



**IN DEFENCE OF**

**REGIONAL  
ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT  
IN INDIA**

**A CASE FOR THE NORTH EAST**

**P.M. PASSAH**

**IN DEFENCE  
OF  
REGIONAL ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA**

A Case for the North East

*Edited by*  
**P. M. Passah**

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**AKANSHA PUBLISHING HOUSE**

4649B/21, Ansari Road

Daryaganj, New Delhi - 110 002

Phones: 011-23263193, 9811582579, 9435116718

Fax: 011-23263193

Email: ektabooks@yahoo.com

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*A  
Felicitation Volume  
in Honour  
of*

*Dr. Basudev Datta Ray*

*The Secretary  
North-East Council for Social Science  
Research  
A Freedom Fighter, A Teacher par excellence  
and  
A Champion of the North-Eastern Region*



M. M. Jacob

RAJ BHAVAN  
Shilong 793 001  
Meghalaya State

## Foreword

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This publication is a fitting tribute to a selfless scholar, whose contributions are much valued by all. I am glad that a felicitation volume in honor of Dr. Basudev Datta Ray is being brought out. It is also significant that this book is compiled and edited by an eminent Economist, Prof. P.M. Passah. I know Dr. Basudev Datta Ray intimately, for the past many years and I have great appreciation for the remarkable service rendered by him for the cause of promotion of research in various fields. As secretary, North-East Council for Social Science Research, he was always piloting the cause of North Eastern Region. It was his devotion, hard work and a vision that made him to conceive the idea of establishing NEICSSR way back in 1974 and thereafter, conducting large number of seminars, workshops and conferences, on various topics concerning North Eastern States.

His personal rapport with individuals and institutions in the country, enabled him to get prominent scholars, to attend the conferences held in Shillong. He was mainly responsible along with his colleagues to publish a series of publications, on behalf of NEICSSR. About sixty-six seminars and conferences organised by him and his colleagues attracted not only prominent scholars of North Eastern Region but also, from other parts of the country.

I had the good fortune of participating in some of the workshops and seminars in Shillong, during the last few years. The workshops and conferences were very useful and

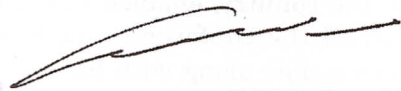
informative and attended by resource leaders competent to handle each topic under discussion. This felicitation volume is a useful publication as it comprises major contributions on topics of great interests in this North East Region as a whole.

Various papers on macro-economic and theoretical overview of the North East, by Amalesh Banerjee and others; Regional trade services and entrepreneurship by A.K. Neog and others; Micro-level studies by N.N. Bhattacharjee and others; socio-political aspects and women issues by Girin Phukon and others; are some of the topics of current interests to the readers. I do not wish to mention all the different topics included in this volume. This volume will be a treasure house to all those who wish to have a feel of North Eastern India.

Not only the choice of topics and themes for various conferences, NEICSSR is to be complimented for publishing many of the conference papers in the past. This publication is unique with a variety of topics from agriculture to industry including many other aspects pertaining to North East India in general.

I am happy that his contribution in social sciences are recognized by his colleagues through the publication of this "Felicitation Volume". I wish all success for this publication. May Dr. Basudev Datta Ray continue to serve the society through the NEICSSR, and I pray God to give him health and happiness to continue this endeavor to impart knowledge through this forum.

My best wishes,



(M.M. Jacob)

Shillong  
The 28<sup>th</sup> June 2005

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## Preface

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In the publication of this volume, the members of the North-East India Council for Social Science Research, Shillong are very proud and happy indeed. They had some time ago proposed to felicitate Dr. Basudev Datta Ray, the founder Secretary of the Council, and to publish a volume in his honour. Dr. Datta Ray deserves congratulations and felicitations not only from the members of the Council but also from all those who know him and his achievements in the field of social science research in the North-East. Many scholars and social scientists, young and old, in the North-East and in other parts of the country, have been provided with an ideal forum in the NEICSSR through the unstinted efforts of Dr. Datta Ray who continues as its Secretary for the last 31 years of its existence.

