MEGHALAYA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY:
THE ROLE OF THE OPPOSITION
(1972-1988)

Introduction:

Legislatives are representative bodies entrusted with the function of making laws to ensure the protection and safeguarding the interest of the people and oversee their welfare.\(^1\) In a parliamentary democracy, the Government owes responsibility to the respective elected representative bodies. The members of the legislative as elected representatives of the people are entrusted with the task of ventilating public grievances as well as offering opinions of the people on various issues, to scrutinize the functioning of the Government on the floor of the legislative and to enact laws.\(^2\)

It is the duty of the legislators to articulate the aspirations and the grievances of the people as well as try to fulfill the expectations and redress their grievances.\(^3\) The essence of parliamentary democracy lies in the accountability of the executive to the people as the legislative derives its power from the people. The legislature comprised the Treasury benches or the Ruling Party(s) that are in the majority and the Opposition that are in the minority. In the enactment of legislation, the relationship between the

Government and the Opposition is that the majority proposes and the Opposition generally opposes what the Government proposes or in certain situations itself initiates or proposes alternative measures.  

The main function of the Opposition as derived from its connotation is to constructively oppose and criticize the functioning of the Government. It not only keeps the Government on its guard through constant criticisms of its acts of omission and commission but also can provide an alternative Government should the ruling party loses its majority. It endeavours to maintain continuous contact with the electorate and expresses their grievances in the legislative Chamber.  

The presence of the Opposition differentiates between democratic and dictatorial nations. It acts as a check on the otherwise enormous power exercised by the Government. The Opposition proposes alternative measures differing from those of the party in power. It ventilates public grievances through various parliamentary methods and procedures such as questions, half-an-hour discussion, adjournment motions, etc. and secures discussions particularly on those questions that agitate the public mind and therefore presses the Government to resolve these issues and questions.  

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6. H. S. Fartayal: *op.cit.*, p. 211
The Opposition in a parliamentary democracy therefore is expected to play an effective role by performing two basic functions. Firstly, it is required to provide constructive criticisms to the programmes and policies of the party in power. Secondly, it must be ready to form an alternative Government in case a situation arises where the party in power is voted out of office. The objective of having an Opposition in a parliamentary democracy emanates from the basic concept of 'limiting power by power'.

Meghalaya, the twenty first State of the Indian Union, came into existence on the 21st January 1972. Before the advent of the British into these areas, some form of direct democracy was in existence particularly in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. By the nineteenth century when the annexation of the hill areas by the British was total, the system of administrative institutions got eroded and was gradually replaced by the modern form of administration as introduced by the British. The hills experienced radical political and administrative changes which the British administration introduced. Through the various Acts, Rules and Regulations passed by the British Administration from time to time, modern administrative system was also introduced in the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills which remained in operation up to the period when India attained Independence.

With the independence of India on August 1947, the Federation of Khasi States signed the Instrument of Accession and also authorized its representative in Delhi to sign

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the Standstill Agreement with the Indian Union on their behalf as it was realized that after the British left India, a vacuum would be created in the administrative arrangements between the Khasi States and the Indian Union. The administration of these areas was finally brought under the Indian Government. In order to ensure this merger between the Khasi States and Federation of Khasi States on the one hand and the Dominion of India and the Province of Assam on the other, an agreement was signed by the Federation of Khasi States in August 1947. Further, with the adoption of the Indian Constitution, the Khasi States and British Areas became part of the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District within the State of Assam as stipulated by the Indian Constitution. As for the 'Garo Hills, there does not appear to have been much resistance as in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills to its integration into India. Consequently, the hill areas of the present State of Meghalaya were constituted into two Autonomous District Councils namely, the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council and the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council as envisaged in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which were the first representative institutions of these areas.

