Abstract

The concept of democracy has evolved in shape and form spanning centuries, drawing inspiration from the critiques of numerous scholars and practitioners whose writings made people and their acquisitions the frame of reference. A variety of notions and meanings have been attached to the concept of democracy depending on the time, space and context of its application and usage. Despite the variations attached to its meaning, democracy embodies the ideal that decisions affecting a collective as a whole should be taken by all its members, and that they should each have equal rights to take part in such decisions. Democracy thus entails the twin principle of popular control over collective decision making and equality of rights in the exercise of that control.

The Khasi traditional system of governance prides itself and has been lauded by its advocates as being democratic in nature and practice, involving the maximum number of the collective. This acumen of deliberation and consensus permeates even to the smallest interactive unit of Khasi society, the family. In Khasi tradition the clan, *ka kur*, is considered to be the oldest institution through which other structures of socio-political organisation emerged. Decisions were arrived at through consensus after thorough deliberation by all the adult male members of the clan. This system of administering common issues concerning related kin groups was later extended to the village, (*ka Shnong*), the commune, (*ka Raid*), and finally the state, (*ka Hima*).

The Khasi traditional political institutions that regulate settled life among the inhabitants have endured the numerous political currents that affected the Khasi Hills (now part of the State of Meghalaya). Though deficient in many democratic attributes yet their existence today is an accepted fact. This paper discusses the concept democracy as practiced by the Khasi of
Meghalaya with special focus on the institution of the *Dorbar Shnong*, that is, the village or local council.

**Keywords:** *Dorbar Shnong* (Village/Local Council), *Rangbah Shnong* (Village/Local Headman), *Syiem* (administrative head), Shillong Municipal Board, Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, traditional political institution

**INTRODUCTION**

The concept of democracy has evolved in shape and form spanning centuries, drawing inspiration from the critiques of numerous scholars and practitioners whose writings made people and their acquisitions the frame of reference. A variety of notions and meanings have been attached to the concept of democracy depending on the time, space and context of its application and usage. Despite the variations attached to its meaning, democracy embodies the ideal that decisions affecting a collective as a whole should be taken by all its members, and that they should each have equal rights to take part in such decisions. Democracy thus entails the twin principle of popular control over collective decision making and equality of rights in the exercise of that control.

Democracy is a system of governing conforming to one elementary principle, that all members are to be treated, under framed guidelines as if they were equally qualified to participate in the process of making decisions about the policies the association will pursue.\(^1\) Democracy is not only a process of governing but is inherently also a system of rights especially the right to effective participation in the decision taking process. Such a right to effective participation is conditioned by the evolved mechanisms of participation.\(^2\)
**OBJECTIVE**

This paper seeks to shift the locus of democracy away from a global discourse to a local discourse where democracy can be witnessed at a microcosm level, that is, at the level of a Khasi village council, *ka dorbar shnong* Khasi.

The paper seeks to examine how various institutionalizing forces have transformed the practise of democracy at the level of the village council thereby necessitating a transformation in the functioning of village council itself. In this journey a gap between the script and practise of democracy has also taken place. This gap has taken various forms - between expectation and outcome, between constitutional design and political experience, between indigenous and import and also between tradition and modernity. This gap has not only been a distortion and deviation but also a source of innovation for democracy, conditioned by necessity, circumstance and experience.

The idea of democracy travelled from Europe to other parts of the world. However, there also existed many elements and practises in pre-colonial societies that could be considered democratic. The existence of *gram sabhas*, village assemblies and village councils are notable examples of such elements and practises. Contemporary discussion on democracy focuses more on the western encounter and has not adequately discussed the pre-colonial experiences. This paper seeks to also examine how such elements and practises of democracy of pre-colonial
societies have survived the political currents of the newer and modern elements and practises of democracy despite inadequacies.

TRADITIONAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS - THE KHASI OF MEGHALAYA

The Khasi are one of the major communities of the State of Meghalaya (the term Khasi is a generic term used to include all the sub-communities of a common Mongoloid race who inhabit the erstwhile Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills). The Khasi today primarily reside in six of the eleven districts of the State – East Jaiñtia Hills District, West Jaiñtia Hills District, East Khasi Hills District, Ri Bhoi District, West Khasi Hills District and South West Khasi Hills District.

