

Electoral Participation Of Garo Tribes In Meghalaya-A Study Of 2023 Legislative Assembly Election

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Abstract

Meghalaya held a single-phase Legislative Assembly election on February 27, 2023, with 85.2% polling. The Garos are the second largest ethnic groups in Meghalaya, making up 30% of the state's population. Historically, Garos played a significant role in the state electoral politics. In 2023 Legislative Assembly Election, the total no. of votes cast in Garo Hills Assembly Constituency is 698101 out of 1856502. This research article aims to study factors that contributed to the high electoral participation of Garo tribes in Meghalaya, it also studies the strong sense of community and identity among the Garos, the high level of education among the Garos. Lastly, the Garos have a long history of political activism. There are a number of other factors which include, the level of economic development in the region, the quality of governance, and the level of political awareness among the Garos. This ensures the Garo tribes representation in the state government. The research adopts descriptive and documentary analysis.

Keywords: *Electoral Participation, Political Awareness, Tribes, Voting.*

Introduction

The democracy in India is the most extensive in the entire planet. Elections are held in a significant nation such as India. Indian citizens make use of their constitutional right to vote and select representatives to serve on various governmental bodies. The Democratic Republic of India are thriving and flourishing today. Voting is the single most important thing one can do to help ensure democracy to flourish. Electoral participation refers to the involvement of eligible citizens in the electoral process, which includes activities such as registering to vote, casting a ballot, and engaging in political activities. It is a crucial aspect of a democratic society as it reflects the level of citizen engagement and the well being of the democratic process. High electoral participation is generally seen as a positive indicator of a vibrant democracy, while low participation may raise concerns about representation and legitimacy. (Bhalla, 1973)

According to the 2011 census the state of Meghalaya has a total population of 29.7 lakh people. {Statistical Hand Book of Meghalaya, 2017}. Meghalaya, known for its diverse ethnic communities, including the Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia tribes, conducts regular legislative assembly elections to elect representatives to the state legislature. The Garo tribe, concentrated

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mainly in the western regions of Meghalaya, has a rich cultural heritage and a history of active participation in state politics. This population was distributed among three major tribes and a few minor tribes. The Khasis, the Jaintias, and the Garos are considered to be some of the more important ones, while the Hajong, the Rabha, and the Koch are considered to be some of the more minor ones. In addition, elections for the Legislative Assembly take place in Meghalaya once every five years. In March 1972, Meghalaya held its first Legislative Assembly election after being recognized as a state of India. Despite having achieved statehood for over 40 years, politics in Meghalaya continue to be heavily influenced by concerns of identity and fear of 'other' domination, as evidenced by public discourse (Ambagudia & Xaxa, 2020).

The North Eastern Areas (Re-organization) Act of 1971 established the State Legislative Assembly of Meghalaya as a unicameral legislature with a total of sixty assembly constituencies. Seven of these assembly constituencies were drawn from the Jaintia Hills District, twenty-nine from the Khasi Hills Districts, and twenty-four from the Garo Hills Districts. (Tariang, n.d.)

The Garo tribes, one of the prominent indigenous communities in Meghalaya, have played a significant role in the state's political landscape (Yadav, 2012). The 2023 Legislative Assembly Election in Meghalaya provided an opportunity to examine the electoral participation of the Garo tribes and understand the dynamics that influence their political engagement. This study aims to shed light on the extent of Garo tribal participation in the election, the factors influencing their choices, and the implications of their involvement in the democratic process. The Garo tribes voted for various parties such as NPEP, AITC, INC, BJP, UDP etc. but the National People's Party (NPEP) emerged as the clear winner, winning 18 seats in the Garo Hills region. The NPP's victory was attributed to a number of factors, including its strong organization in the Garo Hills region, its focus on development issues, and its appeal to young voters ("Meghalaya Election Results 2023 Highlights," 2023).

Research objective

- To study the significance of 2023 Legislative Assembly Election in Garo Hills of Meghalaya.

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive and documentary analysis utilizing qualitative data which is generated through an interview schedule. The sources are gathered from official government publications from Meghalaya, as well as secondary data from books, research articles, journals, magazines and internet sources.

Election in Garo Hills: An Insight

The Garo Hills District is located in the Indian state of Meghalaya, primarily in the western part of the state. The region is home to the Garo tribe, an indigenous community with a rich cultural heritage. The geographical terrain of Garo Hills is characterized by lush green forests, rolling hills, and numerous rivers and streams. The population is diverse, with people belonging to various ethnicities, but the majority are Garos. It has an area that is 8,167 square miles in total (The Garos, With A New Introd. By Parimal Chandra Kar|Playfair, A | 9788185319780, n.d.). The Garo community, which comprises of 1,103,542 population, holds the prestigious position of being the second most populous tribe in Meghalaya. This statistic was recorded during the 2011 census, where a total of 558,552 males and 544,990 females were accounted

for, contributing to the overall population count (Meghalaya Statistics Handbook, n.d.)

