

Why So Few? The Challenges of Womens's Political Representation in A Matrilineal Society: A Study of Meghalaya and Beyond: A Comparison with Assam

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Abstract

Women's underrepresentation in politics continues to be a global concern, but in India's Northeast it carries unique paradoxes. Meghalaya, often celebrated for its matrilineal system, should ideally be more inclusive of women in legislative spaces. Yet, the state consistently records extremely low female representation. Assam, on the other hand, despite being a patrilineal society, shows comparatively higher participation of women in its legislative assembly. This paper examines the puzzle of "Why so few?" through a comparative study of Meghalaya and Assam. Drawing on electoral data, interviews with women legislators, and secondary sources, it highlights the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that limit women's political presence. The findings underline that matriliney does not automatically translate into political empowerment, and meaningful change requires political will, gender-sensitive policies, and stronger support for women leaders.

Keywords:: Women's political representation, Matriliney and politics, Gender and power, Electoral participation, Structural barriers, Political empowerment, Gender-sensitive policies

Introduction

The representation of women in political institutions has long been seen as a measure of democratic inclusivity. In India, despite constitutional guarantees and increasing women's participation at the grassroots level through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, women remain vastly underrepresented in state assemblies and Parliament.

Meghalaya presents a unique case. Known globally as one of the few matrilineal societies, where lineage and inheritance pass through women, one might expect high female participation in politics. Yet paradoxically, Meghalaya has consistently recorded one of the lowest percentages of women legislators in India. Assam, on the other hand, rooted in a patriarchal social order, has witnessed comparatively more women entering politics and occupying legislative seats.

This contrast poses the central question: Why are there so few women in Meghalaya's political institutions despite matriliney, and how does the situation compare with Assam? By investigating this

puzzle, the paper explores deeper socio-cultural and institutional dynamics that shape women's entry into political power.

Objectives

1. To examine the extent of women's representation in the legislative assemblies of Meghalaya and Assam.
2. To explore the barriers that limit women's entry into politics in both states.
3. To analyze why matriliney in Meghalaya does not ensure greater political participation of women.
4. To suggest possible strategies for enhancing women's representation in Northeast India.

Research Methodology

The present study is comparative and analytical in nature. It relies on both primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Primary sources include interviews with women MLAs and political activists, wherever possible, to capture first-hand experiences and perspectives. Secondary sources such as Election Commission of India reports, assembly records, government documents, newspapers, and scholarly articles are also extensively utilized to provide factual and contextual support. The period of study covers the years 2001 to 2023, with a specific focus on legislative elections during this time frame. The method of analysis involves percentage analysis of women's representation, comparative evaluation across different contexts, and qualitative interpretation of the socio-political factors influencing women's participation in legislative politics.

Socio-Cultural Context

Meghalaya: The Paradox of Matriliney

Meghalaya is often described as unique because of its matrilineal kinship system. Women inherit ancestral property and family lineage is traced through the mother. However, political decision-making and public leadership largely remain in male hands. Clan elders, village councils, and political parties are dominated by men. Women's social authority in domestic matters does not extend to the public political arena.

Assam: Patriarchy and Women's Mobilization

Assam follows a patrilineal structure, where inheritance and lineage pass through men. Despite this, Assamese women have a long tradition of political activism — from participation in the freedom struggle, the Assam Movement (1979–1985), to contemporary electoral politics. Organizations such as the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and various women's groups have shaped political mobilization, creating pathways for women to emerge in legislative politics.

Barriers and Challenges

The persistent underrepresentation of women in the legislative assemblies of Meghalaya and Assam can be explained through a set of socio-cultural, institutional, and political barriers that continue to limit women's entry into electoral politics. Although the contexts differ in each state, the challenges women face reveal both unique and overlapping patterns.

Meghalaya: The Paradox of Matriliney

Meghalaya's case is often cited as paradoxical. While the state follows a matrilineal kinship system in which inheritance passes through daughters and lineage is traced from the mother's side, this has not

translated into political authority. Women enjoy social respect and economic security within families, but political leadership remains heavily male-dominated. Several barriers contribute to this contradiction:

1. **Male-Controlled Decision-Making:** Despite matriliney, the clan elders and traditional institutions such as the Dorbar Shnong (village councils) are controlled by men. Political parties, too, are dominated by male leadership, leaving women little space to assert themselves.
2. **Cultural Stereotypes:** There is a deep-rooted perception that politics is “not for women.” Women are expected to be caretakers of property and family lineage, while men are seen as public decision-makers. This cultural stereotype discourages women from contesting elections.
3. **Party Gatekeeping:** Political parties in Meghalaya have been reluctant to nominate women candidates. Even when women are fielded, they are often given tickets in constituencies with little chance of winning, reducing their electoral success rate.
4. **Lack of Resources and Networks:** Election campaigns in Meghalaya, as elsewhere, demand significant financial resources and strong political networks. Women candidates frequently lack access to both, making it difficult to compete on equal footing with men.
5. **Societal Expectations:** Even successful women leaders often face a “double burden” of balancing family responsibilities with public life. This discourages many potential candidates from pursuing politics.

Assam: Patriarchy and Structural Hindrances

Assam's context is shaped by a patriarchal kinship system, where inheritance and lineage pass through men. Yet, Assamese women have a strong tradition of political activism — from the independence struggle to the Assam Movement. However, several barriers still limit their representation in the assembly:

1. **Gender Stereotypes in Leadership:** Women in Assam continue to face patriarchal norms that question their suitability as political leaders. Leadership is socially coded as masculine, which creates resistance to women contesting elections.
2. **Party Politics and Candidate Selection:** Political parties are hesitant to field women in “winnable” constituencies. Instead, they often use women as token candidates to demonstrate inclusivity, without providing real backing for their campaigns.
3. **Violence and Intimidation:** The political culture in Assam, particularly in rural areas, can be aggressive and even violent. Women candidates are more vulnerable to intimidation and harassment, discouraging their active participation.
4. **Financial Barriers:** Like in Meghalaya, women often lack the financial independence or external funding necessary to sustain competitive campaigns. Male candidates usually have easier access to patronage networks and business connections.
5. **Balancing Roles:** The expectation that women must prioritize domestic duties continues to act as a silent barrier. Many capable women withdraw from politics due to family pressure or lack of support.