An important contribution of the Khasi people to collective life is their traditional political institutions which evolved in the pre-colonial period. These traditional political institutions emerged to bring order to and to regulate settled life among the people. In the case of the Khasi people these traditional political institutions evolved beyond the confines of village settlements to higher settlements and principalities. It is generally accepted that the first waves of migration of the Khasi people to their present habitat occurred in batches. Each batch comprised of a clan, ka kur, and was usually led by the eldest maternal uncle, u Knyi or Rangbah Kur, of the clan. This elder was chosen to be both the head as well as the leader of the clan by all the adult male members of the clan. He was entrusted with the responsibilities of performing the necessary rites and rituals when the clan first settled or appropriated a portion of land. This leader was also vested with both religious and administrative responsibilities. All deliberations must be carried out in clan meetings and all decisions must be arrived at by consensus. As settled clans grew in
number and size, other migrating clans were accommodated into the fold of the original clans thereby paving the way for a more settled life. It is in this phase of polity formation that the village, *ka Shnong*, emerged. The village assumed the role of administering affairs of common concern of all its residents and subjects. Thus, the first phase of polity formation among the Khasi is the village. In the second phase of polity formation, as village settlements grew in size and the art of governance became complex, many villages merged to form a commune, *ka Raid*.

The *Raid* administers subjects of common concern of its constituents. In the third phase of polity formation, as communes grew in size and population, administration also became diverse. The existing authority could not execute its social and political responsibilities. Under such circumstances clans, villages and communes federated to create a state, *ka Hima*.

The English term state is used to identify this highest stage of polity formation because like the state, the *Hima* too has evident features - a demarcated territory, a stratified population, a system of administration and independence, especially in the pre-colonial period. Each phase of polity evolution, that is, the village, the commune and the state, also witnessed the evolution of an intricate set of authorities whose role and responsibilities were circumscribed by an existing council, *ka dorbar*, and council of elders, *ki Bakhraw or ki Tymmen ki San*. The *dorbar* also emerged as a core traditional political institution to manage and administer socio-political affairs of the citizens and residents.

**THE DORBAR SHNONG**

The concept of *dorbar*, that is, the council, is an important part of a Khasi’s collective life. The *dorbar* is closely associated with a Khasi from his hearth to his clan, to his village, commune and even to his state. The Khasi people sit in consultation before taking any collective
decision with regard to administration. The dorbar sits in judgement over cases and concerns brought before it by the citizens and residents relying on the balanced scales of ka riti, that is, the unwritten code of conduct observed and which has been handed down for generations. Every decision taken at the dorbar is considered sacred as the dorbar is God’s council. This observation signifies the reverence the Khasi have for the institution of dorbar.

As mentioned, the village, ka shnong, is the first unit in the polity formation process of the Khasi people. A village reflects that organized and settled human aggregation beyond the confines of a household, family and clan. The village emerges at that stage of polity formation when settled existence requires elaborate rules of conduct to govern the numerous social, political and economic concerns which emerge. The village is composed of the following features:

a) domestic groups as residents – these domestic groups belong to different clans

b) well defined boundaries for residential land – there is also fallow land for economic activities

c) the village is governed and ruled by the dorbar shnong, the village council with a Tymmen Shnong, the headman as its representative.

d) every village also has a proper name thus giving it a distinct identity.

It may be noted that today in an urban environment such as Shillong the nomenclature, village, has been replaced by ‘locality’. The residents of a locality (especially the older localities which were former villages) may include both original settlers (families and clans) as well as recent settlers (new land owners and tenants). The residents may also be of mixed composition,
Khasi as well as non-Khasi. The boundaries that define the territories of these localities have also changed and may include foot-paths, drains and roads - modern civic amenities of an urban environment. Every locality is administered by a *dorbar shnong*, the local council, whose role and responsibilities, like those of the present village councils in a rural environment, have increased manifold.

The *dorbar shnong*, that is, the village/local council is one of the traditional political institutions among the Khasi people which exists at the village level. The *dorbar shnong* comprises of all the adult male residents, *ki Rangbah*, of the village who are permitted to attend *dorbar* meetings. Every *Rangbah* inducted in the village council is a life member. The *dorbar shnong* has as its head a *Tymmen Shnong* or a *Rangbah Shnong*, that is, the village headman entrusted with administrative responsibilities falling within the jurisdiction of the village (the two terms, *Tymmen Shnong* and *Rangbah Shnong* are used interchangeably when referring to the headman. The difference is that they signify age and seniority. If a senior member of the village is the headman he is referred to as *Tymmen Shnong* if a younger member of the village is the headman he is referred to as *Rangbah Shnong*). With the evolution of the *dorbar shnong* along with the *Tymmen Shnong* the evolution of *ka synshar khaddar*, that is, a political system to govern and to rule, in the *shnong* took place.\(^{12}\)

