



Women and the Environment: Eco- Feminism, its impact on transcending the borders of NE Region

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Abstract:

Eco-feminism which is of course an alternative perspective to redefine the term ‘femme totale’, has been proved to be distinguished from all relevant rather radical discourses that ascribed the root cause of gender discrimination or gender inequality to certain dictates of patriarchy. Given that context, this research article focuses on how North Eastern regional politics have stunted the growth of women as an independent authority, how consistently has denied grass root women of their right to education, health, well-being, and their entry into politics, the decision-making democratic process, even though the ‘holy cows’ are capable of being at the helm of affairs. In this article, we would like to focus on how ecofeminism can be an alternative tool for reducing gender disparity in the NE States, especially in the matrilineal tribal society of NE states. The Research Methodology used here is mostly secondary data available in the public domain as well as a critical analysis of the socio-political and economic history of the country and NE states in particular. In addition, the researcher has garnered primary data using conducting a quantitative survey to assess the extent of gender disparity and development index in North Eastern States, especially Meghalaya and for that women’s political participation in the election process has been used as an indicator for development. The research population of 100 respondents had been chosen randomly but specifically targeted for the research purpose and thereafter categorized under two different segments: 1) those who directly hail from a political family or political dynasty and thereby have secured their berth in the election fray by their inheritance. 2) who do not belong to any political dynasty but ventured out of their domestic sphere having been persecuted long in their family life and aspire to get into the poll contests and thus ensure democratic rights by their eligibility and innate desire for self-accomplishment. The research gaps as identified in the process of the research that most of the scholars have relied mostly upon available data from government sources and other world welfare organizations and thus perspectives of actual beneficiaries, their demands, and aspirations for self-fulfillment or self-accomplishment are missing.

Keywords: ecofeminism, binary analytics, women as nurturers of Mother Earth, the myth of catching up development.

Introduction:

Maria Mies, a German social scientist and activist in the feminist movement, while explaining at the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (UNCED, June 1992) that ‘the solutions to the present worldwide ecological, economic and social problems cannot be expected from the ruling elite of the North or the South. Rather, a new vision – a new life for the present and future generations and for our fellow creatures on earth in which praxis and theory are respected and preserved, can be found only in the survival struggles of the grassroots movements. Now, if we look at the present-day scenario in the Indian socio-political system, a wide range of narratives are very much dominant and they are doing the rounds at every corner of the society, everyday life of the middle class. Those narratives are revolving rounds a wistful imagination of an advanced society where all such farfetched promises like ‘digitization’,

‘development for all’ ‘Sab ka Saath, Sab ka Vikash’, nation-building, economic empowerment for the poor, sustainable growth, will be fulfilled. But the question remains: ‘whose development are we talking about, Digital India campaign for whom?’ economic empowerment for whom? where is the sustainable growth that the advocates of development are propagating around the clock? The country’s economy has touched its highest-ever slowdown with the growth rate slogging at the rate of 4.5% and the GDP growth of India has gone down to just 5% in the first quarter of the financial year 2019-20.

Here again, we would like to take recourse to another champion of the eco-feminist movement, Vandana Shiva when she stated ‘Development is a culturally biased process that destroys wholesome and sustainable lifestyles and instead creates a real material poverty or misery by denying the means of survival through a diversion of resources to a resource-intensive commodity production’. To further substantiate this concept of development which is an immediate aftermath of industrialization, urbanization, environmental degradation, and of course globalization, we need to look at the alternative perspective, the other side of the mirror, which never gets reflected in the development discourses as propagated by the ruling elite. North Eastern Region is no exception to this overwhelming process of development whereby the natural resources are exploited or invaded to bring about changes in the lifestyle of the grassroots but in reality, it is creating only alienation of resources, and destruction of livelihoods. Specific instances will be drawn from the current socio-political scenario in North East Region to legitimize my argument that the so-called development plethora in NER, which is which hotbed of natural resources, is creating only displacement of the grass root people from their natural environment and used to generate profits to be availed by a selected few.

‘Modern civilization is based on cosmology and anthropology that structurally dichotomizes reality, and hierarchically opposes the two parts to each other: the one always considered superior, always thriving and progressing at the expense of the other. Thus, nature is subordinated to man; woman to man, consumption to production and local to global, and so on (Mies & Shiva 1993 p. 5). The central axiom of Mies and Shiva's critique is that modern science is grounded in the linked material relations of patriarchal violence, capitalism, and colonialism and that capitalism, and colonialism, themselves, constitute (forms of) patriarchal violence. More specifically, they posit firstly that science and scientific rationality are both the core constituents and the driving motors of capitalist accumulation. That is, they argue that progress in scientific terms underpins 'growth' in capitalist terms. Second, they posit that the violence of scientific epistemology and practice has historically been constituted through the violence of colonial relations between industrialized and 'underdeveloped' countries. The consequence of these linked relations, they argue, is that the destructive effects of science are felt most by women and children, particularly those living in the 'underdeveloped' south, and are reflected in the progressive destruction of 'nature'. (Source: Mies & Shiva's Ecofeminism)

Another relevant narrative is all about ‘Nation-Building’ that became dominant in the past few years in the Indian political circuit, especially during BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) regime. The moment we talk about ‘Nation Building’, the image that comes to our mind is the myth of ‘nation state’. Now, this myth is not just a myth or fictional so to say; popular apprehension is that when we categorize or christen something as myth, the improbability or the kind of exaggeration that’s implied in the very concept itself, overrules its actual achievability. However, keeping aside all those dualities, if we focus on the essence of ‘nation state’, we can easily identify the core areas where we need to work to chart a very clear roadmap for nation-building. That roadmap will not entertain any narrow sectarian or regional politics or other extraneous preconditions like religion, power, caste, and creed. The concept was interpreted by the first prime minister of independent India, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru when explained in his book ‘Discovery of India’ in this way: ‘nation-states constitute the foundation of an international society and the operation of nation-states and their institutions largely depend on certain basic understanding of the global forces and a sort of flexibility to overcome the narrowness of regional dogmatism or prejudices. According to Nehru, the nation-state (system) does not function in isolation. It operates within the global atmosphere; the global atmosphere gives birth to new realities. The society of a nation-state has to take cognizance of the new forces shaping reality (science, technology, public opinion, internationalism, etc.) and needs to accommodate these forces. To Nehru, the basis of nation-states remains nationalism and sovereignty, but their meaning and context have to be changed (Nehru 68). Here also, specific instances will be cited from the current happenings in NER to establish the fact that ‘nation-building’ has been used to accelerate the cultural disintegration of the masses, create animosity between different religious groups, mass uprooting, etc. The last narrative is about ‘sustainable development’ which by its term entails an amount of balance between organization and distribution of wealth or natural resources between the rich and the

poor, between the marginal and the mainstream but in reality, just the reverse is happening. The word 'sustainability', as we know it all, refers to the kind of development which envisages development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. But again, this most common definition of sustainability as propounded by Brundtland Commission in 1987, is dichotomous as the needs of the present are so uncontrollable that it hardly bothers to leave space open for future generations and so went on ravaging the resources to the fullest extent till the time profit making zeal gets saturated by the sheer exhaustion of the wealth.