The transfer of power in 1947 brought in a number of political and administrative changes in the hill districts of the present State of Meghalaya paving the way for the formation and functioning of representative institutions which led to the development of

demand for statehood and culminating in the setting up of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly as the State Legislative.\footnote{L. S. Gassah: "Traditional and Emerging Leadership Pattern in Khasi Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya" in \textit{B. C. Bhuyan (ed.), Political Development of the North East, Part II}, Omsons Publication, New Delhi, 1992, p. 72.}

\textbf{Review of Literature:}

Various books have been written on Meghalaya, but this particular field of study and research on Meghalaya Legislative Assembly has not been undertaken so far. Earlier studies have not properly examined the role of the Opposition in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. Most of the studies conducted so far are general in character focusing on a wide range of topics. The book \textit{Hill Politics in North East India} by S. K. Chaube dealt mostly with the politics in the hill areas of North East India with reference to various factors leading to the formation of Meghalaya. \textit{A Century of Tribal Politics} (1894-1974) by V. V. Rao delved in detail on the political set up in the entire North Eastern region during the British rule and also on the gradual changes that had taken shape in the region. H. Bareh's \textit{Meghalaya} dealt extensively on the State of Meghalaya in general and on the cultural aspects of the people in particular. \textit{A Century of Government and Politics in North East India, Vol.II}, Meghalaya, (1874-1983) jointly edited by V. V. Rao, Niru Hazarika and B. Pakem gave a detail account of Meghalaya, though the main focus is on the evolution of electoral process of the members of the various representative institutions. \textit{Coalition Politics in North East India} by B. Pakem, a recent publication mainly focuses on the processes and practices of coalition of different political parties, an emerging trend in the politics of the North Eastern states over the past few years.
Objectives of the Study:

The main objectives of the study have been divided into three main areas.

The first objective is to trace the emergence of representative institutions in Meghalaya and also to examine the party organizations of the different political parties in the State, party affiliations and their role in Government formation that came into existence with the formation of the State of Meghalaya.

Secondly, the study aims to analyse the role of the Opposition in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly during the period under study.

Thirdly, certain issues such as Land Tenure System and Land Relations; Boundary problems between Meghalaya and Assam; law and order problems especially in the State capital Shillong, together with the problem of influx, are taken up for critical examination and analysis under the purview of the study. The role, participation, articulation and contribution of the Opposition on these issues are analysed. This study covers the period from 1972 to 1988 because these critical issues were raised and discussed and kept on appearing in the agenda items of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly as these issues were considered to be critical and confronting the newly formed State of Meghalaya.

Methodology:

The data for this study is based both on primary and secondary sources. The reports of the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly from 1970 to 1988 and the
relevant Official Records and Documents pertaining to the above period constitute the most important and primary sources for understanding the role of the Opposition within the legislature. These Official Records and Documents have been critically analysed to assess the contributions of the Opposition in the Legislative Assembly during the period of study.

The Secondary sources are drawn from the publications of the Government of Meghalaya and the Assembly Secretariat; books, research articles and seminar proceedings; journals, pamphlets and political manifestoes. Constitutions of the different political parties especially the Regional Political Parties form another important sources of information. The political parties' Constitutions are compared, examined and analysed while preparing the different chapters of the study.

**Chapterisation:**

The study is divided into six chapters.

- **Chapter I**: Emergence of Representative Institution in Meghalaya.
- **Chapter II**: Party Organisation: Their Role in the Legislative Assembly.
- **Chapter III**: Nature of the Opposition Parties in Meghalaya Politics.
- **Chapter IV**: Role of the Opposition I: Problems and Issues Relating to (i) Boundary between Meghalaya and Assam and (ii) Law and Order and the Problem of Influx.
- **Chapter V**: Role of the Opposition II: Problems and Issues Relating to Land and Land Relations.
- **Chapter VI**: Conclusion.
Chapter I:

This chapter traces the emergence of representative institutions in Meghalaya. It focuses on the historical administrative development that took place in the hill areas of North-East India in general and Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills in particular. Before coming into contact with the British, the people of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills had their own traditional system of administration and institutions. But with the advent of the British, the administrative system in these areas underwent changes which had tremendous effects on the traditional system of administration and institutions.\(^{14}\) Through the various Acts, Rules and Regulations passed by the British authority from time to time, the modern administrative system was introduced in these areas and it continues even after India's independence.

The present system of representative institutions had evolved over a period of time and in the process has undergone changes and also been influenced by various factors.\(^ {15}\) The first representative institution in Meghalaya emerged when Meghalaya was formed as an Autonomous State on the 2\(^{nd}\) April 1970 within the State of Assam and the Provisional Assembly was then set up consisting of 38 elected members and 3 nominated members bringing the total to 41 members.\(^ {16}\) The members of the Provisional Legislative Assembly were elected by the elected members of the two Autonomous District Councils of Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills. In the election of March 1970 to the Provisional Legislative Assembly – 16 seats were returned from Garo Hills; 18 seats