The headman, *Tymmen Shnong / Rangbah Shnong*, functions on the principle of collective decision-making. In exercising his duties and responsibilities he is assisted by a small executive council, comprising of a council of elders, *ki Bakhrarr* or *ki Tymmen ki San*. The *dorbar shnong* meets at least once in a year to discuss matters concerning the village, it may also meet more often depending on necessity. It is the duty of the village/locality headman to convene
the village council meeting. The announcement is made by the village announcer, *u Sangot*, who moves around the village and publicly announces the day of the village council meeting. On the appointed day all the adult male residents are obligated to attend the said meeting. Absence from a village council meeting will invite censure and sanction. At the meeting every adult male member has the right to be heard during the deliberations. The opinion of every member is respected and deliberations can continue till a collective decision is taken. Approval of a decision is indicated by a nod or the raising of hands. Every decision taken at the village council meeting is revered. In conducting himself at the village council meeting every member present must maintain *Ka Akor-Ka Burom*, that is, etiquette and manners. Personal attack by way of words, while disagreeing with viewpoints is a serious violation of etiquette and manners. Members who indulge in such attacks may be suspended or debarred from attending future meetings.

Khasi unwritten of conduct has debarred women from attending and participating in the *dorbar shnong* as well as in the higher *dorbars* of the commune and the state. This instruction has clearly been reflected in a number of tenets. A Khasi tenet states that *ka said ka thew, ka saiñ ka tiah, kiba khia kiba shon ka jong u Rangbah*, that is, deliberations and decisions, planning, administration and policies and the burdens of management belong to the man. Another tenet states, *ka wait, u sum, ka sang, ka barshi, ka kña ka khriam baroh ka jong u rangbah. Ka kynthei tang ka lum ka kynshew, ka tiaar ka dah ka dang*, that is, the weapons of war and the sacerdotal performance belong to the man. The woman is the keeper of the home and the one who prepares and collects the things connected with the rituals. A third tenet states, *ka akor Khasi ka khang ban kynih ka iar kynthei ne said thma ha dorbar*, that is, Khasi tenet forbids a hen to crow or deliberate before the *dorbar.*
THE DORBAR SHNONG IN SHILLONG – A GLIMPSE

A locality in Shillong may be cited as an example to understand how the traditional political institution of dorbar shnong functions in a present environment. The Mission Compound, one of the old localities located in the centre of Shillong, consists of three blocks having about 75 dwellings and a total of 300 households. The local council is called the dorbar shnong Mission Compound. It has a Rangbah Shnong who is assisted by five office bearers – Advisor, Assistant Rangbah Shnong, Secretary, Assistant Secretary and a Treasurer. In addition there are fifteen executive members representing the three blocks. Together, the office bearers and the executive members constitute the Executive Committee of the dorbar shnong Mission Compound. Till today only male residents can become members of the executive committee. A present day village or local council has developed a bureaucratic structure in its organization and composition. The term of all these executive committee members is three years and there is no bar on re-election. The primary functions of the dorbar shnong are to maintain peace and tranquility and to undertake development work in the locality. Providing and maintaining civic amenities to its residents are a primary function of the dorbar shnong. These include construction and maintenance of small roads, footpaths, street lighting, drainage and sewage system and waste disposal. In addition, the dorbar shnong also promotes youth development activities through the Seng Samla, the youth organization of the locality. The Seng Samla in turn promotes the sports activities of the Combine Amateur Club, a club established in 1913 and which was formerly known as the Christian Athletic Club.

The dorbar shnong Mission Compound functions largely on the basis of an unwritten code of conduct though there are some written guidelines. Proceedings of meetings are recorded
and confirmed at every meeting. The *dorbar shnong* convenes two types of meetings – the executive committee meeting and the general meeting, *ka Dorbar Pyllun*. Executive committee meetings are convened frequently as and when the need to hold such meetings arises. They are presided over by the *Rangbah Shnong* and are attended by the office bearers and executive members. The *dorbar pyllun* on the other hand is convened once in a year to present the yearly report of the activities of executive committee and is also presided over by the *Rangbah Shnong*. All Khasi residents of the locality which include both male and female are permitted to attend this general meeting though no fines are imposed for non attendance. A public address system has been installed in the locality and is used for all public announcements.

