CHAPTER III

KHASI WOMEN: THEIR PLACE IN TRADITIONAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR PARTICIPATION IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

a) Traditional Political Institutions and the Khasi Women:

The written history of the Khasi people indicates that they had their own traditional political systems. The arrival of the British into this region and the subsequent establishment of their system of administration, had left practically untouched the traditional administrative institutions of these people from where a fair idea of how they functioned can be inferred. According to Simon (1991:2) the entire geographical area inhabited by the Khasis was called Ka Ri ki Laiphew Syiem meaning 'land of thirty kings' (The Khasi term for laiphew means thirty). However, today it is generally understood and accepted that the term laiphew does not necessarily mean thirty but rather denotes many. British records indicate that there were as many as 25 petty states at the time of their occupation of the Khasi Hills. These 25 states varied in
size and population. Each state was under a traditional head called a
*Syiem, Lyngdoh, Sirdar* and *Wahadadar*.

Before studying the role of the Khasi women in the traditional
political institutions it would be appropriate to examine in brief the
traditional political institutional set-up. There are a number of books
written on the traditional political institutions by local as well as non-
local scholars from where a fair idea of how these institutions functioned
in the past and how they are functioning today can be inferred. In Khasi
society, the *kur* or clan formed the nucleus of all traditional socio-
political institutions (Giri, 1998). The art of politics and governance
takes shape at this level when clan matters were entrusted in the hands
of an eldest maternal uncle to be addressed. The Khasis developed a
distinctive four-tier form of governance with the *hima* (state) at the top,
*raids* (communes) at the middle, the *shnong* (village) and the *kur* or the
clan at the base (Lyngdoh, 1996). The *dorbars* or councils were the
highest decision making bodies in the Khasi political and administrative
set-up. The *dorbars* or councils have no written law of their composition
or functioning but functioned purely on uncodified customary laws and
practices, which were more or less binding on all members of the village.
In the present age changes have been seen wherein some dorbar shnongs or village councils have their own written constitutions, rules and regulations (War, 1998). Every stage of administration, from the village to the state, has its own dorbar or council. The dorbar or council was a sacred institution and was called Ka Dorbar Blei or God's council, because it was believed that God Himself was present in the dorbar or council (Bareh, 1985; Singh, 1985). The Khasi dorbar (council) is conducted very solemnly and decisions are taken unanimously.

As mentioned earlier, the kur or clan forms the core of Khasi political institutions. Each kur or clan is generally a unit within the political and social framework (Lyngdoh, 1996). Each clan has its own dorbar kur (clan council) which is presided over by the rangbah kur (clan headman). The rangbah kur (clan headman) was elected by the male members of his clan and was also called the kni rangbah (head uncle) as he was the eldest male member of the clan. At the lowest level, the kur or clan council functioned as an organized political unit (War, 1998). The rangbah kur (clan headman) was the spokesman of his clan and together with the dorbar kur (clan council) managed all internal affairs of the clan. The dorbar kur (clan council) performs the important function of
selecting clan delegates to represent the clan in the electoral college of the hima or state. Though the functions and powers of the dorbar kur (clan council) are limited, it plays a moderately effective role in the political affairs (Mathur, 1979).

Every Khasi village has its own dorbar shnong (village or local council) which plays a pivotal role in the village administration and is presided by the rangbah shnong/ymmen shnong, that is, the village headman, who is elected by the adult male members of the village. The village administration is run according to local customs and traditions. A significant feature of a Khasi village administration is that the village headman alone cannot decide on any issue, and that it is only after long deliberations and discussions on all issues before the dorbar or council that consensus is arrived at (Simon, 1991). The welfare of the village such as water supply, health, roads, education etc., are looked after by the village headman and the village council. The village headman looks after law and order of the village and as such performs the dual role of magistrate and police officer in the village administration besides seeing to the payment of tributes to the chiefs or the territorial headmen by the villagers (Mathur, 1979).
The largest political unit under a hima or State over which the Khasis wield political authority is the raid or commune. It is a political unit which is a confederacy of villages that federate into a political system for the purpose of social control and harmonious civil and judicial administration. The raids or communes have their dorbar raid or commune council which may be called territorial tribal councils (Mathur, 1979). The dorbar raid (commune council) elected its head who is known as the rangbah raid (head of commune). Members of the dorbar raid consisted of all village headmen with additional representatives whenever necessary (War, 1998). The dorbar raid looked after all internal affairs of the villages under its jurisdiction but in matters of serious crimes the syiem’s (chief) authority was called upon.

The highest traditional political authority of the Khasis is the syiem or chief. Several raids or communes form the hima or state with an elected chief called the syiem. The syiem along with other elected officials ruled the Khasi state under the overall supervision of the dorbar hima (state council). Besides presiding over the dorbar hima he also presided over his own council, that is, the syiem’s dorbar or dorbar myntri or council of ministers (Das, 1998). Members of the dorbar myntri
consisted of all elected clan officials like the myntris, lyngskors, basans and lyngdohs and were collectively called ki bakhraw or noblemen (Mawrie, 1981). The syiem or chief is elected by an electoral college that comprised of the bakhraws and basans or representatives of clans (Lyngdoh, 1996). In general the syiem was elected from a pre-ordained royal clan, the syiem clan and heirship to the office of the syiem is in all cases traced through the female offspring. In the case of total absence of male heirs, a woman was eligible. In such cases the syiem was succeeded by the eldest of his uterine sisters (Bareh, 1985).