Dr. Datta Ray is well known as a teacher and research scholar of repute even though he had a chequered career as a student during his young days. At the young age, he joined the ranks of Freedom Fighters who fought for the freedom of India in the early part of the last century. He was born to a humble family at Bankura, West Bengal on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 1924. His ancestral home was in a village in the District of Bakarganj, East Bengal where he had a part of his school education. He wrote his Intermediate Examination from Dum Dum Central Jail. He graduated from the Scottish Church College, Calcutta; obtained his M.A. degree in 1949 from the Calcutta University and then came to Shillong in 1950 to join the St. Edmund's College as a Lecturer in Economics and subsequently opened the Department of Political Science in 1962 and headed it till 1985. He was incharge of the

Faculty of Post-graduate studies in Political Science which was functional for seven years from 1973 in the St. Edmund's College. He gave lectures in the I.A.S. Pre-Training Centre as well. He was also a member of the Voluntary Health Association, Meghalaya and the State Resource Centre, N.E.H.U. Dr. Datta Ray obtained, in between, his B.T., LL.B., and Ph.D. degrees from the Gauhati University.

It was in the middle of 1974 that Dr. Datta Ray brought together a number of teachers and social scientists of the North-East in a meeting at Shillong on the 30<sup>th</sup> June of that year under the Chairmanship of late Prof. V. Venkata Rao of the Gauhati University. The meeting with one accord decided to establish the NEICSSR with the principal objective of undertaking, organising and facilitating research activities in the North-East besides other activities related to research. Earlier he founded the Shillong Political Science Association and the Inter-Disciplinary Forum and guided them for a few years.

Dr. Datta Ray who has been able to effect good rapport with many research centres and institutes both in the North-East and in other parts of the country, is guiding the Council which has since held more than 66 seminars, conferences, symposium, workshops, etc. and published as many research proceedings in the form of Books. Many national and international organizations have been attracted by the fairly high standard of publications of the Council mostly dealing with the question of socio-economic problems and issues of the North East. The Journal of NEICSSR is being published regularly since 1977 under his guidance.

By the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 1985, Dr. Datta Ray's service in the St. Edmund's College was superannuated but the college authorities continued to assist him and to utilize his service. Immediately in April 1985 he started the Women's College in the St. Edmund's College premises where the new college continued to function upto 1991. He was the founder Principal of the college upto 1992. In fact as the Secretary of the organization known as 'The Shillong Academy', he had earlier helped to revive a dying Secondary School at

Laitumkhrah and made it functional. The School had since shifted to its own campus at Upper New Colony. Dr. Datta Ray was instrumental in organising, as the Rector, both the School and the Women College under the sponsorship of the Shillong Academy, which are now functioning in the same campus. Dr. Datta Ray never retires. From 1993 onwards he has exclusively devoted his time to the cause of the NEICSSR.

He wrote a number of books including the *Assam Secretariat: An Administrative History of North-East India* (1978); *Tribal Identity and Tension in North-East India* (1989); and a volume of *Bengali Poems* (2004). He edited 20 books published by the NEICSSR and authored more than 40 research papers.

As an editor of the book, I am indeed very grateful to the members of the Council for the opportunity they have given me in associating myself with this work, and I join in with all of them in felicitating Dr. Datta Ray, the Secretary of the Council all the time. I am especially grateful to the authors of the Papers contained in this volume for their generous response and for their scholarly researched contribution. It must now be said that this Felicitation Volume is published, to use the words of one contributor, "in honour of Professor B. Datta Ray, a freedom fighter, a teacher *par excellence* and above all, a social scientist with deep concerns for the underdevelopment of the North-Eastern States (Region) of India. This octogenarian thespian has spent over the last three decades in herding the social scientists of the Region into the secular forum of the NEICSSR, of which he is the Secretary General. In times when the polity is fragmented and even this fragmentation is assigned morality and legitimacy, the aging Nehruvian Scholar still spends sleepless nights in building a new India, a dream consigned to ashes of history a long time ago." The title of the book justifies his conscious efforts as the Champion of the North East.

In a very special way, I must express my thankfulness to His Excellency, the Governor of Meghalaya, Shri M.M. Jacob for writing a Foreword to this Volume.

We must also thank M/s. Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, for agreeing to expeditiously publish this book. Last but not the least our thanks are also due to Mr. Godfrey Pathaw for partly helping in computerised work.

Shillong:  
The 30<sup>th</sup> June 2005

**Editor**

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# 24

## Reservation of Seats for Women in Grass-Roots Democracy (With Reference to Meghalaya)

—E. Jyrwa

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The women represent nearly half of the country's total population (accounting for 407.1 million in absolute numbers, as per 1991 census). Two-thirds of Indian women live in rural areas, and most of them are illiterate and unorganised. Indian women constitute about 50 per cent of the Indian population, yet not even 10 per cent of them are represented in the Indian Parliament. Even in matrilineal society of Meghalaya, political and religious authority is exercised by men. The traditional *Dorbars* which run the traditional institutions are the exclusive domains of men.