To perform its duties and to maintain its office the executive committee of the *dorbar shnong* collects and is provided funds from a number of sources. The executive committee receives a monthly contribution from all the residents at fixed rates – `30 from every house owner and from every shop, `20 from every tenant. In addition it receives vehicle parking fees from the designated parking lot as identified by the Shillong Municipal Board (a certain sum of this amount collected is also shared with the Shillong Municipal Board). In addition, the locality also receives funds from the M.P’s. local area development fund, from the M.L.A’s local area development fund and from the Special Urban Works Programme (hereafter SUWP) for undertaking civic amenity works.

The *dorbar shnong* Mission Compound falls under the purview of the Shillong Municipal Board (hereafter SMB) and any matter related to civic amenities must be routed through the Shillong Municipal Board. The monitoring and implementation of all construction work of civic amenities is done by the Shillong Municipal Board while the execution of the work is undertaken
by the *dorbar shnong*. Thus bills of civic works executed in the locality will not be passed by the Shillong Municipal Board unless the *Rangbah Shnong* certifies that the work is complete.

A glimpse of a present day *dorbar shnong* suggests that this institution has been playing a vital role in community life and local administration. The *dorbar shnong* functions on the basis of an unwritten code of conduct though a number of *dorbar shnongs* today also have a set of guidelines. These guidelines emerged from the agenda and minutes of proceedings that the *dorbar shnong* meetings have been recording. The local headman, the *Rangbah Shnong* is no longer a clan based, hereditary and permanent representative of the locality but is today a term based elected representative. In exercising his responsibilities he is assisted by an executive committee also elected for a specific term. The *dorbar shnong* still upholds the practice that all important matters must be decided through consensus. Residents (including Khasi women) who attend *dorbar* speak freely at such meetings and also raise important matters concerning their village or locality. Any affirmative decision is expressed by a show of raised hands or a voice vote. The *dorbar shnong* is also a politically neutral village/local council and its office bearers have no collective affiliation to any political party. Thus political parties and party politics have not been able to influence the functioning of the *dorbar shnong* to a large extent.

**EFFECT OF MODERN GOVERNANCE ON THE DORBAR SHNONG**

The traditional political institution of *dorbar shnong* did not remain isolated from the influence of modern structures of administration. The advent of the British to the Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills in 1824 and the subsequent introduction of newer forms of administration and local government, previously unknown to these pre-colonial societies and the local people, had an impact on their existing traditional political institutions. A further impact was evident after India
achieved its independence and a new Constitution was inaugurated in 1950. The two systems of local government that came in contact with the *dorbar shnong* were the municipal administration introduced in Shillong by the British and the Autonomous District Council formally introduced in the Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills through the application of the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

**MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION AND THE *DORBAR SHNONG***

Municipal administration was introduced by the British in Shillong in 1878. The Shillong Station was then the British district headquarters of the Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills District, having replaced Cherrapunjee as the district headquarters in 1866. In due course, the administrative area of the Shillong Station was extended when neighboring villages (such as Mawkhar and Laban), then under *Hima* Mylliem (the Mylliem state) were included within the Station. Shillong thus became a Municipality on November 26, 1878. The establishment of the Municipality was necessitated by the need to improve local sanitary and hygienic conditions as well as public amenities, a result of the growing urbanization of Shillong, which the existing village councils could not provide.

In due course the territorial jurisdiction of the Shillong Municipality grew, more lands were ceded by the native ruler, the *Syiem* of Mylliem to the British through various agreements and notifications and the functions of this municipality also grew through the implementation of various acts and regulations (such as the Bengal Municipal Act, 1876 and Assam Municipal Act, 1923). Municipal administration was also extended to neighboring villages of Shillong. With the introduction of municipal administration in the municipal areas which were formally villages, the traditional political institution of *dorbar shnong* did not disappear but continued to exist along
with the Shillong Municipal Board. The relationship between the Shillong Municipal Board and the *dorbar shnongs* remained minimal between 1878-1966 except in the form of election of the Ward Commissioners (who were both Khasi as well as non-Khasi members) to the Board and the complaints that the localities may send to the Board. The headmen of the different localities within the jurisdiction of the Shillong Municipal Board formally had no hand either in the administration or legislation of the Shillong Municipality during this period.\(^\text{17}\)