From the above discussion of how the traditional political institutions functioned it can be observed that the Khasi traditional political institutions manifest a blend of partial democracy and limited monarchy. It is partial democracy because it encourages the participation of only adult males in the political affairs of the state. This trend is strictly adhered to even today where Khasi states, especially in rural areas are reluctant to allow women to participate in state affairs. Secondly it is a limited monarchy because the syiem's (chief) powers are to a large extent circumscribed (Gurdon, 1990). He performs important acts only after consulting and getting the dorbar's (council) approval. As
such the syiem was not a territorial ruler but was and still is a functionary of his state, his duty being to put into action decisions of the council (Singh, 1985). The present day functioning of these traditional political institutions remain the same.

With this brief preview of the traditional political set-up of the Khasi society, we can now examine the role played by women in these political institutions. As mentioned earlier the dorbar or council was considered a sacred institution of the Khasis. Singh (1985:22) notes that the Khasis have tried to maintain it as the sole electoral body, the sole legislative, administrative and judicial body in the state, ka hina. Even the syiem was below the dorbar. Strict rules of conduct were imposed. An interesting issue here is that though the political institutions were democratic in nature, they had some limitations. Lyngdoh (1996:143) points out four factors in this regard. Firstly, he notes that it was the kur or clan and not the individuals who formed the political unit. The second factor is that the syiem or chief was elected only from the syiem clan. Thirdly, smaller kurs or clans had no voice in the syiem’s election and lastly, women had no share or role in the political and administrative set-up of the Khasi society. In general the traditional political
institutions of the Khasis have been eulogized as being very democratic. However a closer examination proves the contrary. According to Bareh (1985:255), in no case were women elected to the councils. Total adult male franchise was followed where they were both voters as well as candidates. A woman was also not allowed to hold the office of the syiem (chief) nor could she speak up in the dorbar or council (Singh, 1985). All dorbars (councils) right from the dorbar kur (clan council) to the dorbar hima (state council) had only male members. Administration was regarded as a burden for men while home, the domain of women.

It may be worthwhile to note a few tenets regarding the role and place of the Khasi woman as noted by Singh (1985:14) – 1) Ka said ka thew, ka sain ka tiah, kiba khia kiba shon ka jong u Rangbah – Deliberations and decisions, planning, administration and politics and the burdens of management belong to man; 2) Ka wait, u sum, ka sang, ka barshi, ka knia, ka khrim baroh ka jong u rangbah. Ka kynthei tang ka lum ka kynshew ka tajar ka dah ka dang – the weapons of war and the sacerdotal performances belong to the man. The woman is the keeper of the home and the one who prepares and collects the things connected with the rituals; 3) Ka akor Khasi ka khang ban kynih ka iar kynthei ne
said thma ha dorbar – according to this tenet, a woman is forbidden to speak or deliberate before the dorbar. He further observes that the blind, the lame, epileptics, men without moustaches, the mentally imbalanced and one who is the last or sole surviving member of his clan could not hold office. Sen (1985:101) writes – “Chastity of women glorified magnificently is an aspect of keeping womenfolk confined to the household⋯⋯women are also denied the right of franchise”. According to Lyngdoh (1991:33) there is a Khasi saying, wow la kynih ka 'iar kynthei, ka pyrthei ka la wai, which means that the world will come to an end or there will be destruction when the hen crows. There is a saying that as it is the rooster that crows, the crowing should be done by it and not by the hen, for when the Khasis say – kynih ka iar kynthei or crowing of the hen, it means that she does not know her role as the mother of the house (Giri, 1980). This tenet also implies that by ‘crowing’ or partaking in those activities not sanctioned by tradition, she has overstepped her jurisdiction and role. There is another Khasi saying wherein women are regarded as Ka thei shibor meaning that women are of one device and one power, while the man was regarded as u rang khadar bor which means that a man with twelve powers (Giri, 1998).
In Khasi tradition, a man is *U Nongda* or protector and the woman *Ka Nongri ling* meaning the custodian of the family property (Bareh, 1985). This is best illustrated by the symbols or objects that are used at the birth ceremonies of a newly born child. A bow and three arrows are placed near a male child to signify his role as a warrior, hunter and protector of the family, clan and the race. For a female child, a head strap or *u star*, a conical basket or *ka khoh* and a knife or *ka wait* are placed to symbolize her role as a hardworking house-wife and co-worker in the field, who contributes not only to the welfare of the family and the clan but also to the race in general (Lyngdoh, 1991). Mawroh (1990:3) gives another example for this social thought where in she interprets the *shad suk mynsiem* or the Thanksgiving Dance. In this Thanksgiving Dance the male dancers hold the sword on their right hands, the whisks on the left hand, the shield, the bow and arrows at their back indicating that they are the defenders of the clan, the community and the land. The turbans on their head with the crest of a feather on the back of their turbans, indicates that they are the rulers, the law-makers and the administrators. The female dancers dance in the inner circle of the arena while the male dancers dance surrounding them. The female dancers adorn themselves with costly gold and silver