\(^{14}\) H. Bareh: *op.cit.*, pp. 152-155
\(^{15}\) R. S. Lyngdoh: *op.cit.*, pp. 179-189.
\(^{16}\) R. S. Lyngdoh: *op.cit.*, pp. 97-98.
from Khasi Hills and 4 seats from Jaintia Hills. The result shows a clean sweep for the All Party Hill Leaders’ Conference (APIILC) which won 34 seats with the remaining 4 seats captured by the Indian National Congress (INC). 3 members were nominated by the Governor. This Provisional Legislative Assembly was characterized by a more or less homogeneous party structure owing to the absence of a well organized Opposition party. This set up could not satisfy the aspirations of the people of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills as there was bound to be administrative and other differences between the Autonomous State of Meghalaya and the State of Assam. Following intense political movement in the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills Districts, the Autonomous State of Meghalaya was upgraded into a full-fledged State in 1972, thereby fulfilling the political aspirations of the people. The first general elections to the newly formed Meghalaya Legislative Assembly were held on March 1972 paving the way for the installation of the first Legislative Assembly of the new State comprising of 60 elected members.\textsuperscript{17}

Chapter II:

In a parliamentary democracy the Government is responsible to the elected Representative Legislature which derives its authority from the people. This chapter analyses the composition and structure of the political parties in successive Legislative Assemblies after every general elections held from 1972 to 1988 and also whenever there is any change of power.

The membership pattern of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly is also discussed and analysed in this chapter. The constitutions of the different political parties are

\textsuperscript{17} B. Pakem, \textit{Coalition Politics in North East India}, Regency Publications, New Delhi, pp. 97-98.
examined and analysed in order to assess the performance of these parties. The emergence and the fall of these political parties operating in Meghalaya politics within this stipulated period is also assessed in this chapter.

The role of the political parties in the formation of Government in Meghalaya is also discussed and analysed in detail. From 1972 to 1976 the APHLC was at the helm of power in the State. But in 1976, a section of the APHLC led by Capt. W. A. Sangma agreed to merge with the INC leading to the installation of a Congress Government that completed its first term in 1978. After the 1978 general elections, the three regional political parties – the All Party Hill Leaders’ Conference (APHLC), Hill State People’s Democratic Party (HSPDP) and Public Demand Implementation Convention (PDIC) came together and formed a coalition government popularly known as the Three Flag Government. This coalition government remained in power for eleven months when in March 1979 the HSPDP was removed from the coalition. The two parties in the coalition – the APHLC and PDIC survived in power for a month when the coalition was overthrown by the United Meghalaya Parliamentary Democratic Front (UMPDF), a coalition of three political parties – HSPDP, a section of the APHLC led by B. B. Lyngdoh and the INC. This coalition remained in power until the 1983 general elections to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. The Legislative Assembly that emerged after the elections again witnessed the coming together of the regional political parties to form the Government under the banner of the Meghalaya United Parliamentary Party (MUPP). But this coalition from its inception was fraught with infighting among its members leading to its collapse barely a month of its being in office. The sudden collapse of the
coalition Government was viewed as a weak point of the regional political parties by the main Opposition – the INC. The Indian National Congress took advantage of the political instability and managed to bring some members to its side and then moved a No Confidence motion which was carried through in the Assembly. The MUPP lost the motion and the Congress formed the next Government which completed the term of the Assembly.

Chapter III:

This chapter deals mainly with the Opposition parties during the three successive Legislative Assemblies. All political parties in Meghalaya have at some point of time served the State as members of the Opposition. Even the Congress party did play the role of an Opposition though for a short stint. This chapter analyses the electoral performances of the different political parties in the State. The strength of these political parties, the number and percentage of votes polled by these parties in the 1972, 1978 and 1983 general elections are also taken into consideration.

This chapter also examines the reasons and causes for the rise of the Congress party to power which rose from being a party that rode on the popularity wave of the APHLC by forging an electoral understanding with this party in the first general elections of 1972, to being the party that wrested power from the APHLC and forming the next ruling party, in the process consolidating its support-base and power particularly in the Garo Hills where it dominated the politics of this area. Another area of enquiry in this chapter is based on the factors responsible for the decline of the main regional political
party – the APHLC, and its subsequent diminishing role resulting in the disappearance of this party from State politics. The dismal performances of the HSPDP and the PDIC, both of which are the off-shoots of the APHLC are also discussed. Both these political parties advocated the need to generate upliftment, development and welfare in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills but were unable to convince the voters of their policies and programmes of action. The result was the failure of the two regional political parties to come out successful in their electoral performance.