Gender disparity in both public and private spheres has been a recurrent phenomenon in all societies in India despite having so many Women Development schemes like Beti Bachao Beto Padhao, Mahila E Haat (direct online marketing platform to support women entrepreneurs), One stop center scheme and so on, which remained more as a propaganda machination than actually beneficial to the effect of diminishing discrimination between male and female. It is not a homogeneous or analogous reflection of diverse social, political, or economic circumstances, rather it is the culmination of certain specific generic trends that influence and shapes the behavior, culture, economy, and different power structures existing in a particular community and hence the gender analytics when used in assessing the extent of development, distribution of resources, participation in politics or decision-making process, needs to be subject-specific. Ecofeminism as a concept while re-establishing and redefining the interconnectivity and interdependence between environment or the nature and women, has been trying to reduce this overwhelming scenario of gender discrimination using giving absolute providence to 'Women as the nurturer, and caretaker of Mother Earth'. And this shift of emphasis from patriarchal and hierarchical differences as the genesis of gender discrimination to a broader perspective of world polity, environmental degradation, and developmental discourses where women's subjugation is as prominent as ever, actually became the springboard of widening the binary analytics of 'authority versus responsibility', 'man versus woman' 'regional versus national' 'local versus international' or 'development versus retrogression or under-development.' Here we would like to quote from Maria Mies, one of the leading icons of the eco-feminist movement: 'the myth of catching-up development - a path which is and will remain an illusion for women. This is so because the great values of the French Revolution i.e. the promises of freedom, equality, and the self-determination of the individual, are betrayed by many women because all these rights depend on the possession of property and women.

Development Communication and capitalist economy: The debates surrounding Development Communication and Capitalist Economy foregrounding the issue of 'development for all of the ruling class!' had become one of the pioneering scholarly discourses in the 80s. Environmentalist and feminist activists Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies brought it into the public debate at the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro (UNCED, June 1992) where both asserted that the solution to the problems concerning environmental degradation as perpetrated by the engineers of development, especially by the 'Big Powers', is not possible to achieve because those Big Centers of Power are essentially patriarchal in its structure and colonial aggression is their handiwork: Here we quote from "solutions to the present worldwide ecological, economic and social problems cannot be expected from the ruling elite of the North or the South. Rather a new vision a 'new life for present and future generations, and for our fellow creatures on earth-in which praxis and theory respected and preserved can be found only in the survival struggles of the grass root movements.' (Source: Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva's Ecofeminism reviewed by Helen R. Graham, M M). She further stated that all 'developmental myth' churned out by capitalist big powers are essentially reductionist or mechanical because it does not include the voices of the marginal and drew references from the French Revolution that the ideal of French Revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity, cannot be obtained for Women as those Rights are preserved for Men who possess both Power and Women. Now to integrate both perspectives, development communication, and resistance against neo-colonial aggression in the name of bringing social development to the poor, third-world nations who have just got their freedom from all oppression by their colonial rulers, it is required to understand how the prerogatives of 'capitalist economy or market economy' has normalized the process of aggression both in nature or natural resources as well as human resources. The need for 'development communication' was felt at a time when third-world nations or developing countries wanted to assert their rights and voiced their concern against all forms of subjugation at the Bundung Conference, the first consortium of Afro-Asian countries held in 1955 from 18-24 April. The purpose of Development Communication was not just to broaden or decentralize the outlets of channels of communication, rather the focus was on bringing social and economic improvement by empowering the grass root people. At this juncture, when the growing propensity for using mass media platforms-especially community radio and television, as a means to bring that desired social development was

on the rise, the masters of capitalist marketers and US-based mainstream media owners also got a severe jolt. Examples can be cited from the success stories of some developing countries that have used satellite television to provide useful information to portions of their populations out of reach of terrestrial broadcasting. In 1975 and 1976, an experimental satellite communications project called SITE (Satellite Instructional Television Experiment) was used to bring informational television programs to rural India. The project did lead to the Indian development of its satellite network. China has also embarked on an ambitious program of satellite use for development, claiming substantial success in rural education. When television has succeeded as an educational tool in developing countries, it is only when very specific viewing conditions are met. For example, programs are best viewed in small groups with a teacher to introduce them and lead a discussion afterward.

The Ideal of Mixed Economy & Social Development: In the post-Independence era, India was visibly fraught with numerous political, social, economic, and most importantly communal doldrums that took half of a century to resolve those crises, though still, we cannot say that India is poised towards a developed nation. Amongst those crises situations, the most overpowering impasse was discerned in the economic system of the country, which was purely based on agriculture, leading to a never-ending conflict between the landowner and the poor farmers who were forced to work at the behest of the zamindars (landlords) and the farmers had no stake on the agricultural produces. In the absence of any agricultural policies, the large section of the population who were dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, fall prey to unequal distribution of wealth. Hence, was the need for land reform agreements which started getting implemented from 1950 onwards. The peasants of the country had strongly backed the independence movement and the "Land to the Tiller" policy of the Congress Party was specifically framed to stop the exploitation of the farmers by a host of intermediaries whose job was to collect land revenue from the poor peasants. In the vision statement of The First Five Year Plan (1951-1956), the major issues concerning land reforms were addressed in this manner: the area of cultivation needs to be increased, the Community Development Networks to take care of the village commons needs to be developed, vast uncultivated land-locked under large sizes of holdings needs to be utilized for the common benefit of the nation (source various plan documents). And it was an uphill task for the Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India to boost up famine ridden Indian economy and therefore the ideal of a Mixed Economy that will combine both industrialist and developmental policies to the effect of bringing social harmony, equality for all, national wellbeing, growth and progress for all irrespective of class, creed or religion - and Five Years' Planning were introduced. Despite having many lacunas in Nehru's concept of Socialism as it was termed more as Utopian Idealism, there is no denying the fact that socialism remained the guiding principle of the Indian government since independence till 1990 when India gradually moved towards a market-based economy.

Till the 80s and early 90s, India's economy, however, started experiencing a change both in terms of policy and attitude, was fragile in the sense that those policies were taken more as a vision rather than reality: 'Reforms played a significant role in spurring growth in the 1980s. The difference between the reforms in the 1980s and those in the 1990s is that the former was limited in scope and without a clear road map whereas the latter were systematic and systemic. This said the reforms in the 1980s must be viewed as a precursor to those in the 1990s rather than a part of the isolated and sporadic liberalizing actions during the 1960s and 1970s, which were often reversed within a short period. The 1980s reforms proved particularly crucial to building the confidence of politicians regarding the ability of policy changes such as devaluation, trade liberalization, and de-licensing of investment to spur growth without disruption. It is questionable, for example, whether the July 1991 package would have been politically acceptable in the absence of the experience and confidence in liberal policies acquired during the 1980s' (Source: India in the 1980s and 1990s: A Triumph of Reforms, Prepared by Arvind Panagariya). A major shift in the Indian economy was visible from 1991 onwards when economic reforms started creeping in & the market was opened up to foreign investors through neo-liberal economic reforms through disinvestment of government sectors, trade liberalization, de-licensing of investment, etc.