60
jewellery and ornaments indicating that they are the custodians of the ancestral properties. They also wear a gold or silver crown which according to Mawroh, symbolizes the various virtues that a Khasi woman should maintain - dignity, honesty, virginity and courtesy in all walks of her life in society. Analysing the participation of a Khasi woman in matters of statecraft, Synrem (1992:32) notes - "the mother would not meddle with the affairs of the state as this would interfere with her duties and responsibilities in the home." She further observes that the position of a woman in a Khasi family is unique. Not only has her right over the home and property been sanctified by custom and religious tradition, but on her depends the very continuation of lineage and inheritance. It is believed that it is from the woman that the clan will multiply - ban roi ka jait ka kynja, and the family household will continue to expand - ban iar U tnum u tyndai. Commenting on the Khasi woman's place in the Khasi society, Nongbri (2003:242) writes that - "Implicit in the division of gender roles among the Khasis is the hint that women lack expertise and skill to handle important and major matters. The exclusion of women from politics and the denial of rights to manage their property gives the impression that society finds them lacking in administrative and managerial abilities - roles which demand tact,
shrewdness and decisive action. Thus, while formal stratification of gender is absent in Khasi society, ideologically, women have always been seen as inferior to men. This inequality is camouflaged by matrilineal descent, which creates a false impression of aura and prestige around women. Ironically, matrilineal descent helps to keep women in subjugation. By conferring descent rights on women, men not only succeed to isolate women from politics but also in legitimizing their own position as their protector”.

What can be inferred from above is that, the Khasi woman has no place in the political sphere and that her main role was that of a home maker. Despite restrictions being imposed on women participating in the decision-making process of these institutions, Khasi history tells us of women who did rule. According to Bareh (1985:237) in a few western and northern states women were instituted as syiem-synshar or ruling heads of states which distinguished them from the role of the syiem-sads, high priestesses, concerned with religious functions. These female syiem-synshars were – ka Jaw Saring of the raid Iapngar in Bhoi area, ka Wan of the Maharam state, ka Latympong Sutnga, ka Jem and ka Sanglar of the Nongkhlaw state and ka Lar of the Nobosohphoh state,
who reigned till 1869. Bareh opines that these women were in office for some time due to non-availability of a male successor. This was done so as to prevent dissensions arising from succession quarrels which would have disastrous effects on the state. Existence of such female rulers indicates that women could take part in administration and that they were also accepted. However, this is more of an exception than a rule.

The Khasi women did take part in political administration, but on very rare and peculiar circumstances. The general trend was and still is that women have no part to play in any activities associated with traditional political institutions. The normal rule was that the dorbars or councils practice male suffrage and women had no representation in these councils. Women were allowed to attend dorbars or councils only when cases or matters concerning them were discussed. Her foremost role was that of a mother and proprietor of her clan. In the present times there has been a perceptible change in this rigidity of debarment to dorbars or councils for we now see women taking part in the affairs of traditional political institutions though only at the village level. Women in some localities in Shillong attend dorbar or council and are also included in the executive committees of the dorbar or council. For example –
Laitumkhrah, Nongrim Hills and Lachumiere dorbars include women in their executive committees. These localities are more cosmopolitan and the residents belong to different communities. There are also some women organizations like *Ka Seng Longkmie* (Mother's Association) Laitumkhrah and *Seng Kynthei* (Women's Organisation) Nongrim Hills, which send two representatives to the executive committee of the local councils. The representatives sent are usually the president and the general secretary of these women organizations. The Lachumiere local dorbar had a lady treasurer in the executive committee. Another locality, Nongrim Hills, has a woman executive member. Ms. Cerila Khonglah was elected as the treasurer of this locality and is at present serving her term as an executive member of the Nongrim Hills dorbar. Besides her, there are two other women sent from the *Seng Kynthei* (Women’s Organisation), to represent women from this locality. Yet this is just a tiny drop in the ocean of women’s participation in traditional political bodies. In some localities there are women members not at the *shnong* or village level but at the *dong* or block level. For example the locality of Malki is divided into 8 ‘*dongs*’ or blocks. Each *dong* has its own *rangbah dong* or block head who represents his respective block. In this locality there are women members not at the locality level but at the sub
divisions of the locality, that is, the block levels. An interview conducted with a woman member (who is the general secretary of her block) revealed that women are reluctant to hold posts that are being held by men, post such as that of the headman. Women according to her are reluctant to take up such posts because of the enormous responsibilities attached to them.