### Constitutional and Legal Provisions for Women

The Constitution of India promises to secure to all its citizens justice, liberty, equality and to promote fraternity among them all. To realise the goals, the Constitution guarantees certain fundamental rights. Along with these rights, equal protection of law is also guaranteed. The Constitution of India recognises the unequal social position of women. As such, Special laws have been enacted for the protection of women workers in factories, mines and plantations, and to provide maternity relief to women workers

in organised sectors. Equality of opportunity in public employment and offices thus helps to ensure a significant position and status to urban, middle class, educated Indian women and also position of political power and appointment.

### Women Liberation Movement

These special provisions for women enshrined in the Indian Constitution were the result of social reform movement which began in the 19th Century emphasising improvement of women's status. The reformers tried to achieve the objectives through social legislation. They agreed that no substantial social change could be achieved as long as women were deprived the opportunities of self-development and participation. Majority of them saw women as custodians of the family who are responsible for the well being of children, inculcating in them the cultural values and very few of them thought in terms of women's right to participate in social functions outside the family framework.

Throughout the world the concept of women's empowerment has its roots in women's movement. Since the mid 1980s this term became popular in the field of development. In India, the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) can be taken as a landmark for the cause of women. Here, the concept of women and development was introduced for the first time.

### Women Empowerment in India

The National Perspective Plan on Women 1988 was drawn up for streamlining women's issues in policies and programmes and giving women at least one-third share in the decision-making bodies from Panchayats to Parliament. The plan promises that 30 per cent of executive head positions from the village to district level in all statutory institutions should be reserved for women.

The National Commission for Women Act, 1990 was passed to set up the National Commission for Women (NCW), a statutory body to review the constitutional and legal

safeguards for women and to recommend remedial legislation. The 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts passed in 1992 by the Parliament provide for reservation of one-third of seats (33.3%) in rural Panchayat and urban local bodies for women as members and as chairpersons. The Acts provide for reservation of seats for women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The Acts are a charter for empowerment of women.

### Reservation for Women

Before proceeding further on reservation of seats for women at grass-roots let us ponder over what we mean by Reservation. According to the New Webster Encyclopedia Dictionary of the English language 'reservation' means the act of reserving or keeping back; concealment or withholding from disclosure. According to Maheshwari, reservation policy is based on consciously planned preferences which may be based on ascriptive criteria like ethnicity, gender or even on geographical location. Reservation is a mechanism of socio-economic mobility, an act of deliberately design social engineering. The United States calls it as the policy of positive or affirmative action. It is known as Bhumiputra preferences in Malaysia. India calls it as the policy of reservation<sup>1</sup>.

In India, reservation policy has been a by-product of the British style and system of governance in India, more particularly in social and economic spheres. Educational institutions in India began to be set up by the State consequent on the official declaration of English in 1836 as India's official language. In India, reservation in government jobs began not in British India but in what was known as Indian India.<sup>2</sup>

With regards to election, reservation in elected bodies began with the passage of the Government of India Act, 1909 and the subsequent legislations of 1919 and 1935 further institutionalised it. The basis of reservation was religion and thus legislative seats were set aside for Muslims, Indian Christians, Sikh, Anglo-Indians, etc. Seats were reserved for depressed classes as well as for women.<sup>3</sup>

### The Case of Meghalaya

With regards to the question of women participating in politics in Meghalaya particularly in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, it must be clearly stated that traditionally women do not have a role to play in political affairs. Women are not allowed to attend the Dorbars. There is a Khasi saying "when the hen crows, the world is coming to an end". In Garo Hills too, women have not much part to play in the public life. In pre-independence period, women were by and large excluded from taking any leading role in social, political or cultural organisation. It was only during the sixties that women of Khasi Hills came together under the banner of *Ka Synjuk Kynthei* which was till then the only women's social and cultural organisation.<sup>4</sup>

The Government of India Act 1935 in fact, has made special provisions for the representation of women in the Assam Legislative Assembly from the Shillong Constituency which was a reserved seat, besides permitting them to contest from other seats. Hence, in 1937 two women contested from this reserved constituency. Miss Mavis Dunn was declared elected and inducted as a Minister twice into the Saadullah Ministry from 1939 till 1941 and from 1942 to 1945. Mavis Dunn was the first Khasi woman elected as a Member of the Assam Legislative Assembly. In 1946 four women contested from the reserved constituency and Bonily Khongmen won the election. In 1952 Bonily Khongmen was elected as a Deputy Speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly.<sup>5</sup>