The Growth of Market the Economy & the concomitant change: Now, coming back to the 'Creative Economy' which is, a market economy, which is of course a very recent phenomenon in the late 90s, one has to understand the fact that India is in a transitional phase from a traditional economy(distribution of natural resources based on the constant dialectic between demand and supply of capital and labour) to a more sophisticated, highly integrated network of a globalized market policy where the so-called barriers between regional, local, national, international will be obliterated. Hence, the kind of 'golden mean' that Aristotle explained in his Poetics that one needs to maintain a

balanced proportion between excess or surplus and deficiency, obviously got ruptured as the prerequisite conditions of this new economic situation, are yet to be perceived or understood by a large chunk of common people. And to convince people of the utility of a new financial order, such fictional narratives or euphoric presumptions, we may say, are introduced. Thus, nationalism has been reinterpreted as divisive politics, sustainable growth in the name of forced disintegration of the mass from their homeland, economic empowerment in the name of job crunch, and digitization in the name of mass seclusion or growing divide between urban and the rural, so on and so forth.

If we look at the historical perspective that gave birth to this new financial order, we can easily recognize that development as conceived in the post-independence era, was more tilted towards bringing a balance between capital and labour using maximizing the agricultural benefits for the uplift of the poor. And therefore, agro-based industrialization was the moot force behind all five years of planning from 1952-56. The Government of India Resolution, which established the Planning Commission, stipulated, among other things, that the Commission should "formulate a plan for the most effective and balanced utilization of the country's resources."; "determine the nature of the machinery" which would be "necessary for securing the successful implementation of each stage of the plan in all its aspects". Hence, the National Development Council was constituted in a bid to strengthen and mobilize the effort and the resources of the nation in support of the Five Year Plans made by the Planning Commission to promote common economic policies and to ensure the balanced and rapid development of all parts of the country. But the irony remains in the fact that despite having envisaged socialist economic policies and structures, the Indian economy started getting entrapped in the vicious circle of 'development' at the cost of excluding a vast section of the society and their natural lifestyle and cultural setting has been forced to change because of the direct intrusion of technology-driven economic policy. This was the time when the Indian Economy, marred by the severe balance of payment crisis, also got entangled in a heavy debt situation. As the fiscal deficit went high in the absence of productivity growth, Govt. of India had to borrow money from IMF and World Bank and thus paved the ground for a market economy to set in opening the Indian market to foreign corporates, liberalizing external sector, bringing down import duties sharply, discarding industrial licensing, etc. The financial sector reforms adopted a more commercial approach to the public sector. Later on, to supplement this crisis, a host of anti-people policies were taken up in the name of 'development' that not only further aggravated the situation but rather made the economy more vulnerable.

Now, the term 'development' has always been debatable as it is described in many different ways by many different theoreticians. But the most acceptable definition of 'development' can be ascribed to the fact that it should not encroach upon the natural and cultural environment of a nation and that its benefit must reach the grass root level and must include the largest possible section of the society. According to Dr. Adebayo Oyeade, (2001), development means simply the ability of a nation to create a viable political and economic system capable of bringing growth and advancement to a nation. This means sustainable democracy, effective bureaucracy, accountability in public service, social justice, and human rights, and a sound economy capable of providing a better life for the great majority of the masses. In short, national development means the ability of a state to provide for its people the necessities of good living like good health care, good roads, good education, and so on. The growth in GDP does not necessarily mean 'development'. Because the concept of 'development' stands quite contrary to the concept of 'growth'. The term 'growth' connotes only an increment in the gross national product. On the other hand, development connotes qualitative and structural change. The structure of an underdeveloped country is characterized by a 'dual economy' and a 'dual society'. While there are manifestations of development in a few metropolitan centers in the shape of modern industrial and commercial establishments, the bulk of the country - the vast hinterland of rural areas, is underdeveloped in every sense of the term.

The Plethora of development in North East (development packages offered by the Ministry of Development of North East Region, Govt. of India): To assess this disproportionate process of development in the context of North East, we must understand the fact North Eastern Region is a conglomeration of seven smaller states: Arunachal, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Sikkim & one major state Assam and all these different states are distinguished by different socio-economic situations, ethnic – political aspirations or demands, and diverse demographic priorities or realities which cannot be ignored while making such assessment. The irony is that despite having pursued the liberalization and globalization policy with a good intent to bring about changes in the standard of living of all, an all-inclusive development in the truest sense of the term, the Indian government has failed to achieve much because of this uneven growth: the widening gap between the rural and the urban, gender disparity, the failure to convert human beings into human resources possibility. According to UNDP's first Human Development Report in 1990, it was introduced that the concept of development should include human development. To substantiate further, we

would like to refer to the UNDP report 1990 where it was clearly stated that development should be measured not in terms of economic growth and wealth, but rather in terms of removing the obstacles that pose a threat to attaining growth and progress in human development such as illiteracy, ill-health, lack of income, lack of access to resources and lack of civil and political freedom. This can be regarded as the first attempt to operationalize Amarta Sen's concept of Development where he propounded the Capability Approach in assessing the extent of development of a particular nation. According to him, development is the expansion of real freedom that people can enjoy for their economic well-being, social opportunities, and political rights. From this strand, the focus of development policies should precisely be the expansion of freedom or removal of major sources of *unfreedom* that people often face in their life. Hence, the developmental discourses that emerged in the 80s onwards, stressed the need to shift the attention from growth in the economy or per capita income to growth and expansion of choices of the people living within the economy. Taking into consideration the parameters of HDI, it is a proven fact that North Eastern Region has failed miserably in this development process as the increasing gap between the rural and urban, the growing disparity between Gender Development Index & Gender Empowerment Measure, are mounting up. Noteworthy to mention here, the *Gender Development Index* uses the same parameters of HDI to analyze and evaluate the extent of inequalities existing between men and women. Whereas, the *Gender Empowerment Measure* focuses on gender inequality in three areas: political participation and decision-making power, economic participation and decision-making power, and power over economic resources.

Ecofeminism & Gender Development in North East: Taking into account all three constituents of evaluating 'Development' ie, HDI, GDI & GEM, with specific reference to NER, we would like to choose *Gender Empowerment Measure* as both dependent and independent variables in support of my argument that the ideology of Ecofeminism has that immense potentiality to become an alternative tool for reducing gender disparity in any society or community or nation as a whole and the matrilineal society in Meghalaya in particular. Gender disparity in three different areas, political participation, economic participation, and control over economic resources, is very much rampant in the state of Meghalaya, even though it maintains the social norms and customs of a matrilineal society where women have been given that absolute constitutional right and authority to be at the helm of all affairs – body politique of the state, access to the property and other public spheres. A very recent document published by the Ministry of Women & Child Development in the year 2009 titled '*Gendering Human Development Indices: Recasting the Gender Development Index and Gender Empowerment Measure for India*', shows a very alarming situation in Meghalaya where the HDI score in the year 1996 was 595 and the rank was 13, whereas the same performed better in HDI in the year 2006 when HDI score gone up to 629 but the ranking value got decreased at 24. Similarly, in the area of Gender Development Index and Gender Measurement Index, the State of Meghalaya performed miserably where the ranking value of GDI got increased from 592 to 624 whereas the ranking position had gone down from 13 to 23.