There are still many dorbars which do not allow women to participate in the meetings. Interviews conducted with some rangbahs shnongs (village headmen) reveal that men are still reluctant to release the reigns of control of a domain they regard as solely theirs. Those opposed to change and who adhere strictly to traditional tenets are of the opinion that since tradition does not encourage the participation of women in political matters even at the grassroot level, the question of accommodating women in the dorbars does not arise. The moderate opinion on the other hand is that if women receive the encouragement and support of men from the level of the dong (that is, the block) itself then their entry and occupation of important posts at the dorbar level stands unhindered. According to Hipshon Roy (cited in Lyngdoh, 1991), the Khasis in the evolution of their democratic system had wisely
avoided burdening their women with politics, and as such she had no place or function in it, her most important role being that of a mother. Affairs of the state were and are still regarded the domain of men.

What has been observed is that ideas about and attitudes towards the Khasi women are crucially linked to the institution of marriage, family, the home, children and household activities. Writings on Khasi woman portray her as a mother through whom the lineage and continuity of the clan depends, and that she is subservient to the tenets of Khasi society as imposed by tradition. Though Khasi society is matrilineal, it is no different from the patrilineal societies when it comes to the role women are expected to play in the society. Women in general construct themselves through culturally given definitions of womanhood. The outcome is defining women who are crucially dependent on the concept of mother and all activities and associations that the concept draws to itself. There is no doubt that there are women who do not agree with this sexual stereotyping of the gender but it is very hard to shake off a practice that has been followed for a long period of time. In the end it all depends on the way an individual interprets or looks at her expected role and sees it as appropriate or not. For the Khasi woman her role in
the traditional political institution is still very limited. However she realizes that this practice of exclusion needs to be reversed.

b) Historical Development of Khasi Women in Electoral Politics:

Having discussed the role played by women in the traditional political institutions, an attempt will now be made to study the role of women in the State politics of Meghalaya. This would lead to the study of the role of women in the Khasi Hills during (a) the pre-independence era, (b) the post-independence era, and (c) the period after the creation of the State of Meghalaya and the present state of women in electoral politics.

The struggle for equal voting rights has been a long one for women in general. The grant of franchise to women has not been uniform (Table 3). There is common consensus that the status of women is subordinate to that of men. As a matter of fact though women may hold some measure of influence or informal power, the degree of influence varied from culture to culture, the gender system, the class or status, caste or religious sects to which they belonged. Basically women
were regarded as the weaker sex and have certain cultural restrictions imposed on them. Today these cultural barriers are weakening and women are treading fields that were regarded taboo to them. One such taboo imposed on women was their participation in affairs of the state, which was regarded as the monopoly of men. Today women in most parts of the world participate in politics and its activities. Women's active participation in politics has always been able to evoke either strong favourable or unfavourable reactions. Arguments and reasons have been put forward as to why women should or should not take part in politics. The argument that women should refrain from politics is a much debated issue. Today, it is an accepted fact in most parts of the world that equal rights to vote and to be elected to national office are fundamental to women's status. The almost worldwide recognition of the political rights of women and equality of franchise with men was obtained after much pressure and struggle. Furthermore, feminist movements began demanding the right to vote, as elections were considered to be the fundamental act of political life. The obtainment of the right to vote was taken to be vital as basic decisions are made in the political arena which shape the patterns of society in which women live. As such, gaining the right to vote was seen as a means to ensure the
elimination of other forms of discrimination as well. "Historically, suffrage came first, eligibility to hold office next and actual access to public office still later" (Hymer, 1972, 103). The fight for women suffrage was not without any opposition. In general, established laws, customs, attitudes and habits of thinking were slow to change, especially when they concerned acceptance of new ideas about women and their place in society.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>YEAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>1893 (First in the World)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>1901 (Local elections)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1910 (Legislative elections)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1913 (National elections)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>1903 (Local councils)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1915 (Parliament)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>1906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>1915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USSR, Netherlands</td>
<td>1917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>1918 (above 30 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1928 (above 21 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg, Canada</td>
<td>1918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany, Sweden, Austria</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechoslovakia, Poland</td>
<td>1919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>1922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolian People's Republic</td>
<td>1924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil, Uruguay and Thailand</td>
<td>1932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(First Asian Country)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>1930 (Municipal election)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1934 (National election)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceylon, Cuba</td>
<td>1934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>1935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1944</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Guatemala, Hungary 1945
Panama, Italy, Albania,  
Rumania, Japan, Yugoslavia 1946
Argentina, Bulgaria, China,  
Venezuela 1947
Belgium, Israel, Korea 1948
Chile, India, Indonesia, Costa Rica 1949
Ghana 1950
Nepal 1951
Greece 1952
Mexico 1953
Colombia 1954
Ethiopia, Honduras, Peru, Nicaragua 1955
Pakistan 1952 (Provisional election)
1956 (National election)
Cambodia, Guinea, Laos, Mali,  
Mauritania, Niger, 1956
Senegal, Vietnam, Egypt
Haiti, Lebanon, Malay 1957
Somalia 1958
Cyprus, Morocco, Tunisia 1959
Nigeria 1960
Paraguay, Sierra Leone 1961
Algeria, Jamaica, Rwanda,
Trinidad, Uganda, Burundi 1962
Iran, Kenya, Fiji 1963
Malawi, Malta, Zambia 1964
Switzerland 1971


KHASI WOMEN IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

a) Pre-Independence Period:

