



## SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF MEN AND WOMEN IN A MATRILINEAL SOCIETY



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### ABSTRACT

*The socio-economic development aspects, marks the path for the overall growth and the development of any state or region. In a matrilineal society, bounded by traditional and cultural institutions and norms, improvements in the social, economic and political spheres is of utmost importance in order to help in achieving the pattern of social and economic development.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Socio-Economic, Matriliney, Gender, Population Density, Sex Ratio, Marital Status, Educational Attainment, Income.*

### INTRODUCTION

Development is a multidimensional process which requires the utilization and evaluation of a number of indicators, to draw a more or less comprehensive picture of the level of development. These include the population density, sex ratio, marital status, educational attainment, income or occupation and health among several others. Narain et al (2004) points that, the socio economic development of a state or a region is reflected by the improvements in the social, economic and political well-being of members of the society.

Meghalaya, one of the eight states of the north-eastern region of India, is a land-locked territory sharing its international boundary with Bangladesh. The state is a major point of international focus both as a consequence of the intermittent conflict between the people living on either side of the political divide and also for the potential for economic transactions. Meghalaya is also home to a predominant tribal population consisting of three major tribal groups, namely, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos and are among the few surviving matrilineal communities in the world (Nongbri, 2008).

In fact, these three indigenous tribal groups follow a strong matrilineal kinship system and are also known to have one of the strongest matrilineal systems in the world.

### OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study includes

1. An examination of the socio-economic status of men and women in a matrilineal society and
2. To determine the degree of variation of men and women in a matrilineal society taking in terms of the different socio-economic indicators like the sex ratio, marital status, educational attainment, work participation rate and other household characteristics.

### METHODOLOGY

The present study basically relies on secondary data sources available from Census, NFHS data, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Meghalaya, Report of the Time Use Survey and NSSO data respectively.



**DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS****Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile**

Meghalaya has a predominant tribal population and also follows a very strong matrilineal kinship system. One sociologist, Syiemlieh (1994), points that matriliney was adopted by the warrior races such as the Khasis because male members had to fight frequent wars against other tribes and enemies in search of food and also to maintain their identity. Hence, the charge and care of the family, property and belongings was handed over to the women, including the lineage of their family. This marks the beginning of the matrilineal system among the Khasis (Syiemlieh, 1994). Although women in a Khasi matrilineal society are assumed to be dominant and overbearing in both the domestic and the economic front, the social structure of the Khasi matrilineal system has struck a fine sense of balance for both men and women in the society. Women, in a Khasi matrilineal society, no doubt enjoy a higher status and autonomy compared to other scheduled tribe women and also women under other patriarchal communities in India. They have more freedom of mobility, access to money and resources and they also have decision making power on certain key household matters. However, they still maintain their reservations and restrictions in politics and the local durbar. It was only very recently that women have been allowed to take part in the political affairs of the state and also only few local or village durbars have acknowledged the presence of women (Saikia, 2007).

The demographic structure of the state shows steady and progressive growth of population. The population growth trend of Meghalaya was 340,524 in 1901 and rose to 2,964,007 in 2011, showing a rise of 770.43 percent in 110 years. The decadal growth rate of the population during the period ranging from 1901-11 to 2001-11, show that Meghalaya is higher than India during the decades from 1901-11 to 1931-41 with a decline in the decadal growth during the period 1941-51 (Table 1.1). Since post-independence, the decadal growth rate of population of the state has been higher than that of India throughout the decades up to 2001-11 (Table1).

**Sex Ratio**

The sex ratio in the state has always been above the all-India figure except in 1961 where it was observed to be lower (937) than the all-India figure

(941) as shown in Table 1.4a. Although the sex ratio has been increasing throughout from 1991 to 2011 across the state, it has also been observed that the rural areas of South Garo Hills experienced a declining trend in the sex ratio from 948 in 2001 to 942 in 2011. The same declining trend is also observed in the urban areas of Ri Bhoi district of the state from 951 in 2001 to 818 in 2011 (Table2).

**Child Birth and Mortality Rate**

Meghalaya projected a birth rate of 29.2 in 1998 which declined to 24.7 in 2003. It further rose to 25.2 in 2004 and then declined to 24.4 in 2007. In 2008, the birth rate of Meghalaya rose to 25.2 to eventually decline to 24.4 in 2009. The death rate of Meghalaya has also showed a fluctuating trend with death rate increasing from 9.0 in 1998 to 9.2 in 2000 followed by a decline to 7.2 in 2004. The death rate again fluctuated with a rise from 7.5 in 2005 to 8.0 in 2006 and again to a fall to 7.5 in 2007 which rose again to 8.1 in 2009. The NFHS-3 estimate of infant mortality rate in Meghalaya is 45 deaths before the age of one year per 1,000 live births, which is down from the NFHS-2 estimate of 89. The infant and child mortality rate in Meghalaya is found to be much lower for girls than for boys. The NFHS-3 survey reports that 1 in 12 boys die before the age of five, compared to 1 in 16 girls (Table3).

