The Universal Declaration of Human Rights strongly states that everyone has the right to participate in the government of her country. Moreover, a target of 30 per cent women at all levels of critical decision-making bodies has been recommended by the UN-Economic and Social Council in 1995. But, globally women constitute only ten per cent of legislative bodies and less in Parliamentary positions. India being a democratic country, has taken many steps including reservation of seats for women in the local self-governments to politically empower them through the Constitutional Amendment Acts. In this, exemption has been made for tribal states of the north-east and certain areas in plain states of the country mainly due to operation of traditional institutions of local governments. Therefore, this article attempts to study the development of the notion of political empowerment of women without seat reservations in the state of Mizoram.

As human development moves centre-stage in the global debate, gender equality and gender equity are emerging as major challenges. Today everyone talks about women empowerment particularly in politics on different platforms. Yet women are nowhere near to being full and equal participants in public policy choices that affect their lives. This lack of adequate political participation in decision-making bodies has far-reaching consequences. It deprives women of important rights and responsibilities as citizens, their viewpoints and perspectives tend to remain unheard or under-represented and in some instances ignored while taking key decisions on national budgets and while setting up priorities for the government. However, this does not appear to be happening and there is a growing opinion that an affirmative action to increase the number of women in representative bodies is required. In this article, an attempt has been made to trace the development of the notion of political empowerment of women in India in general and Mizoram in particular, the impetus provided by the
Constitution and parliamentary initiatives in this regard.

Women have been given an exalted position in society. In the past, they were treated at par with men even in political and philosophical spheres. However, down the centuries the position of women in society deteriorated and politically they were pushed to the background. It was only in the 20th Century with the freedom movement under the charismatic leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that involvement of women was accepted as the natural course in India.¹ In fact, it was primarily due to the conscious efforts of the leadership, at the forefront of the freedom struggle, that women fought against the might of the British empire in partnership with men.

The enactment and adoption of our Constitution and its numerous provisions heralded a new era of equality for women in India. The Constitution guarantees equal political rights including the right to vote to women. There is even a scope for ‘positive discrimination’ in their favour as is evident in Article 15(3), 14, 39(a), 39(d), 42, and Article 51 (A)(e) refers to the fundamental duty of citizens to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. As a result, women have held important political and administrative positions both at the national and International levels, but what we see it that women’s participation in the political arena and in the decision-making bodies is not in proportion to their population. But, as Nehru rightly said “the future of India will probably depend ultimately more upon the women than the men”.²

In pursuance of the notion of empowerment of women, the Constitution (73rd and 74th Amendment) Acts and the grassroots level bodies, namely, the panchayats and municipalities with the hope that these measures will set the trend to provide women their legitimate place in public life. After these amendments, Article 243 D and 243 T of the Constitution provide that not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by the direct election in the local bodies (Panchayats and Municipalities) would be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in the local bodies. This indeed makes a beginning for the effective participation of women in the decision-making process at the grassroots level. In fact, in the elections to these local bodies one million women have been elected every five years.

In some cases women have been able to ensure a significant change in living conditions for the entire community. It may be worthwhile to refer here to a survey conducted by the weekly news magazine Outlook to gauge

the perceptions of middle class sections of society about our politicians. It is worth noting that 55 per cent of the persons participating in the survey maintained that women politicians are better than men and 79 per cent of them felt that there should be reservation for women in Parliament and State Assemblies. Therefore, to provide legitimate place to women in public life and their due share in the elected bodies at the state and the national level, a strong political will is required. The Constitution Amendment Bill to reserve seats for women in Parliament if passed would be a major milestone in the path of women empowerment. Let us hope that there will be a positive outcome as the Rajya Sabha had already passed 33 per cent seat reservation in March, 2010. Actually, there would have been no need for bringing such Bills before Parliament had there been a gradual increase in women’s participation in the political process over the years.