After independence, the reservation of seat for women was abolished. In the general election to the Assam Legislative Assembly held in 1952 only one woman returned out of eleven candidates. Miss Mavis Dunn who contested as an independent candidates was defeated. In the Lok Sabha elections, Bonily Khongmen of the INC defeated two of her male rivals, L.L.D. Basan and Wilson Reads. Bonily Khongmen was the first tribal lady to be a member of the Lok Sabha. In the 1957 Lok Sabha elections, no women candidate contested and Bonily Khongmen who contested the

Assembly election from INC ticket was defeated. In later years no women were either elected to the Lok Sabha or the Assam Legislative Assembly.<sup>6</sup>

Within decades after independence, the legal status of women have undergone revolutionary changes. Indeed, the constitution itself opened ample avenues for all citizens irrespective of religion, caste, race or sex. Paving the way for participation of women on equal terms with men, the Constitution of India also provides for universal adult suffrage. Article 326 gives the Indian women not only the right to vote but also eligibility to seek election to the State Legislature and the Parliament.

After the formation of Meghalaya in 1970 two women were inducted in the Provisional Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. These included Maysalin War and Josephine Momin. In the first general elections to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly (MLA) held in 1972 two women were elected from the APHLC tickets and both were from the Garo Hills. In the second election held in 1978 only one women candidate was elected and that too from Garo Hills as an independent candidate. In the third general elections held in 1983 no women candidate was returned though eight of them had contested. In the fourth general elections to the Assembly held in 1988, two women candidates were elected one from the Khasi Hills on the Congress ticket and the other from the Garo Hills as an independent candidate. In the fifth general elections held in 1993, only one women candidate was elected on the HPU ticket from the Khasi Hills. The sixth general election of the MLA was held in 1998. In this election two women candidates were elected both from Khasi Hills one on the HPU ticket and the other from the HSPDP ticket.<sup>7</sup> The above analysis, however, shows that with the abolition of the reserved seat, women register only a scanty appearance in the battle of hustings. This may be mainly due to the traditional role that keeps them confined in the household or total lack of opportunity to be afforded by the political parties.

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) under its article

243 M states that Part IX of the Constitution will not apply to the States of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram, and the Hill areas in the State of Manipur for which District Councils exist. But the State Legislative Assembly of the concerned state may pass a resolution by a majority of total membership of that house and by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members of that house present and voting in order to extend this Part IX to that State. There are similar provisions for urban areas under the 74th Amendment of the Constitution of India. The Parliament also may, by law, extend the provisions of the amendment to the Schedule Areas and Tribal Areas subject to such modifications and exceptions as may be specified in such law.

The Constitution (74th Amendment) Act, 1992 also specifically provides the reservation of seats for women in every Municipality. The role of women in monitoring and administering schemes like health, education and family planning can be emphasized. Women mayors and councillors could contribute significantly in the implementation of schemes listed in the Twelfth Schedule of the Act and as mandated in Article 243 W of the 74th Amendment. The Act provides a number of Schemes in the Schedule such as (1) planning for economic and social development, (2) water supply for domestic, commercial and industrial purposes, (3) public health, sanitation, conservancy and social waste management, (4) urban forests, protection of the environment and ecological aspects, (5) safe-guarding the interests of the weaker section of the society, including the handicapped and mentally retarded, (6) slum improvement and upgradation, (7) urban poverty alleviation poverty programmes, (8) provision of urban amenities and facilities such as parks, gardens and play grounds, (9) promotion of cultural, educational and aesthetic aspects and (10) public amenities including street lighting, parking lots, bus stops and public conveniences. The 74th Amendment Act has certainly opened up opportunities for women councillors to be more effective in mobilising forces against such social evils as dowry, harassment of women, drugs, child abuse, prostitution, etc.