Now coming back to the point of 'development' and how it intensifies gender disparity which has its root so ingrained in the mindset of every society at large: its behaviour, customs, rituals, and of course in the socio-political and economic structure of a nation, that to ignore its existence would lead to a façade of development where a large section of our population which is, of course, women are excluded. Apart from drawing references from all these recorded data available in the public domain, if we consider the demography of the population in Meghalaya, we'll find that three different tribes that determine its national identity, Khasi, Jaintiya, and Garo, have different levels of deprivation both in the workplace and at home. And the deprivation exists mostly at the level of education, health, and job fronts as exemplified in different available reports and data published by either Govt. or different international sources. According to their indigenous culture, all the tribes consider 'Nature' as their sacred mother, and hence any form of intrusion in 'Nature' is to be restrained and controlled. Here, we would prefer to refer to Vandana Shiva once again. In "The Search for Roots," the third part of *Ecofeminism*, Shiva described how the new religion of development endorses and normalizes the uprooting of people from their roots in the soil which is their "sacred mother," and how the new high priests - the managers of development- often with the cooperation of a police state uses terror tactics to wrench people "from their homes and homeland and consign them as ecological and cultural refugees in the wasteland of industrial society. In what she terms "the process of masculinization of the motherland," Shiva charges the state with having changed its role from that of protector of its people and resources to that of virtue provider and protector of TNCs (trans-national corporations). Rather than serve *as* the TNCs' regulator, the state now acts as their protector'- She added further. North Eastern states which have been recognized as the bio-diversity hotspot, had caught the maximum attention of those lusty 'managers of development' in the past

decade and therefore a series of development packages in collusion with several TNCs were announced by the states at different phases since 2006 onwards. And the most legitimate ground for ushering such developments, all the state governments cited is that those packages would not only upgrade the standard of living of the common people as it will bring more job opportunities for them, but also would enable the government to bring back the insurgent militants to the mainstream politics. Mention can be made of India's *LOOK EAST POLICY* which was formulated in 1991 as a sequel of economic liberalization in India, was the fallout of a foreign economic policy towards South East Asia. Despite having a good intention of bringing in developmental benefits to the people of North East, created widespread apprehension, which is true to the core, that the increased impact of market imperatives will threaten the traditional society by and large and that it may lead to dislocation of people from their original setting, increased settlement of mainland people to the Northeast. And this phenomenon is very much apparent in the prolonged political crisis, be it the D Voter issue, NRC, or CAA, whereby a large section of the population was excluded in the name of ethnicity, religion, or any other reason. Ecofeminism as an alternative to unlimited or unrestrained urbanization,

Given the fact that the plethora of 'Development' or 'Business' is so overpowering that it hardly cares for ecological balance or environmental degradation, we would like to focus on the Gender Empowerment Measure, specifically the ratio of women's participation in politics, as the indicator of assessing development in the state of Meghalaya. In the case of Meghalaya, even the most powerful political dynasts like Sangma Family (P A Sangma), and Lyngdoh Family (Robert Lyngdoh) could not resist this strategic manipulation of Nature for the sake of individual interest or profit. And the political scenario in Meghalaya is such that women who are in power (specific reference to ministers of the state) are used more as a shield to exert political authority by their husbands rather than as an independent authority. If we take stock of the latest political development in Meghalaya and the kind of polemics prevalent in the state does not give a rosy picture. Apart from producing one MLA, Ampareen Lyngdoh, and one MP, Agatha Sangma in the entire political history of Meghalaya, we do not find any women have been allowed to contest in the election, either at the state or central level. A huge amount of government subsidies bestowed on North Eastern States for various developmental projects are not well distributed amongst both genders as apparent in the gender gaps in terms of enrolment ratio, sex ratio, literacy ratio, or political participation. When we talk about political participation, it just does not mean only the right to vote, rather it includes a broader perspective that encompasses the entire electoral process in situ and off-situ activities – contesting elections, campaigning for the election, granting of political membership, party meeting, political agenda setting, coordination with the party alliances or allied political parties, holding party position, participation in policy-making and another vital decision-making process. Even the largest democratic party in Meghalaya, NCP (Nationalist Congress Party) has fourteen MLAs and United Democratic Party (UDP) has eleven MLAs and Hill State People's Democratic Party (HPDP) has two MLAs and Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM) having one MLA, but hardly they have women's representation. Here the term 'women's empowerment' needs to be defined as it involves three non-negotiable and fundamental principles which can be framed in this way: a) the equality between men and women in both and public and private sphere, b) women's rights to the full development of their potentials and women's right to self-determination and self-representation. The Women's Reservation Bill or The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, 2008, is a pending bill in the Parliament of India that proposes to amend the Constitution of India to reserve 33% of all seats in the Lower house of Parliament of India, the Lok Sabha, and in all state legislative assemblies for women. However, it remained a distant hope.

The reports of UNDP in the area of GDI and GEM published in the year 2011, it was perceived that women's political participation is bizarre in almost all North Eastern States. However important the factor it is as an indicator for development, Gender Empowerment contributes to the wellbeing of the womenfolk as most often it is ignored. Empowered women have the greater political freedom to exercise their decision-making capacity at the community, state, and national levels. Women's representation in the political field even in its most modest form of local government can transform and reinterpret the practice of politics (Mathew, 2003). There is no denying the fact that if we can create equal space for women to contest election even at the level of local governance in the form of Gram Panchayat, it helps to ensure better community life where gender balance and gender justice can be achieved through the ideals of harmonious coexistence and cooperation. However, the irony is that Indian politics still revolves around political dynasties and patriarchal lineage and it is difficult for a woman who doesn't belong to any political dynasty to get into politics or to ascertain her individual political choice or decision uninterrupted by their male counterparts. Therefore, it would be an improbable calculation if we analyze women's participation in the political decision-making process as an empowerment indicator, specifically when fielding women candidates just as a substitute for

men to exert male authority is a recurring phenomenon. To date, Meghalaya had represented one woman in parliament. A recent survey in the Ri Bhoi district, conducted for this research article revealed that most of the working-class women engaged as domestic help or maid or as subordinate staff at different emerging private universities as the education sector in North East is booming so fast, think that they want to come out of their husbands' control as they are not as supportive as expected. But the opportunities are very less. And also, politically they are not knowledgeable enough to contest in elections but given the chance, they will be able to manage political affairs at the local governance level. When questioned about women being fielded as proxies to their male counterparts, most of them opined that there is always a huge gender gap in political participation at higher bodies in northeastern states but grounding was being prepared for the future as revealed from their growing participation at local bodies.

This study has taken up a qualitative survey method to understand how far the different parameters of Gender Mainstreaming work with specific reference to the political demography in Meghalaya, the state known for its matrilineal structure of the society whereby the supremacy of Women's position in both domestic and the public sphere is acknowledged not just by social customs and conventions but ensured and protected by the constitutional remedies. A research population of hundred and fifty respondents was chosen and segregated into two different categories based on their exposure to political participation, those who belong to a certain political dynasty and economically weaker sections of society, especially those whose economic liabilities forced them to take up any menial jobs for the sake of survival.

Data Analysis

This section will analyze the data through a questionnaire. For each question table and a chart is shown. Detailed analysis is also done for the data.