The relationship between the Shillong Municipal Board and the *dorbar shnongs* appeared to have changed after the State of Meghalaya was formed out of the composite State of Assam on January 21, 1972. In 1973 the Shillong Municipal Board was dissolved and since then it has never been reconstituted with elected ward commissioners. Till date the administration of the Shillong Municipal Board is carried out by a Chief Executive Officer (hereafter CEO) appointed by the state government. All municipal work in the localities is being supervised by the *Rangbah Shnongs* in the absence of elected Ward Commissioners. What exists today in Shillong are parallel forms of local governance, the Shillong Municipal Board headed by a CEO and the *dorbar shnongs* in various localities. The Shillong Municipal Board has failed to effectively execute all its mandated responsibilities. Some of these responsibilities especially the civic responsibilities are being executed by the *dorbar shnongs*. This tacit relationship is acceptable to all concerned parties (the residents, the Shillong Municipal Board and the State government) so long as the services are rendered. Local matters relating to sanitation, supply of potable water, disposal of garbage, construction of drains and footpaths, among numerous other matters are referred to the Shillong Municipal Board through the *Rangbah Shnong* of the respective *dorbar shnong*. Any municipal scheme in any particular locality under the Shillong Municipal Board is to be supervised by the headman of the concerned locality.\(^\text{18}\)
Despite this convenient and complementary administrative relationship between a modern and a traditional system of administration there have been serious differences between the Shillong Municipal Board and the dorbar shnongs. The dorbar shnongs have vehemently opposed the Shillong Municipal Board’s attempts to conduct elections for the post of Ward Commissioners to the existing twenty seven wards (the last election for the post of ward commissioners was held in 1966). The argument put forward is that if elections are held most of the posts of ward commissioners will be filled by non-Khasi representatives and this would adversely affect the position of dorbar shnongs as local councils tacitly entrusted with the execution of civic responsibilities. While an acceptable solution evades the present impasse the Shillong Municipal Board continues to execute its urban and civic responsibilities through the Rangbah Shnongs and the dorbar shnongs.

AUTONOMOUS DISTRICT COUNCIL AND THE DORBAR SHNONG

When the Constitution of India was being framed, members of the Constituent Assembly strongly argued in favor of including specific provisions for the tribal people of North East India. Such concerns echoed in the Constituent Assembly debates were primarily guided by three considerations:

a) the necessity to maintain the distinct customs, socio-economic and political culture of the tribal people of the region and to ensure autonomy of the tribal people and to preserve their identities;

b) the necessity to prevent their economic, social and political exploitation by the more advanced neighboring people of the plains;
c) to allow the tribal people to develop and administer themselves according to their own genius.\textsuperscript{19}

When the Constitution of India was enacted and adopted these concerns were reflected in the inclusion of the Sixth Schedule which contained provisions for the administration of tribal areas in North East India (which today includes the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram). The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India provided for the establishment of Autonomous District Councils (hereafter ADCs) in the hill districts (including the Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills District) of the then composite/undivided Assam. The Autonomous District Council was thus an institutional innovation of effecting decentralization of power at the district level covering under its general framework the problems and issues down to the village level as developed by the Constitution of India.\textsuperscript{20} The United Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills Autonomous District Council was inaugurated on June 27, 1952 by the Governor of Assam. It comprised the entire geographical area (except the municipality and cantonment areas of Shillong) of the erstwhile Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills District. For the first time all the Khasi states and former British areas were brought together under one single system of constitutional administration. This also meant that all communes (\textit{ki raid}), villages and localities (\textit{ki shnong}) outside the Shillong Municipality came under this constitutional administration. Today there exists three ADCs in Meghalaya, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (hereafter KHADC), the Jaiñtia Hills Autonomous District Council (hereafter JHADC) and the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (hereafter GHADC).