Out of the total number of women who actually contest the elections, the percentage of women who finally make it to the Lok Sabha is always very less. Moreover, women contestants fielded by national parties have better chance to win in comparison to independent candidates. Thus, support from political parties will surely give a fillip to the number of women who find their way to the legislatures. May be involving more women in the party’s work could be a first step to stimulate and encourage more women to join politics. In this context, national level parties can and ought to play a major role. The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001 also admits that there still exists a wide gap between the goals enunciated in the Constitution, legislations, policies, plans, programmes, and related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality of the status of women in India, on the other. However, the need of the hour is to translate these ideas into actual numbers in legislative bodies and other representative institutions.

POLITICAL PROFILE OF WOMEN IN MIZORAM

As elsewhere, the Mizo society is a patriarchal society whereby women are having lower status than men in social, economic, religious and political aspects. In the past, the whole political process was completely dominated by male in terms of village chief. However, women could have chance to become village chief if her husband had deceased without leaving major heir. We find a number of such cases until the advent of British in India and they had proved to be efficient and not less than their male counterparts in carrying out the village administration. They even participated in the

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freedom struggle, for instance, the Mizo chieftain, Ropuiliani in a patriarchal society of the Mizo. It has been highlighted well her patriotic and heroic roles in instilling a sense of Mizo nationhood, and mobilising them and thereby leading Mizoram Resistance Movement against the oppressive endeavours of the British colonial rulers in annexing the then Lushai Hills (Mizoram).4

After Independence, the Lushai Hills Autonomous District Council (later the Mizo Hills Autonomous District Council) and Pawi-Lakher Regional Council were created under the Six Schedule to the Constitution of India in 1952 and in 1953 respectively. The chieftainship was also abolished by an Act of the Assam Lushai Hills District (Acquisition of Chiefs Right) in 1954. Both the Councils democratised the village administration by enacting the Lushai Hills District (Village Councils) Act, 1953 and the Pawi-Lakher Autonomous Region (Village Councils) Act, 1954. Accordingly, the village administration was vested in the democratically elected Village Councils, which in fact started functioning from August 1954 within the respective jurisdictions of the Councils. These Acts did not provide seat reservation for women.

There were four nominated seats in each Autonomous District Councils where one of the seats had been given to woman. As the Mizo people became politically conscious during the formation of the Autonomous District Council, the women organization in the name of Mizoram Hmeichhe Tangrual was also formed to cause women empowerment by the womenfolk in Mizoram. They demanded that nominated seats should be given to women members.5 Therefore, nominating women as members of the District Council became a turning point for Mizo women to participate in political leadership and decision-making. Therefore, credit must go to the Mizoram Hmeichhe Tangrual Pawl in this regard. Even though women members were not given much chance to cause women development in the proceedings of the District Council, yet there had been one significant role played by them to cause changes in the customary law of the Mizos through legislation. In this regard, due to effort put by the Tangrual Pawl a significant change was affected by the District Council. According to this change women were allowed to inherit property by “Will” if properly executed with witness. Since then the Mizo women have a right to inherit family property through ‘Will’.

The Mizo District Council was elevated to the status of Union Territory of Mizoram in January 1972 with a 33 elected and nominated members and a council of minister. The first General Election to the Members of Legislative Assembly was held in April, 1972. Unfortunately no political party had any woman candidate while two women contested as independent candidates so far. But both of these women contestants had lost and forfeited their deposits. The Mizo Union, being the majority, formed the Ministry and nominated Saptawni. It seemed, she did not find much chance in regard to upliftment of women in the society.

During the formation of UT period, two new political parties were formed namely, People’s Conference (PC) Party, now known as Mizoram People’s Conference (MPC) and the Mizo Democratic Front (MDF). The MPC had six Secretaries apart from the General Secretary and one of them was female. The MDF Party was also headed by a lady, Sanglianchhungi as its President. This is a landmark in the history of Mizoram for a woman took the leadership of a political party. It also indicated that women are not inferior to men in terms of leadership in the political field. This same lady had made an important history in Mizoram as she was the same woman to contest Lok Sabha election in 1977 that too from behind the bars.\(^6\) No woman or man is found doing the same till now in Mizoram.