Garo Hills is not only known for its stunning landscapes but also for its vibrant political landscape. Elections in Garo Hills, like in many other parts of the country, play a pivotal role in shaping the destiny of the region and its people. This article provides an insight into the electoral process, political dynamics, and significance of elections in Garo Hills.

The Electoral Process:

Elections in Garo Hills, like elsewhere in India, follow a democratic process. They occur at various levels, including local, state, and national elections. The key aspects of the electoral process in Garo Hills are as follows:

Local Elections: Local elections in Garo Hills involve the election of representatives to village councils (known as 'Durbars'), municipal bodies, and district councils. These elections play a crucial role in local governance and development.

State Elections: Meghalaya, the state to which Garo Hills belongs, conducts assembly elections every five years. The region has several assembly constituencies, and voters elect their representatives to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly.

National Elections: Garo Hills is part of the Tura Lok Sabha constituency, and residents participate in general elections to elect their Member of Parliament (MP) who represents them in the Indian Parliament. These elections are held every five years.

Political Dynamics: The political dynamics in Garo Hills are shaped by a combination of tribal identity, regional aspirations, and socio-economic factors. Some key factors influencing the political landscape include:

Tribal Identity: Garo Hills is home to the Garo tribe, and tribal identity plays a significant role in politics. Political parties often align themselves with tribal interests and seek to represent the aspirations of the indigenous population.

Developmental Issue: Like many other regions in India's northeast, Garo Hills faces development challenges. Issues such as infrastructure development, education, healthcare, and job opportunities are crucial in electoral debates.

Local Leadership: The region has seen the emergence of local leaders who champion the cause of their communities. These leaders often bridge the gap between tribal customs and modern governance.

Significance of Elections in Garo Hills:

Elections in Garo Hills hold immense significance for the region's development and its people's future. Some key points illustrating this significance are:

Representation: Elections provide an opportunity for the people of Garo Hills to elect representatives who can voice their concerns and advocate for their interests at the local, state, and national levels.

Policy Priorities: The outcome of elections determines the policy priorities of the elected representatives, which directly impact the region's development, infrastructure, and socio-economic well-being.

Empowerment: Elections empower the local communities to have a say in their governance, ensuring that their unique cultural and tribal identities are respected and protected.

Elections in Garo Hills are a vital aspect of the region's socio-political fabric. They provide an avenue for the people to shape their destiny, safeguard their cultural heritage, and strive for a better future. The political dynamics of this picturesque region are a reflection of the diverse and vibrant tapestry of India's democratic landscape. As Garo Hills continues to evolve, its electoral processes will remain central to its growth and development.

Discussion and Findings

The outcomes of the numerous elections that take place in Meghalaya are mostly determined by the votes cast by members of the Garo tribes. The voting role of the Garo Tribe in the state has developed into the most important of any of the state's many different tribal or ethnic groups. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of and provide an explanation for the level of electoral participation among the Garo Tribes in Meghalaya. The political engagement of Garo tribe voters is the primary topic of this investigation, and it is being researched in order to determine the significance of the Garo tribe in the electoral politics of Meghalaya. The participatory philosophy of democracy, which allows participation from all sides and seeks to improve the people by involving them in the decision-making process, is being utilized in the investigation of the electoral activities of the Garo tribe at the moment.

After numerous rounds of counting, Conrad Sangma's National People's Party emerged as the victor of the Meghalaya elections, gaining 26 of the 60 seats. The Congress won five seats, while the BJP, which had previously formed an alliance with the NPEP but opted to fight the elections alone and compete in all 60 constituencies, won two. The remaining seats were shared among independents and other parties. As Conrad Sagma's NPEP fell short of a majority by six votes, BJP national president J P Nadda asked the saffron party's state unit to back the NPEP in forming the government in Meghalayas (Meghalaya Election Result 2023 Live Updates, n.d.)

The data collected by the researcher shows the elected candidates in Garo Hills District of Meghalaya. The main important parties of Garo Hills District are NPEP, AITC, INC, UDP, GNC, BJP and others. The total number of Garo Hills District has 24 constituencies. They are: Kharkutta (ST), Mendipathar (ST), Resubelpara (ST), Bajengdoba (ST), Songsak (ST), Rongjeng (ST), Williamnagar (ST), Raksamgre (ST), Tikrikilla (ST), Phulbari (Gen), Rajabala (Gen), Selsella (ST), Dadenggre (ST), North Tura (ST), South Tura (ST), Rangsakona (ST), Ampati (ST), Mahendraganj (ST), Salmanpara (ST), Gambegre (ST), Dalu (ST), RongaraSiju (ST), Chokpot (ST), Baghmara (ST).

