills became insignificant leading to the outcome that members of the party withdraw from the House when the Bill was tabled and discussed. This affected the performance of the party in the Khasi Hills as it was viewed as a national party which tried to serve and further the interests of the non-tribals.

The HSPDP was actively involved with the boundary issue which viewed it with serious concern and continuously criticised the inability of successive Governments to resolve this contentious issue. This is because this issue is one of the aims of the HSPDP where it laid stress to be achieved by the party as stated in its Constitution and its successive manifestoes. For a brief period, when it was part of the Government, the party was itself unable to achieve any concrete solution to this problem. Though at times being part of a coalition Government the fact remains that this party too could not achieve success or find a lasting solution on this issue.

Another regional party actively involved in the boundary issue is the PDIC. This party continually raised this issue in successive sessions of the House, though the party comprised of only 2(two) members in the Assembly. The members of this party voraciously pursued this issue and secured discussions of the same in the House and questioning to what is being termed as “passive attitude”, of the Government towards this vital issue whenever or irrespective of what Government was in power. This can
be attributed to the fact that constituencies of the members belonging to this party were mostly affected by such a situation arising in the border areas.

The fate of the three issues undertaken for study remains inconclusive as no permanent solution was realised during the period of study (1972-1988). Till date no solution has been reached and these issues continually appeared in nearly every successive Assembly debates whenever any new developments took place.

As an Opposition, the APHLC has not given a significant performance with regard to ventilating public opinions or grievances on the specific issues except in extending support to any moves made by other Opposition parties. Independents also have a good record of performing their role as members of the Opposition. Independent members in particular, M.N. Majaw and H. Hadem actively and continuously generated laudable performance in ventilating issues considered significant for the new State particularly the specified issues though they later joined their respective political parties PDIC and Congress(R). These leaders have raised vehement criticisms against what they considered adverse actions of the Government leading to heated debates in the House. The same level of intensity of their performance as members of the Opposition was pursued even when they became members of the political parties. This attempt has forced the Government to act responsibly since its actions were being scrutinised closely by a vigilant Opposition.

The Provisional Legislative Assembly of Meghalaya was formed on 2nd April, 1970. It was marked by a grand coalition and the absence of an Opposition. During this period, though officially there was no Opposition party in the Legislative Assembly some level of Opposition was provided by the Congress party in the form of Opposition to the passing of the Meghalaya Land Transfer Bill 1970, which sought to prohibit transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals. The Congress party was against
the passage of this Bill as according to the party, this would have damaged the projection of the party as a conciliator in the conflict of interests between tribals and non-tribals. Therefore, though being a part of the ruling coalition, the Congress party took up the role of the Opposition as the stance taken up by the then Government was against the interest of the party.

The first Meghalaya Legislative Assembly (that is from 1972-1978), may be divided into two phases: (i) from 1972 to 1976; (ii) from 1976 to 1978. In the first phase (1972-1976), the HSPDP was the main Opposition party together with some Independent members who actively participated in the discussions on land and boundary issues. In the second phase (1976-1978), the strength of the Opposition rose with the inclusion of the members of the APHLC who refused to align themselves in the merger with the Congress party and instead joined the ranks of the Opposition. The performance of the APHLC as an Opposition remained insignificant as the party members lacked vigour while pursing any acts of omission and commission by the Government on the specified issues, although they extended support to initiatives of other members of the Opposition.

The initial period of the Second Assembly (1978-1983) was marked by political instability during the period between 1978 top 1979. During this period, the Congress together with some Independents formed the UMPDF and played the role of the Opposition. As an Opposition, the party emerged as a numerically strong Opposition, and its members as well as the Independents played a responsible role in the articulating the voice of the people and drew the attention of the Government and the House to the problems concerning the State, especially the boundary issue in Garo Hills which was left virtually untouched in the previous sessions. From 1979 to 1983, there was a change in the Opposition. The Opposition in this period comprised of the
regional parties that is the APHLC and the PDIC. This oppositional group was numerically weak and was characterised by a weak Opposition, though the PDIC with only 2(two) members tried to effectively perform its task as the main Opposition in the House.

In the third Assembly (1983-1988), the Congress party briefly occupied the Opposition bench for a period of one month only (March 2\textsuperscript{nd} to March 31\textsuperscript{st}, 1983). From the month of March 1983 onwards up to 1988, the regional political parties became the Opposition groups in the Assembly. Initially, the groups were numerically strong but due to defections to the ruling party the numerical strength of the regional parties declined leading to the fragmentation of the members of the Opposition. It was found that during this Assembly, the first attempt of merger of the regional political parties was tried though without much success. After the defeat of the united sponsored candidate in the Lok Sabha Elections of 1984, the merger split. It is interesting to note that this merger proved disastrous for the regional parties. The APHLC which remained for so long the main regional party in the State, got totally submerged in the merger and a few years later disappeared from Meghalaya state politics. The HSPDP re-emerged on the political scene being revived by some of its loyalists. This has, therefore, portrayed the negative role of the regional political parties. It also clearly indicated their inability to overcome their differences as the political parties were marked by disunity and fragmentation. The regional parties were unable to present a united front against the Congress whether as the ruling party or the Opposition. They remained a fragmented group and this encouraged the defections of their members to the ruling party. Infighting among the leaders of the APHLC led to the breakdown of the party which finally led to the culmination and its disappearance from the State politics of Meghalaya.
The Opposition in Meghalaya can be stated to be fragmented into several groups in addition to being numerically weak. Under these circumstances, the role and actions of the Opposition were very much strenuous. But it would be wrong to conclude that it fared very badly as an Opposition. In spite of these drawbacks, the Opposition exhibited a good record of ventilating public grievances through questions, half-an-hour discussions, motions and discussions on matters of public importance with regard to the issues specified for this study, though for the most part they could not carry through their suggestions and opinions due to lack of adequate numbers for voting. However, it has also been observed that a party’s response to incidents and events involving law and order situations or problems and its stand on issues of political significance depends upon the side it occupies, either as the Treasury benches or the Opposition benches.

Whether the role of the Opposition has been effective or otherwise, is a question that is debatable. But what has been observed from this study is that till date, what Meghalaya lacked is a strong Opposition that can keep the Government perpetually on its toes and can offer alternative programmes for the electorate to choose from, and to be a vigilant and vibrant Opposition with members vigorously pursuing any initiatives or actions of the Government.

Inspite of the lack of strength of the Opposition affecting their effective performance, this however, does not suggest that there is no scope for the development of a strong democratic Opposition in the future. There has to be an effective electoral alliances among the Opposition parties to counter the ruling party. This can be made possible only if efforts to narrow down differences are made by the parties concerned. The tendency of forming minor parties is to be discouraged to prevent emergence of splinter groups in the Assembly, though this may not be
possible in reality, as Meghalaya is a small state and the presence of various political parties has hampered the development of an effective and strong Opposition. A strong Opposition can effectively carry out the task of being a mouth piece of the people, ensuring the stand taken by the Opposition is regarded as important by the Government and also forging a close relationship between the Government and the Opposition.