As discussed earlier, traditionally, the Khasi women did not have any part to play in the administration of the state. There were debarred from taking part in the political affairs as war and politics were regarded as the activities of the men and the home affairs that of the women. Though tradition makes mention of some female rulers, this was under very rare circumstances. It has been observed that traditionally women...
did not involve themselves with political affairs and left the affairs of the state in the hands of the men. According to one school of thought, as women are already burdened with having to look after the family, an additional work such as taking part in politics would be too heavy a task for them to cope with (Gassah, 1995). In the pre-independence period women were not given any role to play in the traditional political institutions. But changes were seen when new types of administration were introduced, firstly under the British, and secondly under the Indian Constitution, thereby initiating the participation of women in politics at the non-traditional levels. The Government of India Act 1935, under the British rule, had granted women the right to vote, though on a very restricted and limited basis. The Act provided special provisions for the representation of women to the Assam Legislative Assembly whereby there was a seat reserved for women in the Shillong constituency, the reason being that there were more women here than in any other constituency. Moreover they were also eligible to contest from the general seats as well (Rao and Hazarika, 1983, 171). As such in the 1937 election, two Khasi women, Mrs. Berlina Diengdoh and Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh, contested from this reserved Shillong constituency as Independent candidates. There were 2199 women voters in the Shillong
constituency, out of which 1228 or 55.84% had exercised their votes, Miss Mavis Dunn polling 938 votes (ibid). She was declared a winner thereby becoming the first woman from Khasi Hills to become a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly and also the first woman to become a Cabinet Minister from the North East Region of India (Rao and Hazarika, 1983, 171; Gassah, 1995, 300). Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh was inducted into the Muhammad Saadulla Ministry twice, first in the year 1939 to 1941 and again in 1942 to 1945. The 1946 election saw an increase in the number of women contestants though their number was not quite substantial nor in proportion to their population strength. In this year there were five women candidates – Mrs. Bonniely Khongmen, T.W.Shadap, Berlina Diengdoh, Padma Kumari Gohain and Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh. Mrs. Bonniely Khongmen was the Congress nominee while the rest of the contestants were all independent candidates. Padma K.Gohain contested the general seat while the others from the reserved Shillong Constituency seat. In this election Mrs. Bonniely Khongmen won from the reserved seat, getting a total vote of 1454 out of 2878 votes polled (Rao and Hazarika, 1983, 172).
b) Post-Independence Period:

In India with the grant of universal adult franchise in the year 1949 the number of women voters also increased. The first general elections of free India were held in the year 1952. This election saw quite a few women contesting the general election in spite of the absence of reservation for women. In this general election six women filed their nominations – four were from the plain districts of Assam, while two were from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh who was an independent candidate, and Manorama Mehta, contested the Shillong seat against J.J.M. Nicholas, the Indian National Congress candidate. Both female candidates lost to the lone male candidate. Mavis Dunn who was the only tribal woman candidate had polled just 1622 votes out of 14188 votes polled, while the winner polled 4458 votes (Rao and Hazarika, 1983, 173). In the Parliamentary elections to the Lok Sabha which was held in the same year, Mrs. Bonniely Khongmen of the Indian National Congress contested from the Autonomous Districts against two male rival candidates – Mr. Wilson Reade of the Khasi-Jaintia Durbar, and Mr. Donaldson Basan of the Hills People Party. Mrs. Khongmen won with a clear majority, polling 59326 votes out of 109663 valid votes polled, thereby becoming the first tribal lady from
the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills to have represented the people in the Lok Sabha. It may be mentioned that prior to 1952, she was a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly from 1946 to 1952, and was also elected as the Deputy Speaker in 1952. During the 1957 Assembly elections she again returned to state politics and contested the Shillong seat as a Congress candidate but lost. She was the only tribal woman from the nine constituencies of the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills (Lyngdoh, 1992, 10-11; Gassah, 1995, 301). The 1962 and 1967 elections did not witness a single woman contestant to the Assam Legislative Assembly from the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills Districts (Rao and Hazarika, 1983, 107).

c) After the creation of the State of Meghalaya:

On 24th December 1969, the Bill for the creation of Meghalaya was passed by Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha and the Autonomous State of Meghalaya was brought into existence on the 2nd of April 1970 (Rao et al., 1984, 70). The Autonomous State of Meghalaya had its own Provisional Legislative Assembly. The year 1970 saw members of the Provisional Legislative Assembly being indirectly elected by members of the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills Autonomous District
Councils respectively, while some members were nominated by the Governor (Gassah, 1995, 302). A total of 38 members were elected out of which two were women, Maysalin War from the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Josephine Momin from the Garo Hills, while three members were nominated by the Governor (Malngiang, 1996, 37).