Discussions and Findings

1. Age group of the respondents

Table 1.1.1

Category	Frequency	Percentage
18-21	37	41%
21-25	45	50%
25-30	8	9%

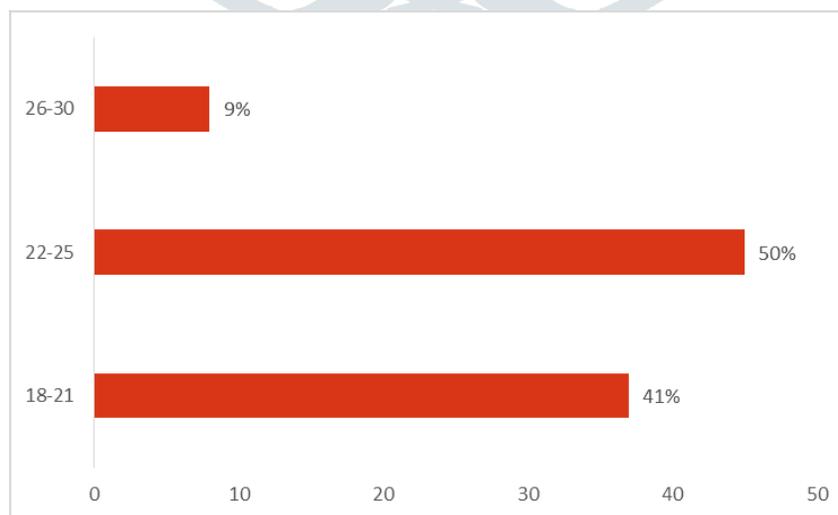


Chart 1.1.1

41% of the population fell between the ages of 18 to 21, 50% were between the ages of 21 to 25%, and 9% were between the ages of 25-30.

2. Gender of respondents

Table 1.1.2

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Male	40	55.6%
Female	60	44.4%
Others	0	0%

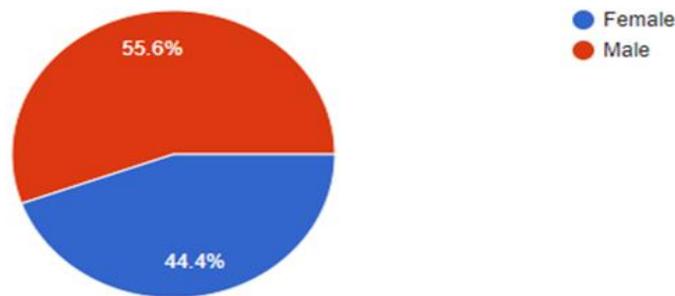


Chart 1.1.2 shows

As far as the composition of the research population is concerned, it was observed that 55.6% were Males, 44.4% were females, and 0% were others.

3. How do you look at the matrilineal system that exists in Meghalaya- Tribal Social Convention? Do you feel more empowered or emancipated?

- tribal social convention: the rights to inherit sole ancestral property by the younger daughter and to be the head of the family
- politically & socially empowered
- this is just a custom and has nothing to do with the social status of being more empowered

4. If we ask you to put it on a scale between 0-6 how will you evaluate this matrilineal system by putting a number to evaluate how far this matrilineal system supports women's empowerment

Table 1.1.3

Category	Scale of Empowerment: 0-1-5	Percentage
Matrilineal System	0-1	52%
Socially empowered	0-2	43%
Politically decisive	0 -4	34% -
Center of Power	0-6	33%

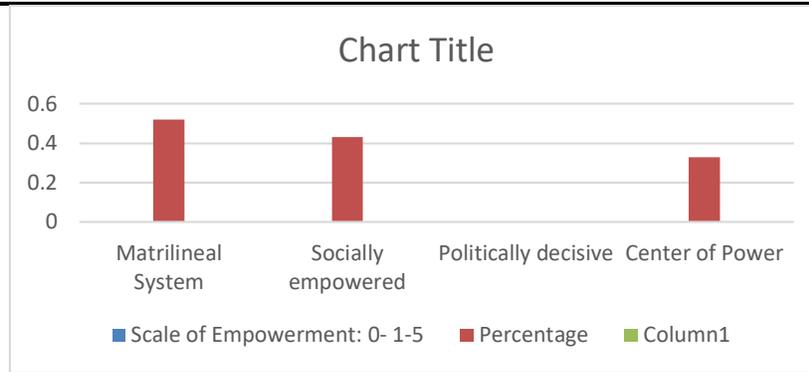


Chart 1.1.3

The chart as displayed above says that the majority of the people, 52% of the respondents, do believe that a matrilineal system does exist in their society but are very unsure of the fact that whether it does open up a better opportunity for women or not, whereas 43% of participants opined that it has the potential for social empowerment of women if utilized, 34% respondents opined that only those who are politically aware or decisive can make use of the matrilineal system for asserting women’s potential and 33% respondents stated that because the centers of power, be it political, social or economic, are still being dictated by the male political dynasts the chances of women to be at the center of power are slim as these aspiring women leaders need to work at the behest of those who cling to power for long.

5. What did force you to come out of your secured domestic space and get into the workforce of Meghalaya, the especially newly emerging boom in the education sector, private universities for any menial job

Table 1.1.4

Category	Research Participants of 100 people	Percentage
Domestic violence	100	88.9%
Persecuted mental torture at home	80	72.1%
Enjoy liberty	60	31.3%
Enjoy self-identity	40	23.8%

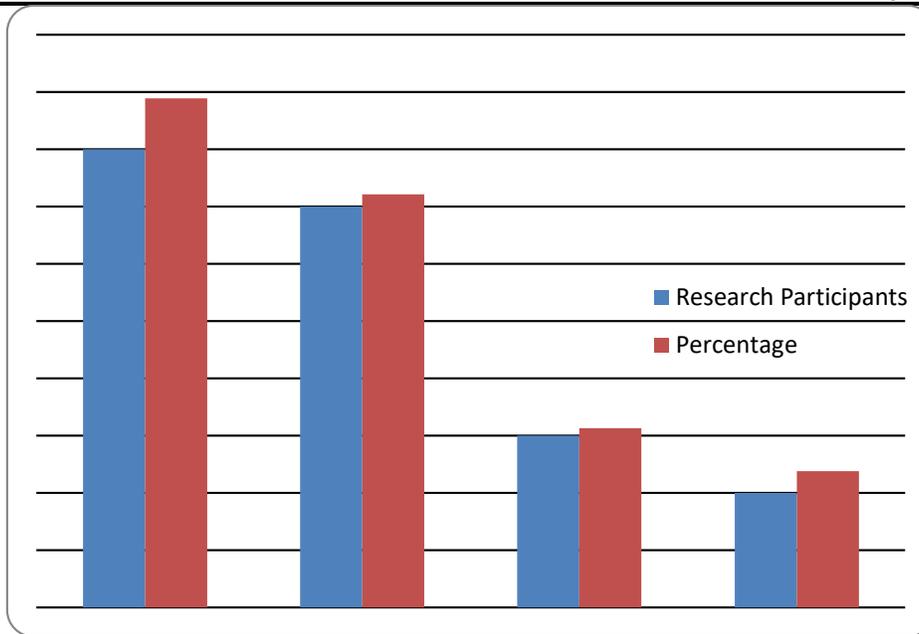


Chart 1.1.4

88.9% of the participants agreed that they wanted to come out of their domestic space because they were tired of being beaten up by their drunken and jobless husbands while 72.1% expressed the reason as to avoid being tortured mentally for not contributing to the family earnings, 31.3% stated to enjoy economic liberty while 23.8% stated that they wanted to attain self-identity through economic independence.