Common Challenges Across Both States:

Despite their cultural differences, Meghalaya and Assam share several common barriers:

- Party reluctance to give tickets to women candidates.
- Patriarchal norms that confine women to private/domestic spaces.

- Financial inequality that prevents women from running strong campaigns.
 - Absence of institutional support, such as training, mentorship, or political financing for women.
- Thus, whether in a matrilineal or patrilineal society, structural and institutional hurdles remain powerful forces that hinder women's access to political power.

Data Analysis

To understand the extent of women's participation in the legislative politics of Assam and Meghalaya, it is important to examine the statistical trends over the years. The following table presents data on women's representation in the state assemblies during the period under study. This statistical overview not only highlights the numerical presence of women legislators but also provides a foundation for analyzing the broader socio-political factors that have shaped their role in the decision-making process.

Assam (Source- Election Commission of India)

Legislative assembly election year	Number of the elected women legislators
2001	10
2006	13
2011	14
2016	8
2021	6
Total	51

Meghalaya (Source- Election Commission of India)

Legislative assembly election year	Number of elected women legislators
2003	2
2008	1
2013	4
2018	3
2023	3
Total	13

Women's representation in the legislative assemblies of Assam and Meghalaya during the 21st century continues to highlight both regional contrasts and systemic limitations in ensuring gender-balanced political participation.

Assam (2001–2021)

The data from the Election Commission of India shows that Assam elected a total of 51 women legislators across five assembly elections (2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021).

- In 2001, 10 women were elected, marking an early benchmark of around 7.9% representation in the 126-member assembly.
- In 2006, this figure rose to 13, showing a positive increase.
- The peak came in 2011, when 14 women MLAs entered the assembly, representing the highest point (around 11.1%).

- However, in 2016, the number dropped sharply to 8, and this stagnation continued in 2021, with only 6 women MLAs elected, amounting to a mere 4.7% of the total house.

This pattern demonstrates a fluctuating trajectory, where women's presence rose steadily in the early 2000s but witnessed a notable decline in the last two elections. The fall after 2011 indicates a withdrawal of party support for women candidates, showing how women's electoral participation is highly dependent on party nomination strategies rather than a steady progression of gender inclusivity.

Meghalaya (2003–2023)

Meghalaya presents a very different picture, having elected only 13 women legislators in total during the five assembly elections held between 2003 and 2023.

- In 2003, only 2 women were elected.
- This figure declined further in 2008, when only 1 woman secured a seat.
- A relative improvement was seen in 2013, when the state elected 4 women MLAs, the highest in its history.
- In 2018, the number slipped to 3, and in 2023, it remained stagnant at 3.

Across two decades, women's representation in the 60-member Meghalaya assembly has never crossed 6.7%, which is strikingly low compared to Assam. This reflects the paradox of matriliney: although women in Meghalaya enjoy inheritance rights and clan status, these advantages do not extend into the political arena, where decision-making remains largely male-dominated.

Comparative Insights

When compared side by side, Assam has consistently elected a higher number of women legislators than Meghalaya, both in absolute terms and percentage share. Assam's numbers reached a high of 14 (11.1%) in 2011, while Meghalaya's best was only 4 (6.7%)

in 2013. However, while Meghalaya shows stagnation at a low level, Assam demonstrates fluctuation, peaking in 2011 before declining to 6 in 2021.

This comparison underlines two critical points:

1. Matriliney does not ensure political empowerment. In Meghalaya, women's social and cultural prominence has not translated into political participation.
2. Party politics is decisive. Assam's higher representation in some years shows that women's success depends heavily on political parties' willingness to nominate and support women candidates.

Overall, despite contextual differences, both states reflect the structural barriers of patriarchy, resource inequality, and male-dominated party systems that restrict women's entry into legislative politics.

Findings:

1. Women's representation remains low in both Meghalaya and Assam, but Meghalaya's case is paradoxical given its matrilineal society.
2. Political parties in both states remain male-dominated and reluctant to field women candidates.
3. Meghalaya's matriliney strengthens women's social position but not their political agency.
4. Assam's relatively higher women's representation stems from historical activism and social struggles.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The question of “Why so few?” in Meghalaya highlights that social systems like matriliney cannot automatically empower women politically without supportive institutional mechanisms. The comparison with Assam reinforces the point that women’s political representation depends more on political opportunities, party policies, and social mobilization than on cultural systems alone.

Suggestions:

- Political parties should commit to a minimum quota for women candidates.
- Gender sensitization programs are needed in both states.
- Capacity building, training, and leadership programs for aspiring women politicians.
- Civil society and women’s organizations must actively push for reforms.
- A constitutional provision for women’s reservation in legislative assemblies could be a game-changer.

The case of Meghalaya and Assam makes it clear that women’s descriptive representation in politics cannot be ensured by culture or tradition alone. Matriliney in Meghalaya has not translated into substantial political empowerment, while Assam’s experience shows that even in a patriarchal setting, women’s visibility in politics increases when parties, institutions, and civil society create enabling spaces. Therefore, meaningful change requires a combination of political will, institutional reforms, and grassroots mobilization. Only when structural barriers are addressed and supportive mechanisms are put in place can women move beyond symbolic presence to become active and influential policymakers in the region.

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