Meghalaya achieved statehood on the 21st of January 1972 and the first general election to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly was held on the 9th of March 1972. In this election nine women contested, 6 of them were from the Khasi Hills – Silverline Swer, Muriel Salena Dunn, Plissibon Marbianang, Rosida Sohtun, Maysalin War and Luisa Brosila Lamin, and 3 from the Garo Hills – Miriam D.Shira, Percyлина R.Marak and Herilla B.Sangma. There were no women candidates from the Jaintia Hills. Percyлина R.Marak, (contested on an APHLC ticket) from the Garo Hills was elected. In this election while four contestants forfeited their security deposit, the other four were defeated by their male rivals (Rao et al., 1984, 107). In the year 1973 when a bye election was held, two women candidates contested wherein Miriam D.Shira, who had contested the previous year, won the seat (Gassah, 1995, 303).
In the 1978 Meghalaya Legislative Assembly election, seven women contested, three were from the Khasi Hills - Neena Rynjah (Indian National Congress - I) from 22-Laban constituency, Maysalin War (All Party Hill Leaders Conference) from 36-Mawthengkut constituency and Drosily Mukhim (Independent) from 16-Malki-Nongthymmai constituency, three from the Garo Hills - Miriam D.Shira (Independent) from 43-Songsak constituency, Percyлина R.Marak (Indian National Congress) from 51-Rongram constituency and Fridina Marak (Independent) from 52-Tura constituency, and one Assamese lady, Usha Bhattacharjee (Indian National Congress I) from 17-Laithumkhrah constituency. Mrs. Miriam D.Shira, an independent candidate from the Garo Hills polled 1156 votes and was declared the winner. Out of the remaining six contestants three (Neena Rynjah, Drosily Mukhim and Usha Bhattacharjee) lost their deposit while the other three escaped forfeiture of deposit. Maysalin War lost by just 27 votes to her male opponent (Meghalaya Election Book, 1978). What had been observed in these last few elections by political analysts was that in spite of a sizeable women electorate the defeat or forfeiture of deposit of the women candidates indicated that women did not necessarily or readily vote for their kind. What can be said from this trend is that the female
electorate did not seem to favour women candidates. Questions such as these come to mind – what could be the reason for such attitude? Do the public in general, whether male or female, view women as incapable political leaders? Does social conditioning, the way one is brought up and expected to behave reasons for such behaviour?

The next general election held in 1983 saw an increase in women contestants, this year eight women stood for election. They were – Ivoryna Shylla (Public Demand Implementation Convention) from 6-Nongbah-Wahiajer constituency, Tiplut Nongbri (Indian National Congress) from 17-Laithumkhrah constituency, Evandalyne Massar (Indian National Congress) from 18-Pynthorumkhrah constituency, Maya R. Kyndiah (Indian National Congress) from 19-Jaiaw constituency, Naramai Langstieh (Indian National Congress) from 24-Sohryngkham constituency, Luisa Brosila Lamin also an independent candidate from 28-Nongshken constituency, Maysalin War from the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (hereinafter APHLC) from 36-Mawthengkut constituency and Miriam D.Shira also an APHLC candidate from 43-Songsak constituency. None of these women were elected; four were
defeated while the other four lost their security deposit (Meghalaya Election Handbook, 1983).

The Assembly election held in 1988 witnessed a very low level of women contestants. Three women, one from Khasi Hills and two from the Garo Hills, contested wherein two were elected - Maysalin War won on the Congress ticket and Miriam D.Shira from the Garo Hills as an independent candidate, both were inducted as Cabinet Ministers (Gassah, 1995, 304; Malngiang, 1996, 38).

In 1993, seven women candidates contested, five of them from Khasi Hills and two from the Garo Hills. Only one woman, Roshan Warjri from the 20-Mawkhar constituency was elected on the Hills People Union (hereinafter HPU) ticket and served as an MLA. Three women forfeited their security deposits while the remaining three were defeated (ibid).

In the next general election held in 1998, as many as fourteen women contested. They are - Lucia Malngiang, a Bharatiya Janata Party candidate (hereinafter BJP) from 16-Malki-Nongthymmai constituency,
Margaret Rose Mawlong, a United Democratic Party candidate (hereinafter UDP) and Naramai Langstieh, a Hill State Peoples Democratic Party candidate (hereinafter HSPDP) from 17-Laithumkhrah constituency, Mena Kharkongor, a Samata Party candidate (hereinafter SP) from 18-Pynthorumkhrah constituency, Maya R. Kyndiah, an Indian National Congress candidate (hereinafter INC) from 19-Jaiaw constituency, Roshan Warjri (UDP) from 20-Mawkhar constituency, Amanda Pathaw (INC) from 23-Mawlai constituency, Simil Gury Kharhujon from the People’s Democratic Movement (hereinafter PDM) from 29-Sohra constituency, Johanara Kharbhil as an independent candidate (hereinafter IND) from 31-Mawsynram constituency, Queentina Nongbet (UDP) from 33-Pariong constituency, Maysalin War (HSPDP) from 36-Mawthengkut constituency, Debora C. Marak (INC) from 39-Rongjeng constituency, Miriam D.Shira (IND) from 43-Songsak constituency and Bijeta Daring (IND) from 49-Rajabala constituency. Three women, two from the Khasi Hills - Roshan Warjri (UDP) and Maysalin War an independent candidate, and one from the Garo Hills- Debora C. Marak from the Congress party, were declared elected in this election. Altogether seven women contested from constituencies within the Greater Shillong Area out of which only one of them, Roshan Warjri,
was elected. 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.