6. How do you feel about the political participation of women in Meghalaya?

Table 1.1.5

Category	Five points Likert Scale: 100 participants' responses in numbers	Percentage
Satisfactory	25	38.9%
Inadequate	16	17.8%
Adequate	39	43.3%
Very Poor	36	41.2%

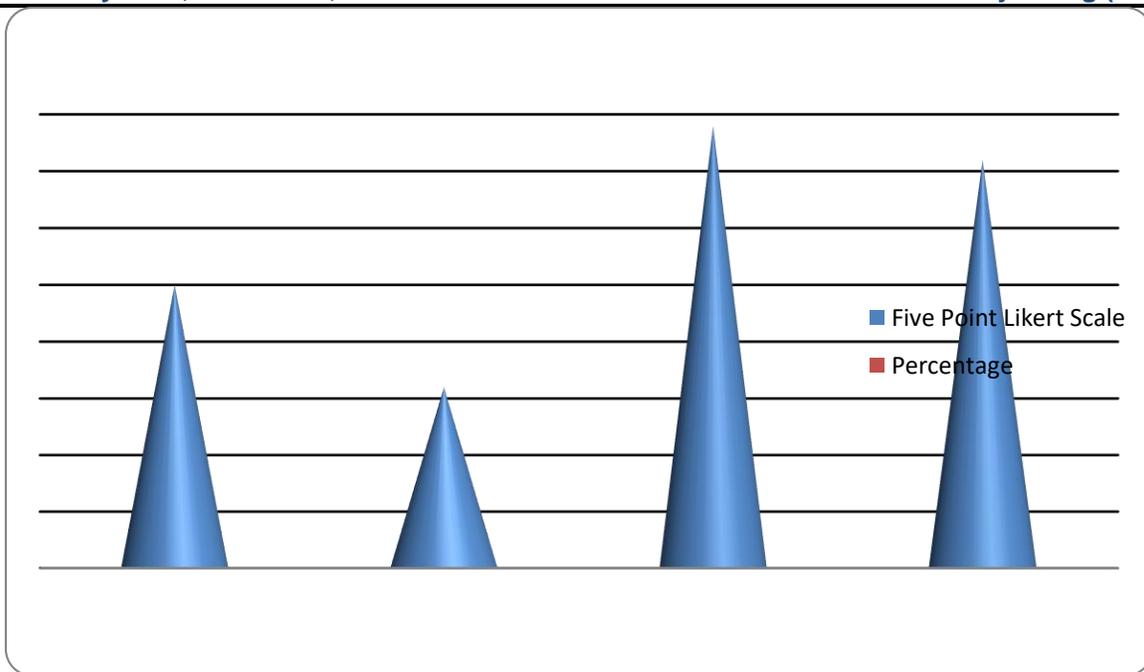


Chart 1.1.5

38.9% of respondents feel that the political participation of women in Meghalaya is satisfactory, 17.8% stated that it is inadequate while 43.3% of respondents stated that it is adequate as compared to several candidates contesting state election for the year 2018, and 41.2% respondents stated that it is very poor. So, there is a mixed response on this matter.

7. What factors influence the political participation of the contesting candidates in the election fray?

Table 1.1.6

Category	Frequency/number of times elected and reelected	Percentage
Political Dynasty	73	81.1%
Political connection	66	75.9%
Deserving candidates	34	34.7%
Undeserving candidates	50	69.3

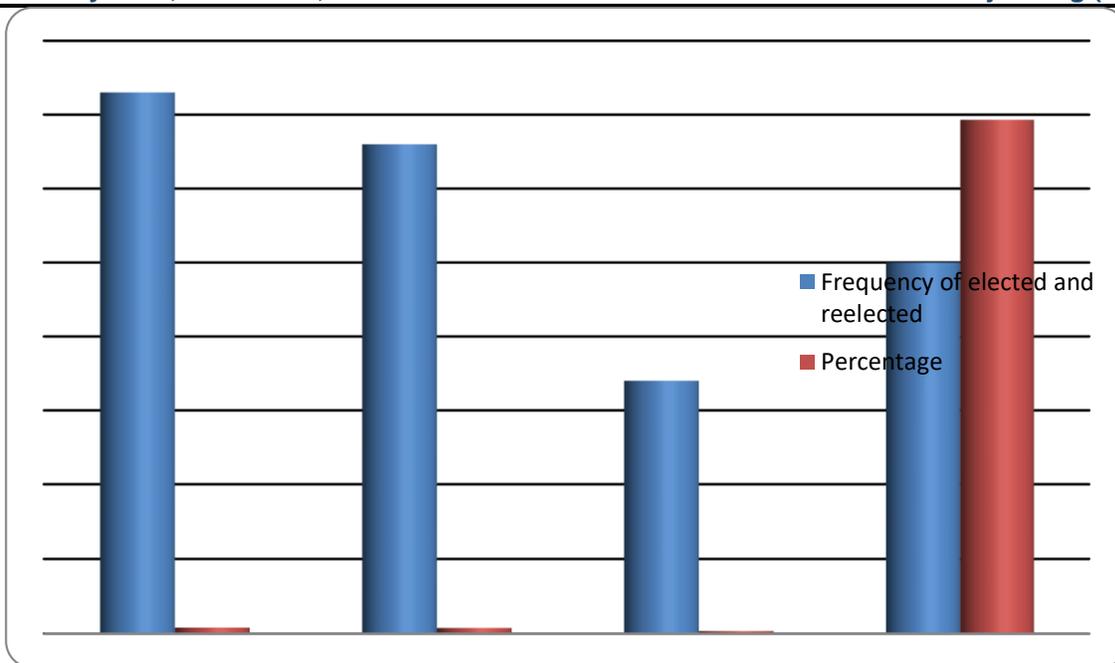
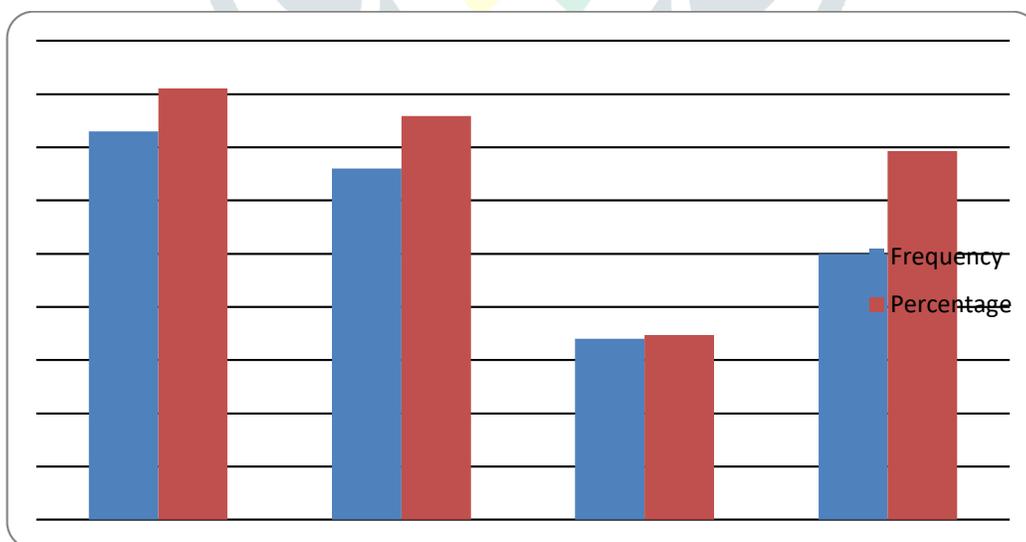


Chart 1.1.6

8. What do you think about your tribal community system where women are given the most importance in terms of the right to inherit property and to participate in the election process? Does it help you in attaining self-fulfillment?