Table: 1 Elected Candidates of Garo Hills District in 2023 Assembly Election in Meghalaya

Constituency	Party	Name	Vote polled	(%) vote
Kharkutta	NPEP	Rupert Momin	17426	47.03
Mendipathar	NPEP	Marthon J Sangma	9363	37.56
Resubelpara	NPEP	Timothy D. Shira	10948	41.3

Bajengdoba	NPEP	Pongseng Marak	9900	34.23
Songsak	AITC	Dr. Mukul Sangma	12689	44.51
Rongjeng	NPEP	Jim M Sangma	8836	29.32
Williamnagar	NPEP	Marcuise N Marak	10976	36.9
Raksamgre	NPEP	Limison D. Sangma	12184	44.06
Tikrikilla	NPEP	Jimmy D. Sangma	13218	41.42
Phulbari	NPEP	Abu Taher Mondal	14969	50.64
Rajabala	AITC	Dr. Mizanur Rahman	12628	37.89
Selsella	NPEP	Arbinstone B Marak	16595	49.86
Dadenggre	AITC	Rupa M. Marak	15702	47.92
North Tura	NPEP	Thomas A. Sangma	11386	42.34
South Tura	NPEP	Conrad Kongkal Sangma	13342	52.04
Rangsakona	NPEP	Subir Marak	13605	41.72
Ampati	AITC	Miami D. Shira	13446	44.69
Mahendraganj	NPEP	Sanjay A. Sangma	13560	41.25
Salmanpara	NPEP	Ian Botham K. Sangma	11352	41.84
Gambegre	INC	Saleng A. Sangma	11252	39.57
Dalu	NPEP	Brening A. Sangma	5834	30.8
Rongara Siju	NPEP	Rakkam A. Sangma	11569	39.31
Chokpot	NPEP	Sengchim N.Sangma	9503	33.33
Baghmara	IND	Kartush R. Marak	9013	30.9
Total			289,296	

Source: Election Commission of India, State Election, 2023 to the Legislative Assembly of Meghalaya.

The data presented in the table above makes it abundantly evident that a great number of political parties participated in the election process in Meghalaya in 2023. The pool of candidates included a wide variety of experiences and perspectives. The number of votes that were invalidated exhibited an upward trend when compared to the votes that were invalidated in the elections that came before. The participation of women was another factor that entered the picture. According to the information presented above, a candidate from South Tura named Conrad Kongkal Sangma received 52.04% which is the highest vote in Garo Hills as well as in

Meghalaya while a candidate representing NPEP in Phulbari received 50.64% of the vote. In a similar vein, each and every person that won the election in their respective constituency is listed above in a plain and concise fashion.

Table: 2 Results of the Garo Hills District Assembly Election in Meghalaya's 2023 election, showing party affiliations and seat allocation

Political Parties	Party Type	Number of Contestants	Seat Won	Voters polled	Votes (%)
NPEP	National Party	24	18	279475	40.03%
AITC	National Party	24	4	194984	27.93%
INC	National Party	24	1	65923	9.44%
BJP	National Party	24	0	90806	13.01%
UDP	State Party	16	0	16897	2.42%
JD(U)	State Party	3	0	1025	0.15%
GNC	Registered (Unrecognized) Party	2	0	9348	1.34%
GNASURKP	Registered (Unrecognized) Party	1	0	1375	0.2%
RPI	Registered (Unrecognized) Party	6	0	1960	0.28%
INDEPENDENTS		17	1	36308	5.2%
Total				698101	

Source: Election Commission of India, State Election, 2023 to the legislative Assembly of Meghalaya.

The candidates who contested in election in the 2023 legislative assembly election are listed in Table 2 above. In the year 2023, the total number of voter turnout in Garo Hills Districts is 698101 out of 808304. The political system in India is multiparty and operates under the scope of federalism. Numerous political parties in India, which is home to the largest democratic population in the world, adhere to a variety of political philosophies. There was a significant increase in the number of regional parties across the states of India. The number of political parties and independent candidates who ran in this election is detailed in the table that can be found above. The total number of votes cast and the composition of the political parties are the other two primary aspects that are displayed in the table that was just presented.

Factors of Electoral Participation in Garo Hills:

There are a number of factors that may have contributed to the high voter turnout among the Garo tribes in the 2023 election. These include:

- The increasing awareness of the importance of voting among the Garo tribes.

- The growing dissatisfaction with the performance of the previous government.
- The strong campaign by the NPP and other parties to mobilize voters.
- The improvement in the security situation in the Garo Hills region.