In the latest election held in the year 2003, a total of fourteen women contested but only two were elected - Deobora C. Marak from Garo Hills and Irin Lyngdoh from the Khasi Hills, both Congress candidates, though by very slim margins of 61 and 29 votes respectively. This year there were only three women contestants from the Greater Shillong Area - Larisha Kurkalang (HSPDP) from 15-Mylliem constituency, Maya R. Kyndiah (UDP) from 19-Jaiaw constituency and Amanda Pathaw (INC) from 23-Mawlai constituency. All these three women forfeited their security deposits. Besides the two elected ladies, another lady, Mrs. Jopsimon Phanbuh, the wife of the then sitting MLA of the 22-Laban constituency, T.H. Rangad, was elected in the bye-election held when her husband passed away in July 2003. This bye-election was held in the same year of the Assembly elections on the 26th of September 2003. It has been rumoured that this lady won due to sympathy wave that have engulfs the Laban constituency when its
elected candidate passed away. All together there are now three women in the present Legislative Assembly. Mrs. Irin Lyngdoh was inducted to the Government in 2003 as a Minister of State and was given the following portfolios – to assist the Ministers of Soil Conservation and Irrigation. With the downsizing of the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (hereinafter MDA) ministry in July 2004, Irin Lyngdoh lost her ministerial berth in this ministry and was made a parliamentary secretary – to assist Minister in charge of Soil Conservation department: to assist Minister in charge of Sericulture and Weaving department. Mrs. Debora C. Marak was privileged to have been appointed a minister of Cabinet rank on both occasions, before and after the downsizing of the MDA ministry. Between the period of March 2003 and June 2004 she was minister in charge of Mining and Geology (Cabinet rank). In July 2004 after the downsizing she retained her cabinet berth and was given additional charge of Tourism, Cooperation, Art and Culture and Weights and Measures.

In the seven general elections (1972, 1978, 1983, 1988, 1993, 1998, and 2003) held so far, a total of only 65 women have contested in these elections out of a grand total of 1985 contestants. Out of the total
of these 65 women who had contested in the elections, only 12 of them have been elected so far.

Coming to the elections of the Autonomous District Councils, there were a number of women representatives who were either elected or nominated. In the first election to the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council held in the year 1952, a lady, Mrs.Lariam Shullai, was nominated as a member. The Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council in 1973-74, also had a nominated lady, Dr. (Mrs.) K.Rymbai. The next election held in the year 1972 saw two women, Mrs.Louisinia Brosila Lamin and Mrs.Etris Syiem, contesting and winning the election. In 1972, the Chief Executive member of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, Mr.L.G.Shullai, selected Mrs.L.Brosila Lamin as one of the executive members. She became the first lady executive member in all District Councils in the North East. Another lady, Mrs.E.Syiem, also served briefly as an executive member in 1977. Maysalin War who was a member of the Provisional Assembly in 1970 contested in 1984 and was elected to the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. She won on a Congress ticket (Lyngdoh, 1995, 12). The election held in 1991 saw three women contesting – Doris Bell Giri
Kurkalang (IND) from Mylliem, Lucia Malngiang from the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) from Laitumkhrah-Malki constituency and Velvet Rose Jana (RJD) from Mawlai constituency. All three contestants lost the elections. In the year 1993, Mrs. L. Brosila Lamin contested from the Mawlai constituency but lost. The nomination of women has not been repeated except for the two cases mentioned above.

The Garo Hills Autonomous District Council also held its first election in the year 1952. Out of the twenty-four members in the council there were two women, Mrs. Sujomoti W. Momin and Mrs. Roneswari Marak. Sujomoti was elected as an independent candidate while Roneswari was nominated by the Governor. Mrs. Sujomoti again contested in the year 1957, defeating two of her male rival candidates. Due to the Chinese aggression elections could not be held in the year 1962, it was postponed to 1964. In this election Mrs. Ewine Marak, the only women candidate contested against three male rival candidates and lost. In order to represent women in the District Council the Governor nominated a lady, Bisadini Sangma. In the 1972 elections Evangeline Shira, the only women candidate lost as an independent candidate. However, two women, Alleswary Momin and Janje Marak, were
nominated. There was a total absence of women members in the year 1978 to 1983. Two women, Enilla D.Shira and Reboti Burman, were elected in the year 1983, while in 1989, there was one elected lady member, Mrs. Reboti Burman. In the 1994 District Council elections, no female candidates were elected (Lyngdoh, 1995, 12-13).