The Second General Election was held in May 1978 and in this only one woman candidate contested on party ticket, that is, MFC. She was Thanmawii, and she got elected from Serchhip Constituency. Her winning in the election became a landmark in the history of women’s participation in political leadership as she was the first lady to be elected for a Member of MLA. Even though, the MFC formed the Ministry but the Ministry lasted only for six months due to split in the Party. As a result, the Ministry was dissolved. Consequently, Mizoram was under the President’s Rule. A new election was required. Accordingly, the third General Election was held in April 1979. Again Thanmawii contested and won in the election but from the Aizawl East Constituency. Besides her, Sanglianchhungi, the Party President of the MDF, also contested in the election but she lost in this election.

The Ministry was formed by the MPC led by Brig T. Sailo as its Chief Minister for the second time. This Third Assembly had two women legislators by the joining of K. Thansiami to fill the nominated seat of the newly formed Ministry. She became the second woman who entered the Assembly as nominated member after Saptawni, who made her debut in

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the House in 1972. The Fourth General Election was held in April 1984. In this election, K. Thansiami contested from Aizawl West Constituency on MPC Party ticket and she won from this constituency. This new Ministry was formed by the Congress Party. Rokungi was made as nominated member by this Ministry. Therefore, for the second time, Mizoram Legislative Assembly could have two women MLAs as one was in the elected seat and the other one was in the nominated seat. However, they could not complete their term on account of peace agreement known as ‘Peace Accord’ between the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Government of India on June, 1986. Following this agreement a new Ministry was formed as an Interim Government with Laldenga as the Chief Minister for an interim period of six months.

After six months, the UT of Mizoram attained the status of State of the Indian Union in February 1987. Consequently, the Fifth General Election to the first Mizoram State Legislative Assembly was held in February 1987, with an increase of 10 seats, making the total number of seats from 30 to 40. In this Election there were two women candidates contested and one of them had won. Having majority members, the MNF formed the new Ministry under the leadership of Laldenga as the first Chief Minister of the State of Mizoram. Lalhlimpuii was also elected on MNF ticket and was inducted as Minister of State. She has been the first and the last woman Minister in Mizoram State Legislative Assembly till date. Unfortunately, defection in the MNF party led to the fall of the Ministry in September 1988. The Sixth General Election was held in 1989. In this election four women had contested. But, all of them had lost in this election. The Seventh General Election to the MLA was held in 1993. There were two women contested in the election but both of them had lost even in this election.

While the issue 33 per cent seat reservation for women was being debated, no major political party in Mizoram could allot seats to women except the MNF (Nationalist), a faction of the MNF party in the 1998 election. Veronica K. Zatluangi contested in the name of the party. Besides her, there were nine women contestants as independent candidates fighting in this election. No women contestants had won even this time. However, the election of 1998 is unique in its own way as a record number of women contested even though they had to forfeit their deposits.

The Ninth General Election of 2003 saw five women candidates but none was elected. In fact, female had outnumbered males by 3,010 votes during assembly polls (2003). But, womenfolk were not given their due share in terms of party tickets and full support in the patriarchal society.

\[7\text{Lalneihzovi, } \textit{op.cit, p.65.}\]

\[8\text{Ibid, p.66.}\]
Therefore, it is presumed that women become more conscious politically and would like to take their due share as equal partner with men in the political field.

In the General Election to Assembly of 2008, there were as many as nine women contestants fighting in the election but none was elected. Anyhow, this election witnessed a significant trend in the history of Mizoram due to a maximum number of women contestants were fielded by political parties. All the major political parties, namely, Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC), Mizoram National Front (MNF), and the United Democratic Alliance (UDA) formed by two regional parties Zoram Nationalist Party (ZNP) and Mizoram People’s Conference (MPC) with the backing of farmers’ group Zoram Kuthnathawk Pawl (ZKP) had fielded women member on their party tickets. The BJP could field two women of total eight contestants (25%) on their party tickets. Lok Janshakti could also have two women candidates this time. Therefore, out of total nine women contestants only one contested as independent candidate in this election.