**Education**

Education is one of the most important socio economic factors that has a significant influence on the individual's behavior and attitudes and is also one of the prime drivers of human development. Having access to at least basic education helps to reduce social exclusion as it helps to develop the skills and competencies of the beneficiaries and increase their participation in the economy and the society (The World Bank, 1995). The literacy rate of the state as per the 2001 Census was 62.6 percent (with male literacy rate of 65.4 percent and female literacy rate of 59.61 percent), which was marginally below the national average literacy rate of 64.83 percent (with 75.26 percent male and 53.67 percent female literacy rates). The NFHS-3 survey showed that there are about 70 percent of women and 73 percent of men between 15-49 years of age who are literate in Meghalaya. The survey further revealed that, two-thirds of children aged between 6-17 years, attend school, with 86 percent in the urban areas and 60 percent in the rural areas. Moreover, there is an increase in the school attendance in the age group 11-14 years

but with a 62 percent drop in the age-group between 15-17 years.

There is no broad gender disparity in school attendance, although the extent of gender disparity differs by age. There is almost no gender disparity in the percentage of school attendance for children age 6-10 years in both rural and urban areas. However, the proportion of girls attending school is higher than the boys in the age group 11-14 years and 15-17 years, in both the rural and urban areas of the state. The latest census 2011 revealed a considerable increase in the percentage of literacy to 75.48 percent (with 77.17 percent among males and 73.78 percent among females), higher than the national average of 74.04 percent (with 82.14 per cent among males and 65.46 percent among females). The gender gap difference in terms of the rural-urban literacy rate is very small with 5.55 per cent in urban areas and 6.00 per cent in rural areas, as per 2001 Census, thus indicating equality in terms of access to educational attainment for both male and female (Table4).

### **Marital Status**

Most of the studies have also looked at the marital status aspect by considering the four different categories of the marital status groups, namely, the currently married, the never-married or single, the widow/ widower and the separated or divorced. The 2001 Census data reveals that out of the total female population of 11, 42,735 in Meghalaya, about 6,55,156 women belong to the never-married category while around 4,04,048 women are currently married. The rest of the female-population are either widowed (59,604) or divorced or separated (23,927). According to a survey conducted in 2005, there were 157 households headed by females in the rural areas while about 270 households in the urban areas are female-headed as shown in the table below. Comparatively, this figure is also much higher than the all-India level of 113 and 111 respectively in both the rural as well as the urban areas. The possible reasons for the large proportion of female-headed households could well be due to reasons mentioned earlier of early widowhood and high incidence of divorce and separation and also the number of single or never-married women.

One noteworthy point here is that the concept of divorce prevailing among the Khasis, differ from what is understood in the standard legal texts. The concept of divorce held by a Khasi, however, is less rigid wherein it may subsume separation carried out

under civil law but it also includes cases where a couple who had lived together as husband and wife, sever the relationship, so as to have no further sexual or familial obligations towards each other.

### **Health**

Health is also another important aspect which requires attention in the development process. Availability and accessibility to health and health care facilities is an important determinant of the socio-economic development of any community. There are a number of Primary Healthcare Centers, Community Health Centers, Sub-Centers, etc that have been set up for providing health care services to the people. A look at the nutritional status of children in Meghalaya shows that over half of the children (55%) under five years of age have stunted growth, a clear sign of undernourishment for some time. There are thirty-one percent children who are wasted or are too thin for their height which again may be due to inadequate food intake or a recent illness and almost half of children (49%) are underweight on account of both chronic and acute under nutrition. Such situations are more prominent among children in rural areas than in urban areas.

### **Workforce Participation Rate**

The workforce participation of men and women is a good indicator of the level of economic development of a country. Women in the state enjoy greater freedom of mobility compared to women in other parts of the country. The participation of the women folk in the income yielding activities have helped in increasing the welfare benefits of the family and the household.

### **Access to Land and Property**

Women in Meghalaya also enjoy greater power of autonomy in terms of their access to physical resources. The distinct position of women in a Khasi society is in the role of the youngest daughter or the *khadduh* as traditional heir to the ancestral property of the household. However, although rights on landed property conferred benefits on women, they are virtually excluded from property management and overall authority as she is being guided by the counsel of the maternal uncle.

### **Women's Empowerment in a Khasi society**

There is no doubt that Khasi women are traditionally empowered being placed in a better position in society, having greater power of autonomy and control over physical resources. However, the

virtual exclusion from property management and overall authority had circumscribed the power they could derive from those rights. Women in a Khasi society do enjoy social and economic freedom, yet they are not empowered to directly participate in local self-governance and administration. This phenomenon also suppresses the role of traditional matrilineal system in promoting women's empowerment.