Table: 1.1.7

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Community System	73	81.1%
Matrilineal Society	66	75.9%
Electoral Process	34	34.7%
Self-Attainment	50	69.3



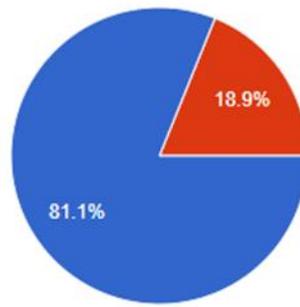


Chart 1.1.7

81.1% feel that the community system does help them in self-attainment while 18.9% responded negatively.

9. Do you think that women’s empowerment is just a myth in Meghalaya? Do you consider that modernization ventures like malls, opening up of MNCs, and franchises with foreign companies will only uproot the tribal community from their natural setting?

Table 1.1.8

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	26	53.3%
No	16	28.9%
Maybe	48	17.8%

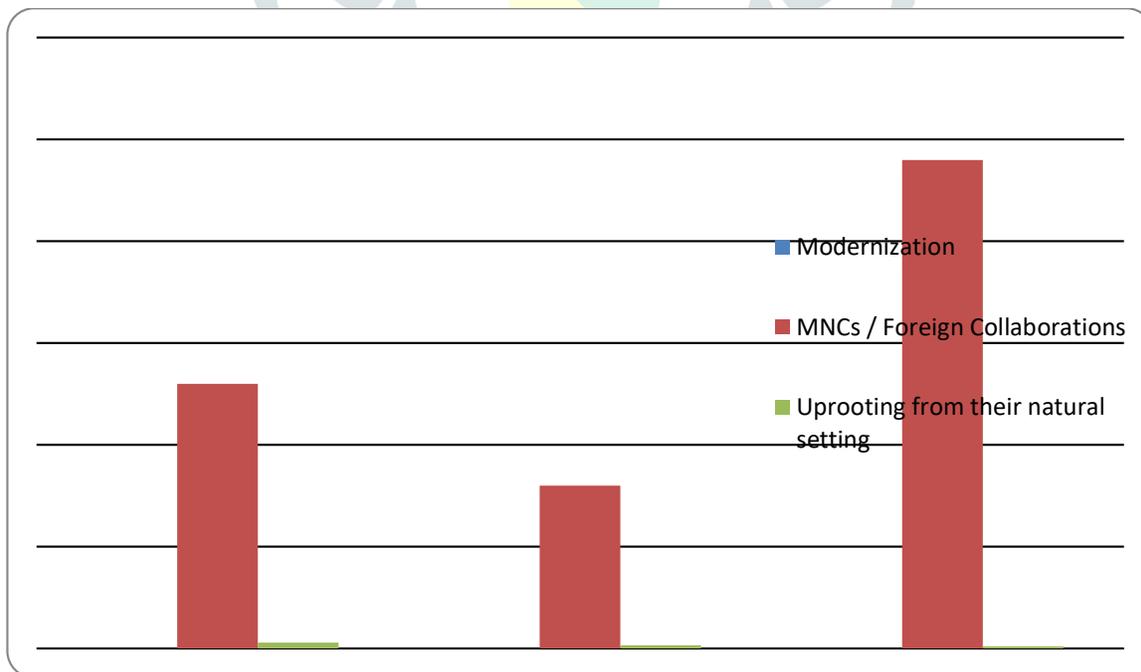


Chart 1.1.8

28.9% of respondents believe that it will help in changing their perspectives, 53.3% of respondents deny this and 17.8% of respondents selected maybe.

10. Do you think that women are used as a shield or substitute for their husbands while fielding candidature for the state election 2018? The codes used here are Modernization, MNCs / Foreign Collaboration, and Uprooting from their natural soil.

Table 1.1.9

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	49	54.30%
No	17	28.9%
Maybe	48	17.80%

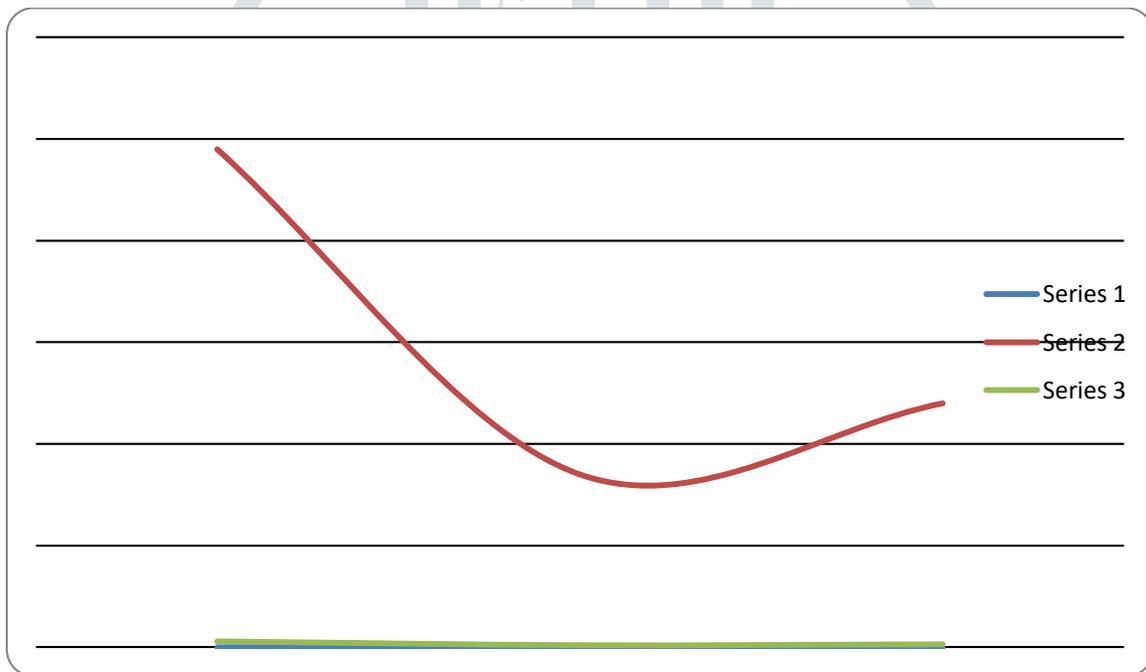


Chart 1.1.9

54.30% stated that women candidates are used as shields for their male substitutes and the modernization process affected a lot their natural habitats, 28.9% do not know about this political scenario and 26.7% said maybe.