Challenges to electoral participation of Garo tribes in Meghalaya

Here are some of the challenges to electoral participation of the Garo tribes in Meghalaya:

- **Lack of awareness:** Many Garo tribes people are not aware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. They may not know how to register to vote or how to cast their votes.
- **Distance:** Many Garo tribes people live in remote areas, which can make it difficult for them to travel to polling stations.
- **Transportation:** Lack of transportation can also make it difficult for Garo tribes people to travel to polling stations.
- **Security:** There have been reports of violence and intimidation during elections in Meghalaya. This can discourage Garo tribes people from voting.
- **Discrimination:** Some Garo tribes people have faced discrimination from other ethnic groups. This can discourage them from participating in the political process.

These challenges can be addressed by raising awareness of the importance of voting among the Garo tribes, improving transportation infrastructure in remote areas, and ensuring a safe and secure environment for elections. The government and civil society can also work to address discrimination against the Garo tribes.

Findings:

High Voter Turnout: The 2023 Legislative Assembly Election witnessed a high voter turnout among the Garo tribes, reflecting their commitment to the democratic process. Factors contributing to this turnout may include awareness campaigns, efforts by political parties, and community mobilization.

Issue-based Voting: Many Garo voters emphasized issue-based considerations in their voting choices, indicating a growing interest in policies and governance. Local development, education, healthcare, and infrastructure emerged as significant concerns.

Influence of Traditional Leaders: Traditional Garo leaders, such as Nokmas and headmen, continued to play a crucial role in guiding community members' electoral decisions. Their endorsement of specific candidates or parties often carried substantial weight.

Political Alliances: The study observed various political alliances and coalition formations that sought to cater to the interests of the Garo tribes. These alliances aimed to address community-specific issues and concerns.

Youth Participation: An increased involvement of Garo youth in the electoral process was noted. This generation showed a willingness to embrace change and push for new leadership and ideas.

Suggestions for increasing electoral participation of Garo Tribes

Participation in elections is typically thought of as being synonymous with modern forms of democracy. Within the context of this political system, individual participation in political action is regarded as an admirable quality, an indicator of the state of the political system, and the most effective way to protect one's own private interests. Participation affords individuals the chance to articulate their individual perspectives and work toward the realization of the greatest possible benefit for the largest possible number of people. It teaches both the rulers and the ruled about the duties and responsibilities that come with their respective positions, and it makes for a more comprehensive understanding of politics. It gives citizens a sense of dignity and value. Participation, which involves incorporating individuals in the business of the state, improves stability and order in the system by involving people. It not only encourages citizens to learn about politics but also instils a sense of responsibility in them. It not only broadens one's political awareness but also their perception of their own political usefulness.

Conclusion

The election process is the embodiment of political liberty. Of particular relevance is the fact that it is the instrument that places power in the hands of ordinary people. Without it, democracy in all likelihood would not be able to function properly. People need to awaken to the importance of elections and vote in big numbers for it to have any meaning. In India, elections are celebrated as a festival of democracy since they are held on the day that bestow upon the people the great ability to exercise their right to vote, which has the potential to alter the course of a nation's history.

The Election is also a platform on which a voter sees a fresh light of hope for strengthening the nation and nation-building. This hope is based on the voter's participation in the Election. In recent years, participation as a method has emerged as a central component of the majority of development initiatives. As a consequence, it is anticipated that this will result in the marginalized, particularly women, being included in the distribution of political power and in the control of resources. The time has come to actually facilitate the realization and acquisition of equal power, right, and political remuneration by integrating a critical mass of women and the marginalized as participants and as beneficiaries. This is necessary in order to bring about equal power, right, and political remuneration.

Every citizen, male and female, from every imaginable history and circumstance, must be effectively guaranteed equal right within the national political processes, and they must be enabled to participate in those processes even if they are confronted with obstacles that impede the progression of social justice. It is necessary to implement affirmative action measures such as the quota system in order to give women and other marginalized people the ability to be effective in bringing about equity and equality, as well as to improve the nature of governance and decision-making in all sectors in order to bring about a qualitative change and transformation in social justice.

The electoral participation of the Garo tribes in the 2023 Legislative Assembly Election in Meghalaya is indicative of their commitment to democracy and their desire to address pressing issues facing their community. As this study demonstrates, the political engagement of indigenous communities in democratic processes can have far-reaching implications for governance, development, and representation in the state. Further research and continued

dialogue with these communities are essential to ensuring their voices are heard and their needs addressed in the political arena. The high voter turnout among the Garo tribes in the 2023 election is a positive sign for democracy in Meghalaya. It shows that the Garo tribes are interested in participating in the political process and that they are willing to hold their elected representatives accountable.

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