The formation of the Opposition party or parties in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly is taken into consideration in this chapter to examine the formation and role of the Opposition from 1972 to 1988. The role of the Congress party as a national party when in the Opposition, how successfully it has achieved its objective of dislodging successive ruling party (s) is also examined. The role of the Regional Political parties as members of the Opposition, their success or failure in achieving their main objective which is either to topple or form an alternative government is examined and analysed in this chapter. The factors and reasons for the emergence and decline of these Regional Political parties are analysed and encompassed in this chapter.

Chapter IV:

This chapter examines and attempts to analytically assess the role of the Opposition in the Assembly with regard to the problems and issues relating to the boundary problems between Meghalaya and Assam during 1972 to 1988.

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Meghalaya and Assam share a common boundary that stretches from the northern to the south-eastern part of Meghalaya. Since there is no well define demarcation between the two States, boundary disputes are bound to arise. These issues proved to be contentious ones as they are continually raised in successive Assemblies and generating intense debates in the House. With no clear solution in sight, these issues kept cropping their heads whenever a dispute situation occurred in the border areas between the two neighbouring States.

Successive Opposition has initiated intense debate on this issue. However the successive governments, have not been able to find a solution though the issue was addressed in successive Assemblies from 1972 to 1988 ( 1972-1978; 1978-1983; 1983-1988 ). A permanent solution eludes both States. It has therefore been regarded as a contentious issue which has continuously appeared on the agenda items of the House.

In this chapter an attempt is made to study and analyse this issue in the political realm of the State and its impact on its politics. It discusses the way the issue is raised in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly by the political parties or individual members and assesses whether this has made any serious impact on the political parties of the State and the members of the House. It also analyses the role played by political parties, particularly the party(s) in the Opposition in bringing this issue to the Assembly, the debates that usually ensures and the outcome of the discussion if any, and also seeks to examine the reason why the successive governments have not been able to come out with any concrete and permanent solution to this issue.
The study also attempts to assess whether the initiatives made by members of the House representing these areas to highlight this issue as well as to bring to the attention of the House; the problems faced by these people with the people of Assam and the inclusion and intrusion by Assam made any impact on the ruling party or government to try to resolve this issue.

Chapter V:

In this chapter an attempt is made to examine and analyse the role of the Opposition with regard to three specified issues:

i. Land and Land Relations
ii. Law and Order Problems
iii. Problem of Influx

In order to have an indepth study and understanding of the above mentioned issues and problems, this chapter is divided into two sections –

Section I examines and analyses the role of the Opposition with regard to the Land Tenure System and Land Relations in Meghalaya and other related issues or problems. This section traces the origin of this issue and discusses how this was initiated into the Assembly debates. In this section, we also examine and analyse the debates and discussions that followed thereafter when this issue was addressed in the House. This chapter in particular focuses and analyses the role of the Opposition in articulating the problems associated with this issue.
Section II deals with the issue relating to law and order situations/problems particularly in Shillong, the State capital. Such situations had resulted in the break down of law and order and had also its effect on the functioning of the House during such times. The agenda items of the House were usually interrupted by members through procedures of Call Attention notices to draw the attention of the House to the seriousness of the situation. Meghalaya witnessed serious law and order situations during 1979 to 1982. This chapter traces the factors responsible for the breakdown of law and order in Shillong particularly relating to the problems that took place between 1979 to 1982. The volatile situation that arose had generated heated debates and discussions in the Legislative Assembly between members of the ruling party and the Opposition. The Assembly debates pertaining to this issue are analysed to focus and understand the role of the Opposition in the Assembly.

In this section too, the Problem of Influx has been discussed and analysed as this issue is related to the law and order problems. These two issues are interconnected and thus influenced each other. It may thus be stated that during the Legislative Assembly debates whenever the first issue on law and order problem was raised, reference to the other issue, that is, the problem of influx to the State of Meghalaya was always referred or dragged into the Assembly debates and discussions.