Despite the fact that very few women actually contest for elections, it has been observed that the turnover of women voters is usually large, sometimes outnumbering male voters. But, the right to vote, though an essential means of influencing the distribution of political power in a democracy, does not by itself carry political power. The proportion of women elected as members of the Parliament, State Legislative Assembly, the Autonomous District Councils or even high officials within the state government, is by far very negligible. An interesting fact is that though political parties, whether at the national or regional level, have their women’s wing to work for their parties, very rarely do they nominate a woman candidate from their party. Women seem to play a more effective role in campaigning for parties during the elections besides casting their votes. Even the various women organizations that emerged after the creation of the state were mostly
socio-economic in outlook, working for the socio-economic upliftment of
the women besides looking into the general welfare of the society as a
whole. Some women organization such as 'Ka Synjuk Ki Kynthei
Riewlum' or the Tribal Women Welfare and Development Association of
Meghalaya (TWWADAM) formed in 1979, has taken up political issues
besides social and cultural issues (Lyngdoh, 1998, 95). The women's
wing of political parties such as the Mahila Congress I Committee and
the Women's Wing of the Hill People's Union have also raised issues
regarding the representation of women in the political and administrative
spheres (Lyngdoh, 1995, 20). These women's wings were basically set
up to give support and strengthen their political parties through their
social and political activities. There are others who have observed that
despite dynamic women party workers in the various women's wing of
different political parties, they are never projected as future candidates
of any constituency. This has been seen as a major set back to the
success of the Khasi women in the field of politics. Moreover it has also
been observed that on many occasions political parties approached
women to contest for election either as a last resort or merely to split
the votes of their opponents.
After more than a half century of women's suffrage, the number of women in high positions of political power and influence is still negligible. Actual political power has been achieved only by a handful of actively participating courageous women. Though there have been in a number of countries women ministers, some even of cabinet rank, very few have held office outside spheres usually considered women's interests such as social welfare, public health, family affairs—etc. A study conducted by the International Parliamentary Union shows that the percentage of women in the world Parliaments has dropped over the years, the ratio being quiet disproportionate to the total women population. Ten Parliaments in the world do not have a single woman representative. There are only 4512 women parliamentarians as against 33,981 men elected to the Parliaments in the world (The Hindu, June 17, 1997).

The present scenario in India is not very different. As such women in India have been clamouring for the 81st amendment to the Constitution for reserving 33% of the seats in the Lok Sabha and the Legislative Assemblies. This bill was first introduced in the Lok Sabha in September 1996, by the then United Front Government and later referred to the
joint select committee of Parliament chaired by late Geeta Mukherjee.

This reservation policy for women has not been able to get the approval of all political parties. In 1997, the then Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Mr. P. A. Sangma, was of the view that if women were to play any significant role in governance, they should themselves undergo a change of attitude. Moreover, he suggests that political parties practice and promote equal partnership for women in political participation - in enrolment of members, giving positions in party hierarchies, giving training to them in political work at all levels, in offering candidatures for elections, in meaningfully financing candidatures and electoral contests and in giving ministerial berths and positions, including weighty portfolios (The Shillong Times, August 21st, 1997). The Women's Reservation Bill has been able to evoke a lot of debate but consensus is yet to be arrived at.

In Meghalaya, the question as to whether this reservation of seats for women should be implemented or not is yet to be answered. Political leaders majority of whom are men, reason that as women in Meghalaya already have enough power under the matrilineal system, reservation of seats for them would not be applicable. Women legislators in the State
are also against reservation. Women legislators like Mrs. Roshan Warjri and Miss Debora C. Marak, have voiced their agreement on this. The former who was the lone female Cabinet Minister of the State in the year 1998–2003, said – ‘being a matrilineal society, women are equal to men and do not require reservations’ (The Telegraph, June 1st 2000). But in a recent personal interview with Mrs. Roshan Warjri she was of the opinion that women do need reservation of seats though not the present percentage of 33 but maybe a lesser percentage. Reservation according to her would enable more women to come forward in a field regarded as the male domain. Once we see more participation of women then reservation of seats can be done away with. The three Autonomous District Councils, the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills Autonomous District Councils, have opposed allotment of quota for women in the Assembly Councils. The Chief Executive Members of all these three autonomous district councils have opposed the idea of seat reservations for women in the councils. They contend that the women in this society have a higher status than men. They also claimed that since women were debarred from taking part in the traditional political institutions, quotas cannot be allocated for them now. Yet as equals to men, they argued, women can join the fray (ibid). Even in the Shillong Municipal Board 33% reservation
had been demanded for women but was opposed. A leading social activitist, Mrs.Probity Nongpluh, had even approached the court demanding 33% of the seat be reserved for women in the 2000 municipal election. Though the Gauhati High Court, Shillong Bench, passed the judgement in favour of Mrs.Nongpluh twice and later Gauhati High Court, Double Bench once, the State government had approached the Supreme Court ignoring the plea of Mrs.Nongpluh and others. Though the Gauhati High Court, Shillong Bench passed an order directing the State government to grant 33% reservation for women in the municipal election, this has yet to be implemented (The Shillong Times, May 21st, 2000).

What would be the outcome of the women's reservation bill in the State as well as at the centre is yet to be seen. The question is whether the women are in favour of this bill or not, whether they will aggressively contest for its implementation, whether tradition still has a strong hold on them when it comes to politics, or whether women feel that they are educated and matured enough to take on the reigns of governance in a more public way. In totality it is important to find out what is the general women's perception of politics and its various
activities. Do women themselves feel that more women should step forward in the political arena, do they think that women would make better political leaders, or whether they would actively participate in politics if given the chance to do so.