This is, in fact, due to the painstaking efforts put by the Core Committee-Panchayat Mahila Shakti Abhiyaan (PMSA). This Core Committee in their State Charter of Demands submitted to the Government of Mizoram and to the Government of India in October 2008 included 33 per cent seat reservation for women as per the 73rd and 74th CAAs. They also demanded to provide 33 per cent seats reservation for women in the Village Council Act and the same must be included in the party election manifestos to cause women empowerment in Mizoram. They even submitted representation to field women in these elections to all leaders of political parties so that each party could field potential women candidates at least not less than 33 per cent to these elections of MLA and Village Councils.

The Mizoram Municipalities Act was legislated in 2007. But this Act does not provide for reservation of seats for women. Therefore, the Committee demanded reservation clause to be inserted by amending the Act and even met the Chief Minister to take positive action at earliest. The

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9In pursuance of Government of India’s Ministry of Panchayati Raj’s D.O. letter No. R-12012/31/2007-P-J Dated 21/1/2008, the Governor of Mizoram Constituted Core Committee for Mizoram for the purpose of successful implementation of Panchayat Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti Abhiyan through Mizoram Gazette Extraordinary and Published by Authority.

Government of Mizoram was very serious with this demand. Accordingly, the Review Committee of the Mizoram Municipalities was set up by the Government of Mizoram to review the Mizoram Municipalities Act of 2007. Mainly based on the recommendations of the Review Committee, the Mizoram State Legislative Assembly amended the Act and clearly inserted the Reservation Clause of Article 243T provided by the 74th CAA. Moreover, the Core Committee of PMSA had submitted representations to all the leaders of the political parties for fielding woman candidate in the 2009 MP election on their party ticket.\(^{11}\)

The revised electoral rolls for the State Assembly elections, 2008 showed that women voters have outnumbered their male counterparts by 6,644. Of the total voters of 6,11,124 in the eight districts of Mizoram, 3,08,884 are females and 3,02,240 males. It is a matter of irony in the Christian state that though women voters are more in number than men, they do not shine in the same proportion on the political stage. Immense contribution by the women to the state economy, church and social activities, but they shy away when it comes to politics, assembly elections in particular.\(^{12}\) Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihhkawm Pawl (MHIP), the state’s biggest women’s body and other women NGOs in Mizoram have given full moral support to the Core Committee’s initiatives to have politically empowered women in the state.

Since this is the case in the state of Mizoram, the women of the state especially women NGOs like Panchayat Mahila Shakti Abhiyaan, All Mizoram Women Federation and Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihhkawm Pawl are putting pressure to the political party leaders to make room for women by reserving seat and by nominating women with party ticket. As a result, in the recent Hrangturzo Constituency By-election 2014 Vanlalawmpuii Chawngthu was given party ticket by the Mizoram Congress Pradesh. She contested in the By-election to Hrangturzo Constituency along with other male contestants. Fortunately, she won this election by getting 6721 votes casted in favour of her. Thus, Mizoram State Legislative now has another woman MLA after 27 years in the history of Mizoram. She became the first and only woman elected member from Congress Party of Mizoram since the inception of the Party in the state.\(^{13}\)


\(^{12}\)Charter of Demands, op.cit.

Participation of Women in Village Councils

The Government of Mizoram adapted the Lushai Hills District (Village Councils) Act, 1953 in 1972 to carry out the village administration in its respective areas. The Village Council (VC) is a democratically elected body whose provisions can be amended by the executive/administrative orders of the Government of Mizoram under the Local Administration Department. The Act does not have nomination nor reservation seat for women. But women can fight the election through general seats. Therefore, since 1954 there have been some women members got elected to form village councils in the state.