Today the emphasis in women's role is not on the status of women, their degradation, social customs, the role of women in the family, community and tradition. The emphasis has shifted to education, economic and legal status of women, political participation, etc. Of course, much has been written on the glorification of Meghalayan women. Different writers had pointed out the higher status occupied by women in society presumably on the consideration of certain social aspects like descent and inheritance. But there is one area where women in Meghalaya is yet to be liberated. That is, the participation of women in the political institutions. Traditionally, Meghalaya women are not allowed to meaningfully participate in their respective village councils. That is why in some localities of Shillong like Nongthymmai, women movements for emancipation are already afoot since 1988. They had demanded for full participation in their respective local Durbar Shnong (Village Councils).<sup>8</sup>

With specific reference to the urban areas, in a few localities of the Shillong town like Nongrim Hills, Laitumkhrah and Lachumiers, women have entered the village *Dorbar* as elected/nominated members.<sup>9</sup> But this possibility is rather remote in the rural areas. However in a few villages of the rural areas, women do freely attend public meetings called by the village *Dorbar* and freely participate in the discussion. But they cannot enter the village *Dorbar* as elected/nominated members. While providing reservation for scheduled caste, scheduled tribes, a further reservation of at least one-third of the total quota is made for women. Moreover, reservation for the office of the chairpersons of the panchayat bodies has been made for these three categories. Now the question arises: Will Meghalayan women attempt to become heads of the village *Dorbar* or to abrogate unreasonable customs which are beneficial to the society? True, the District Council under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India have been empowered to regulate social customs thereby bring about a change. Will it do it?

Thus, in Meghalaya we have a social situation where a particular custom like women's participation in modern

institutions may not be a constraint, while it may be a constraint to modernization like allowing women to have a meaningful participation in some traditional institutions.<sup>10</sup>

In most societies, rural women are the backbone of agriculture. But they sink down into poverty. The most disadvantaged population today are the poor rural women who have been very much affected by the technological changes and development processes. As Pakem has pointed out, in Meghalaya, particularly in rural areas, there has been a marked interference of technological change in the socio-economic situation. The technological change is more keenly felt in the field of agriculture and industry where male manpower and skills are required. As a result, women are in a disadvantageous position as the same new technical facilities enjoyed by men have not added any more work capacity for women. The introduction of symbolic mechanised farming in the rural areas is a case in point. Earlier, both males and females, used to work side by side with the same tools and implements, but now it is more or less a male oriented society wherever a new technology is involved. Compared to the rural experience, the response of the male in urban areas is different. Education and employment are taken both by males and females. It is no longer a question of male oriented or female oriented society, but one where there is an equal opportunity for males and females.<sup>11</sup>

When Mrs. Margaret Alva a National Congress leader, visited Shillong in September 14, 1994, she urged upon the women of this Region to fight for the reservation of seat in the Autonomous District Councils. She strongly felt that since women of other states have already got representation in the panchayats so the tribal women also should get the same in the district councils.<sup>12</sup>

The point to be noted here is that, there is a qualitative difference between the tribal situation in the Autonomous District Council areas in the North east and the Panchayati Raj institutions in the rest of the country. The historical background of the District Council, the structural arrangements, functioning and operations have very little

semblance with those of the Panchayati Raj and Municipal institutions as envisaged under the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment Acts.

### Concluding Remarks

By virtue of the 73rd and the 74th amendments of the Constitution, million of women are aspiring for getting elected to the village Panchayats and municipalities in the country. Reservation of seats for women in the State Legislature and Parliament will be just another step in the same direction empowering the women to enter into the public life.

There is a danger as well. In view of the widespread illiteracy among women, a large dose of reservation may inject unqualified representation in the legislative bodies. Empowerment of women must begin as a bottom-up exercise rather than a top-down decision. As such, awareness and consciousness of women about their own rights and status is even more important for meaningful participation at the grass roots level. It is universally accepted that education is a significant instrument in improving the status of women. Education can give a woman more awareness, more choice and more confidence. Women's education leads to reduction in family size, greater attention by mothers towards health, education and character building of their children. Reservation policy alone is not the only remedy for the country's economic ills or social imbalances.

The present reservation policy have perceptibly not entered the rural areas where poverty is the main cause of obstacles. It is to be noted that 60 per cent of women are still illiterate. The rural-urban gap in female literacy has increased. Over 80 per cent of women in rural areas are illiterate and only 2 per cent have qualified beyond matriculation. The rural girls start schooling late and drop out early. In poor families, parents find little meaning in sending girls to school when they are struggling for survival. The country as a whole need other developmental and promotional measures to emancipate those still below the

poverty line. Reservation may prove to be beneficial only temporarily. Eminent Jurist, Nani Palkhivala had called the system of reservation for the benefit of the weaker sections of the society "a fraud on the Constitution."<sup>13</sup>

True, the long term remedy lies in the general awareness and over-whelming public opinion to change the traditional role of women in the society. Education is thus, an exceptionally powerful levelling weapon in this regard.

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