## CONCLUSION

In the findings and discussion on the socio-economic status of men and women in a Khasi

matrilineal society does reveal the enjoyment of rights and freedom by both men and women and there is a low degree of variation in terms of access to varied socio-economic resources irrespective of gender. Yet some of the findings have policy implications that needs to be addressed related to certain critical issues like socio-cultural norms, gender power relations, education, health care and marital status. These issues will have to be tackled with utmost care and suitability as well as development of a policy that is culturally sensitive and based on ethical approach.

## APPENDIX

**Table 1: Population growth Trend in Meghalaya, 1901-2011**

Year	Male	Female	Total	Decadal Growth Rate
1901	167256	173268	340524	
1911	195706	198299	394005	15.71
1921	211216	211187	422403	7.21
1931	243993	236844	480837	13.83
1941	282666	273154	555820	15.59
1951	310706	294968	605674	8.97
1961	397288	372092	769380	27.03
1971	520967	490732	1011699	31.50
1981	683710	652109	1335819	32.04
1991	907687	867091	1774778	32.86
2001	1176087	1142735	2318822	30.65
2011*	1492668	1471339	2964007	27.82

Source: Census of India, 2011

**Table 2: Sex ratio in Meghalaya and India, 1901-2011**

Sex Ratio in Meghalaya and India: 1901-2011												
State/ Country	Census Year											
	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011*
Meghalaya	1036	1013	1000	971	966	949	937	942	954	955	972	986
India	972	964	955	950	945	946	941	930	934	927	933	940

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India \*2011 figures are provisional

**Table 3: Birth and Death Rates of Meghalaya and India, 1998-2009**

Year	Meghalaya		All-India	
	Birth rate	Death Rate	Birth Rate	Death Rate
2001	28.3	9.0	25.4*	8.4*
2002	25.8	7.7	25.0*	8.1*
2003	24.7	7.4	24.8*	8.0*
2004	25.2	7.2	24.1	7.5
2005	25.1	7.5	23.8	7.6
2006	24.7	8.0	23.5	7.5
2007	24.4	7.5	23.1	7.4
2008	25.2	7.9	22.8	7.4
2009	24.4	8.1	22.5	7.3

Source: Registrar General, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

\*Excludes Nagaland (Rural)

**Table 4: Literacy Rate in Meghalaya and India, 2001 and 2011**

Year	T,R,U	India			Meghalaya		
		Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female
2001	Total	64.83	75.26	53.67	62.56	65.43	59.61
	Rural	58.74	70.70	46.13	56.29	59.24	53.24
	Urban	79.92	86.27	72.86	86.30	89.05	83.50
2011	Total	74.04	82.14	65.46	75.48	77.17	73.78
	Rural	68.91	78.57	58.75	71.15	72.83	69.45
	Urban	84.98	89.67	79.92	91.33	93.17	89.49

Source: Census 2001 and 2011 (Provisional)

**Table 5: Female-headed Households and Average Household Size, 2007**

Particulars	Female-headed households	Average household size	
		Male-headed	Female-headed
All-India	19987858 (10.35%)	5.4	4.00
Rural	13876365 (10.09%)	5.6	3.8
Urban	6111493 (10.99%)	5.2	4.5

Source: Census 2001; A Handbook of Statistical Indicators on Indian Women, 2007

**Table 6: Female-Headed Households per '000 Households in Meghalaya, 2005**

India/State	Number of Female-Headed Households per 1000 Households	
	Rural	Urban
Meghalaya	157	270
India	113	111

Source: A Handbook of Statistical Indicators on Indian Women, 2007

**Table 7: Number of Public Healthcare Institutions in the state, 2011**

Year / District	Hospitals	P.H.C.	C.H.C.	Dispensaries	Sub Centre
2000-01		83	15		401
2001-02		85	17		401
2002-03	7	90	19	16	401
2003-04	7	94	22	15	401
2004-05	8	101	24	14	401
2005-06	8	104	25	13	433
2006-07	8	100	27	13	401
2007-08	9	104	28	12	404
2008-2009	9	108	29	12	401
East Khasi Hills		24	6		63

Source: Statistical Handbook, Meghalaya, 2006-2007, 2008-2009 and 2010-2011.

**Table 8: Workforce Participation Rate, Meghalaya and India, 2004-05 & 2009-10**

State/Country	Year	Rural		Urban	
		Female	Male	Female	Male
Meghalaya	2001	38.6	49.4	20.9	43.8
	2004-05	27.8	57.2	30.3	45.4
	2009-10	37.1	58.0	21.4	46.8
India	2001	30.9	52.4	11.5	50.8
	2004-05	32.7	54.6	16.6	54.9
	2009-10	26.1	54.7	13.8	54.3

Source: Population Census, 2001; NSSO, 61<sup>st</sup> Round, July2004-June 2005 & NSSO, 66<sup>th</sup> Round, July 2009, July 2009-June 2010

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