In the General Election to Village Councils held in February 2006, there were 556 Village Councils against 2036 VC seats within the six districts of Mizoram excluding the two districts lying within the Autonomous District Councils. In actual fact, out of a total of 2036 VC seats only 33 (i.e. about 1.09%) women were elected to this General Election. And out of 33 VC members, only four became Village Council Presidents.

The last General Election to Village Council, for a term of 2009-2012, held in February 2009 could have more women contestants of total 84. Out of this, 34 women were elected this time, which is the highest number ever recorded of women VC Member in Mizoram. In this election there were 557 Village Councils having 2071 VC seats within six districts of the state. It may also be mentioned here that about five women VC Members are presently holding Village Council President posts, four are Vice-Presidents and five are Treasurers within the six districts in the state. Women voters had outnumbered their male counterparts even in this election as was experienced in the past. This increasing number of women VC Members is due to the intervention of the Core Committee of PMSA to women at maximum number.14

Women in Critical Decision-Making Levels

Regarding the number of women working under the government and quasi-government organisation in the State is also very small. There are 21.13 per cent women employees out of the total 85.06 per cent government employees as on March 2005 in the State. At the critical decision-making levels, the percentage of women is still very low. Out of the total sanctioned posts of 4,071 Group ‘A’ officers there are only 722 women Group ‘A’ officers.15 Therefore, unless there are more women at the critical decision-making level and higher civil services, numbers would always remain an

14Charter of Demands, op. cit.
15Employees Census of Different Organisations in Mizoram, 2005, p. 4.
area of concern. The challenge to ensure that de jure participation is also de facto participation continues, and this primarily calls for a range of supportive interventions. There is a need to encourage and provide new opportunities and new role models in decision making structures.

Therefore, it can be said that Mizo women continue to suffer discrimination in the field of politics as well as in decision-making and occupy a lower status as compared with men. Women’s equal participation in the decision-making process, policy-making, planning and administration is extremely important to ensure their equality while participating in the development process. It is therefore, necessary to do something so that women’s participation in political leadership and decision-making can be improved to cause women’s development in the society. And it is strongly recommended that the introduction of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments for the state of Mizoram. As these Amendments provide for reservation of 33 per cent of elected seats for women at different levels of local self-government in both rural and urban and there would be 1/3 reservation for women to posts of chairperson of these bodies.

Concluding Observations

The position of women in the Mizo society needs to be improved in certain fields, particularly in political field. Unlike their counterparts in the plain areas, Mizo women do not enjoy the rights and privileges provided by the constitutional amendments due to non-implementation of Panchayati Raj System and Nagarpalika in the state. Since 1993 their counterparts in the plain areas have been availing the provisions of 33 per cent seats reservation for women in the elected bodies of urban and rural within their states. That means, the Mizo women are far behind about 16 years of the plain women while the State could achieve high literacy rate. In political aspect, Mizoram’s history has taken a backward turn. During the District Council period, there were nominated seats in the Councils for which women could be given chance to participate in politics and decision-making. So was the case during the UT period. As of the three nominated seats, one seat had been given to woman member in every government. But after the attainment of statehood, the nominated seats were done away in the Mizoram State Legislature. As a result, there have been only two women legislators so far after statehood that too only after a gap of 27 years. This is due to low status of women in general and politics in particular. It is also well-known that political parties remain reluctant to field female candidates for election unless they are judged potential winners. Although women constitute half of the population, their participation in political life has been neglected all along. Therefore, women should be increasingly involved in the decision-making process at all levels. This involves greater
participation of women in political leadership. The political parties should also realise that the issues pertaining to women are not the issues to be dealt with by women only. They are to be discussed and decided at the national level. The parties must ensure larger proportion of seats at least 33 per cent to women. Reservation of seats in Parliament and Assemblies for women must be ensured through constitutional amendment. Women’s issues should also be included in party manifestos. It has been accepted that the involvement of women in the politics and decision-making is a necessary step for a sound democratic society.

We shall see better days soon and our progress will be greatly accelerated if male education is pursued side by side with female education

—B.R. Ambedkar