Under the Sixth Schedule and the Assam Autonomous District (Constitution of District Councils) Rules, 1951 the ADCs are empowered to make laws on a number of subjects. In
exercise of its powers the KHADC (whose territorial and administrative jurisdiction extends over the East Khasi Hills District, Ri Bhoi District, West Khasi Hills District and South West Khasi Hills District) has enacted several laws and rules. A number of these laws and rules have a direct impact on the existing traditional political institutions. The United Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills Autonomous District (Appointment and Succession of Chiefs and Headmen) Act, 1959\(^1\) laid down detailed provisions for the appointment, conduct and removal of these traditional authorities including the village headmen. Today, in areas falling under the administration of the KHADC the *Rangbah Shnong* and his executive committee are to be elected on the basis of existing customs and practices prevailing in the particular locality or village. The election of the headman must be confirmed by the Chief (*Syiem*) and his *dorbar* of the particular Khasi state, where the locality or village falls, through the issue of a *sanad* (letter of appointment). Any dispute in such an election shall be referred to the Chief and his *dorbar*. An appeal against the decision of the Chief and his *dorbar* may be made to the Executive Committee of the KHADC. On the other hand, The United Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills Autonomous District (Administration of Justice) Rules, 1953\(^2\) provided for the constitution of three classes of courts – Village Courts; Subordinate District Council Courts and Additional Subordinate District Council Courts; and District Council Courts. The village court comprises of the *Rangbah Shnong* and a number of functionaries. The *Rangbah Shnong* functions as the Chairman, another functionary as Vice Chairman and a third as Secretary. The village court is empowered to try both civil and criminal cases of a petty nature falling within its jurisdiction.

The traditional political institutions of the Khasi people evolved out of their own genius and necessity. They were compelled to adapt and change in some of their functionaries and functions by circumstances over which they had little control. The British found traditional
political institutions appropriate instruments to execute an indirect administration in the Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills. When the Constitution of India came into force on January 26, 1950 all the existing traditional political institutions were constitutionally reconciled to the provisions of the Sixth Schedule. The inauguration of the Autonomous District Council imposed a new constitutional authority over these traditional political institutions. In enacting several laws to protect and maintain the identity of the tribal people the Autonomous District Council also affected certain changes in the composition and functioning of these traditional political institutions. Such changes aimed to usher in a greater degree of responsibility and responsiveness of these traditional political institutions to adjust themselves to a modern, structured and integrated political framework entrusted with the task of bringing democracy closer to people.

The dorbar shnongs today are under the supervision of two administrative frameworks of local self government – the Shillong Municipality in the urban, municipal designated areas (except cantonment areas) of Shillong, and the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council in the urban, non-municipal, non-cantonment designated areas of Shillong and in all the areas outside Shillong but which fall in the four districts (the East Khasi Hills District, Ri Bhoi District, West Khasi Hills District and South West Khasi Hills District) of the State of Meghalaya. The dorbar shnongs continue to exercise their role and responsibilities without formal recognition in many respects. The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, though empowered by the Sixth Schedule, has not passed a law to regulate and streamline village and town administration. The Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Village Administration) Bill, 2011 prepared by the KHADC if passed will codify the existing customs and practices followed in this traditional political institution while simultaneously engaging it to assume new responsibilities in a modern environment.
CONCLUSION

Despite the attention and marvel that Khasi democracy has received, it cannot be denied that Khasi democracy today functions under basic flaws. Khasi tradition had carefully constructed a notion debarring women from any participation that involves governance and administration. This view has been aptly summed in another Khasi tenet that states the crowing of the hen will signify the end of the world. Hence, a woman’s participation ultimately limits her within the confines of her familial abode. Today dorbar shnonggs continuously cite tradition as the excuse for debarment. A visible but miniscule change has occurred in urban centred localities. Women in some localities in Shillong attend dorbar and are also included in the executive committees of the dorbar shnong. Laitumkhrah, Nongrim Hills and Lachumiere dorbars include women in their executive committees. There are also some women organizations such as Ka Seng Lonkmie (Mother’s Association) and Ka Seng Kynthei (Women’s Organizations) in various localities which send two representatives (normally the president and the general secretary) to the executive committee of the local council. In some localities women are now represented in the territorial and administrative sub-divisions of these localities. A number of these localities are divided into sub-localities/blocks, ki Dong, with each dong having its own administrative head, u Rangbah Dong and a small executive committee. Women in a number of such dongs have been elected to their respective executive committees. Each dong is required to send a number of representatives to the executive committee of the shnong. Surprisingly, at this stage of representation, none of the women are recommended to the higher
body, that is the executive committee of the *shnong*. It is clear that it is the process of nomination and not direct election which sends women as representatives to the *dorbar* of either the *dong* or the *shnong*.