11. Which political parties they preferred most in the last 2018 election?

Table 1.1.10

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Indian National Congress	59	65.6%
Bharatiya Janata Party	31	34.4%
National People's Party	43	52.3%
United Democratic Party	37	41.7%

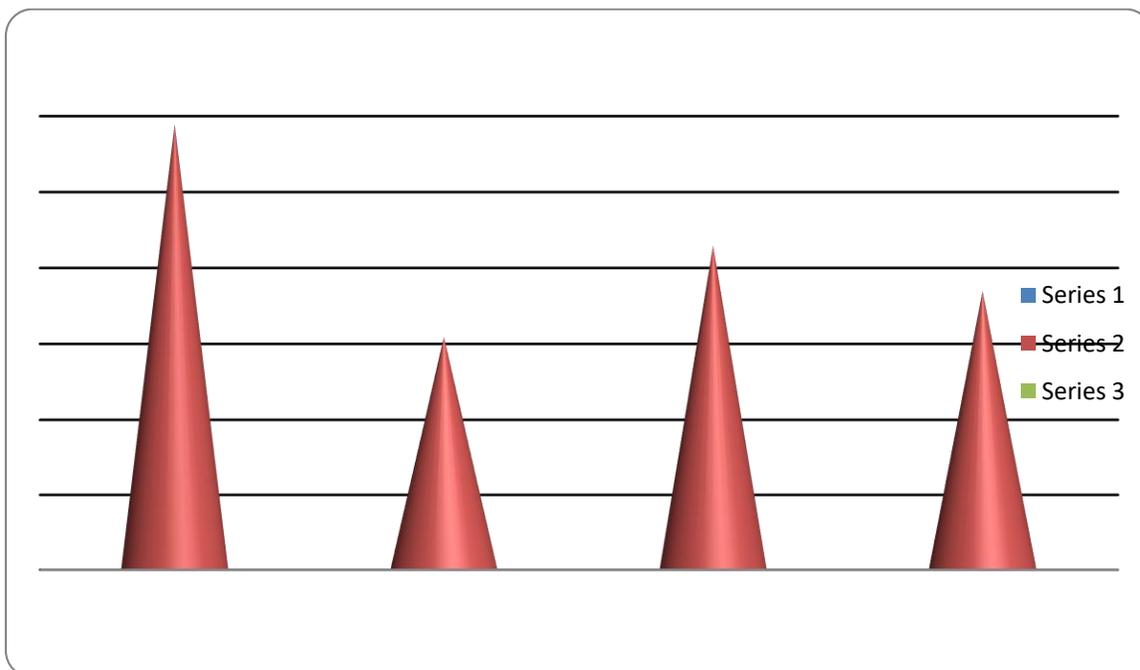


Chart 1.1.10

65.6% stated their preference for INC, 34.4% for BJP, 52.3% voted for NPP, and 41.7% voted for UDP.

12. Do the propaganda narratives/story as posited by the party Agenda persuade you to buy their propositions or the change they want to bring in their governance?

Table 1.1.11

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	51	56.7%
No	39	43.3%

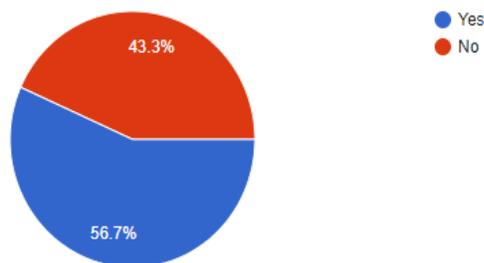


Chart 1.1.11

56% of the respondents agreed that the narratives do persuade them to buy a product and 43.3% said no it does not persuade them.

13. When you vote for a candidate do you make an informed or conscious choice about whether the candidate is eligible or not?

Table 1.1.12

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	53	58.9%
No	37	41.1%

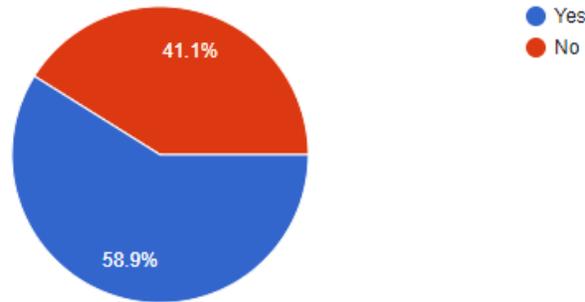


Chart 1.1.12

14. Would you consider the political participation of women candidates as a factor to bring back gender equality in governance? How do the self-help groups help the women’s community to come up with their small initiatives?

Table 1.1.13

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	25	27.8%
No	18	20%
Maybe	47	52.2%

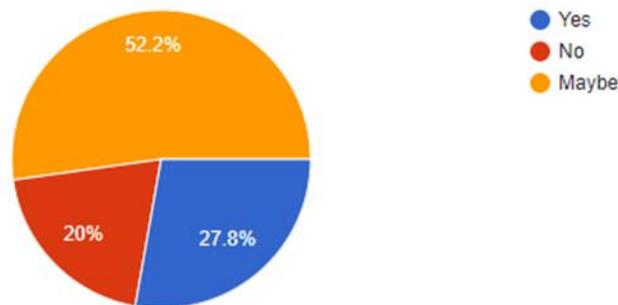


Chart 1.1.13

27.8% of respondents agreed that women’s participation in political governance is required to a larger extent whereas they also agreed that self-help groups come into play to change women’s position both in the domestic and work field, 20% do not feel that women’s participation would change the political scenario in Meghalaya while 47% responded maybe.

15. Do you feel that women candidates are just dummies of their predecessors, maybe their husbands, or any family members or any male members of their family or political community or political fraternity? Also, do you think that the political dynasty works as a determinant for the selection of contestants in the election fray?

Table 1.1.14

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	52	33.2%
No	11	30%
Maybe	27	57.8%

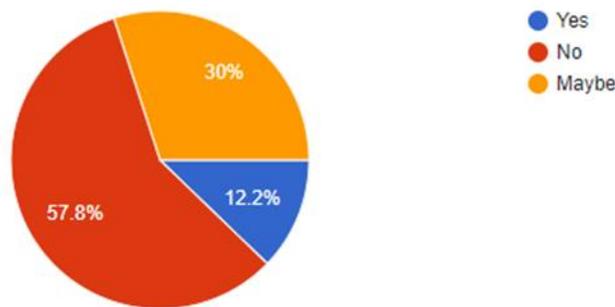


Chart 1.1.14

33.2% of the respondents said that women candidates are the dummies of their predecessors and would affect their voting decision, 57.8% that it may affect their voting decision, and 30% responded it or would not affect their decision.

CONCLUSION

Following are the findings and concluding remarks of the paper

1. Through the research question it can be proved that gender dispositions need to be reorganized to attain equality despite having a societal structure where women are given more prominence
2. Women are given importance to comfortably suit the requirements of their male counterparts.
3. The tribal communities in Meghalaya are apprehensive about the modernization process and self-attainment through upgrading the rural economy or traditional economy.
4. Self-help groups help a lot especially for women entrepreneurs to achieve self-attainment

To conclude, we must say that the development in NER must entail an amount of sincere effort both on the part of the government and individual level so that the distinct divide between the rural and the urban gets minimized if not completely eradicated, people from the rural areas get more opportunities to upscale and upgrade their raw skills, and more and more women are given opportunities to contest in the election not based on their political dynasty or political affiliation but rather their innate political ability. Therefore, the term 'development' needs to be redefined not merely as urbanization or industrialization, or modernization, but rather as a process to bring about qualitative and structural changes in the lives of common people who will be entitled to live on their terms without getting entrapped in the money-making or profiteering business. We must end with a quote from Dissanayake (1981) defining 'development as the process of social change which has as its goal the improvement in the quality of life of all or the majority of the people without doing violence to the natural and cultural environment in which they exist and which seeks to involve the generality of the people as closely as possible in this enterprise, making them the masters of their destiny'.

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