Chapter VI:

This chapter sums up the major findings of the study. The following are the major findings of the study.
The role of the main political parties in the State as Opposition has been studied and examined particularly their role in projecting themselves as an alternative to the ruling party in matters concerning the formation of the government. This role of projecting itself as an alternative government was undertaken by the Congress party. The Congress party managed to wrest power from the ruling APHLC in the First Assembly in 1976 and formed the Government which also completed its term. The party succeeded in installing a Congress Government in 1976, when a section of the APHLC under the leadership of Capt. Williamson A. Sangma merged with the Indian National Congress thereby adding to the numerical strength of the party. In contrast, the regional political parties were not able to dislodge the Congress government due to lack of understanding and co-operation among themselves.

The regional political parties as Opposition was characterized by disunity and fragmentation. They were not able to present themselves as a United Opposition to the ruling party. Instead of coming together and forming a United Front, these regional political parties preferred to retain their individual identity. Hence, the party in power could exert dominance in the House. Disunity and fragmentation is a major cause that accounts for the weakness of these parties which in turn had an adverse impact on their role as an effective and vibrant Opposition.

The APHLC as a major regional political party synonymous with the attainment of statehood of Meghalaya gained prominence in the first general elections of 1972. It
successfully capitalized this image and secured absolute majority in the election to the First Assembly of the State. However, the APHLC could not retain its success in the successive elections. The party started disintegrating during the period of the First Assembly itself (1972-1978). The APHLC though it secured absolute majority and formed the Government was not able to complete even its first term in office, as some prominent members of the party decided in 1976 to merge with the Indian National Congress. The merger proved disastrous for the APHLC as it led to the disintegration of the party and in subsequent years, the party disappeared from the politics of the State.

The other regional political parties of the State – the HSPDP and the PDIC, both offshoots of the APHLC and formed by former members of the APHLC, who were disgruntled with the workings of the party. They therefore decided to make their entry into the politics of the State as independent regional political parties. The HSPDP entered state politics with a credible performance in the general elections of 1972 and followed by gaining ground in the two successive elections in 1978 and 1983. The PDIC another regional political party however was not successful in its electoral performance from the time it entered the state electoral arena. The reason being that even though the party takes up the cause or issue of the farmers community in the State, it failed to convince the majority of the rural voters to return its candidates to the Assembly. It managed to secure only 2 to 3 seats in a 60 member House and in the successive general elections till it disappeared from Meghalaya politics. These two parties were also unable to make any inroads in the Garo Hills which constitute a sizeable number of Assembly constituencies. The Garo Hills remained a strong hold of the Indian National Congress
party during this period due to strong and effective leadership provided by Capt. Williamson A. Sangma.

Another remarkable political development in the State is the history of a fragmented Opposition, consisting mostly that of regional political parties. In the history of Meghalaya politics, the regional political parties had made several attempts to unite and present a unified force against the Congress party. In 1984 the two main regional parties – the APHLC and HSPDP merged and formed the Hill People Union (HPU). This Union however proved shortlived as after their unsuccessful attempt to capture the Lok Sabha seat in the Lok Sabha elections of 1984, the HSPDP came out of the Union and continued to maintain its own original identity.

The Opposition gave a substantial performance, though at times their fragmentary nature hampers their effectiveness in performing their role in the House; the main factor being their inability to sustain a strong united front against the party in power.

Regarding the issues and problems of Land, inter-state boundary disputes, law and order and the problem of influx of outsiders to the State, these were addressed and discussed intensely during the period of study (1972-1988) by successive Governments whenever they were raised by members of the Opposition. It was found that successive parties whenever they were in the Opposition kept constant vigil on any move of the Government by raising questions and generating criticisms. But the reverse was practiced whenever the same parties come to power. This could be attributed as one of
the reasons for not reaching a permanent solution of the issues concerned. The solutions on these issues undertaken for study remain inconclusive during the period of study (1972-1988). The same situation continues till date with no final solutions to these issues.

The APHLC as an Opposition has not registered a significant performance in ventilating public opinions or grievances on the issues specified, except in extending support to any moves made by other opposition parties. Some independent members of the Legislative Assembly had shown a commendable record while performing their role as Opposition. Some of them were actively and continuously generated laudable performance in ventilating and raising issues considered significant for the newly formed State particularly the above mentioned issues.

It is felt that there is scope for the development of a strong Opposition in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly in future. For this to be achieved there has to be effective electoral alliances among the parties in the Opposition to provide a viable alternative to the ruling party. This can be made possible only if efforts to narrow down differences are seriously made by the parties concerned to build up a strong opposition. The tendency of forming minor parties is to be discouraged to prevent the emergence of splinter groups in the Assembly.