Khadi democracy was not completely representative as it has been perceived to be. Exclusive privileges were enjoyed by the original clans (those clans that were considered to be the earliest that occupied, settled, and appropriated a particular area) who played a crucial role in the emergence of the *shnong*. These clans were represented in the *dorbar shnong* and from among them was chosen the *Rangbah Shnong* whose office in due course became hereditary and lifetime. These clans came to represent little oligarchies in the various Khasi states wielding unsurpassed power in determining the course of events in their respective states. It has been argued that the *dorbars* are not held at regular intervals in many *shnongs* thereby denying the Khasi residents the opportunity to put forward their grievances and suggestions for the betterment of their surroundings. The income and expenditure of the *dorbar shnongs* and the *Rangbah Shnongs* are not subject to financial audit thereby leaving this vast area of financial accountability open to manipulation and misappropriation.

Today urban localities represent a pluralist population. However, communities other than the Khasi are debarred from attending meetings of the *dorbar shnong*, having no say in the affairs of the *shnong*, where decisions arrived at ‘in their interest’ are dictated upon them. The only meeting that non-Khasis may be permitted to attend is a *dorbar shnong* where matters discussed have some relevance to them (such as allocation of shops, tenancy rights, peace and tranquillity). In the past it was not unusual to find both Khasi and non-Khasi people sharing responsibility as executive members of these local *dorbars*. One of the major losses of this
pluralistic habitat was the tolerant and liberal character of the *dorbar shnong* especially after Shillong became increasingly marginalised into tribal and non-tribal pockets.\(^{24}\)

At a certain stage of polity formation Khasi democracy becomes indirect. Due to increase in population, area and jurisdiction of the Khasi state, and constraints in mobility of the citizens, that is, *ki khun ki hajar*, contentious issues could not be openly discussed and debated in the presence of all inhabitants. Hence members from certain original clans in the village, commune and state are chosen to represent their respective areas in highest decision making body of the state, the general assembly or *Dorbar Hima* as well as in the electoral college which elects the *Syiem*.

The election of the *Syiem* is the prerogative of a few privileged original clans. The *dorbar* at the village level is precluded from performing this important function. It is ironical to note that a system of governance so elaborately defined and lauded by its proponents vests electoral powers only within a selected few who in turn elect their administrative head only from one single pre-ordained, ‘divine’ clan thereby perpetuating heredity and dynastic rule. Thus the evolution of Khasi polity exhibits a blend of features of a variety of systems of administration: democracy, limited monarchy, federalism, oligarchy and republicanism, discernible at different stages in the polity development but firmly enveloped within the gamut of patriarchy.

Democracy is that lifeline which can inject a political revivalism into the *dorbar shnongs* whose practices of yore are in urgent need of revitalization. To maintain reverence and continuity as distinct traditional political institutions clearly identifiable with the Khasi people, *dorbar shnongs* urgently need to inculcate and accommodate democratic practises commensurate
with those practised and enjoyed by citizens within the legal framework of the Indian Constitution.

The crux of the problem today is the existence of two parallel systems of administration – one mandated by the provisions of the Constitution of India and the other by the sanctity of tradition. Where the constitutional system of administration fails to execute its civic responsibilities the traditional political institution fills the lacuna.

In a modern society, organizing democratic institutions involves coming to terms with tradition, traditional practices and traditional social spaces. The constitutionally organized democratic institutions (the Shillong Municipal Board and the Autonomous District Council) did not abandon tradition and traditional practices but rather upheld them. However, they did not strengthen the traditional social spaces and the traditional political institutions. The ADCs did not frame rules for the effective functioning of the *dorbar shnongs* except for the appointment and succession and judicial functions of the *Rangbah Shnong* and the executive committees. Similarly the Meghalaya Municipal Act, 1973 does not legally recognize *dorbar shnongs* though most of the civic responsibilities are executed by them. Urbanization has brought out the complexities in human needs which the administrative capabilities of the *dorbar shnongs* are not able to handle. Similarly, the structural, financial and professional composition of the constitutionally organized democratic institutions falls short of the ability to handle such complexities. What is required is the convergence of the positive contributions of both the local systems of governance. It is equally important that the state government takes committed and affirmative measures to develop institutional designs to address these challenges and to evolve a durable response in order to keep the promise of democracy aloft.
Footnotes

2 Ibid.
6 Lyngdoh, C. R. (2009), *op.cit*.
7 Ibid.
14 Interview with Shri D. War, Secretary, Dorbar Shnong Mission Compound on July 26, 2012.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
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**Interviews**
Interview with Shri D. War, Secretary, *Dorbar Shnong* Mission Compound on July 26, 2012.