

Leadership and Political Participation of Garo Youth in Meghalaya: Empowering the Future Generation

Sangma, Bijime M.¹ and Varma, S. Suchitra²

¹Research Scholar, ²Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science & Public Administration, Annamalai University Annamalai
Nagar, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Leadership and political participation of Garo youth in the northeastern state of Meghalaya are a significant demographic, making up over 40% of the Meghalaya state's population in India. The Garo community, one of the most prominent indigenous tribes in the region, has experienced significant cultural transformations over the years, but the preservation of their unique heritage and values remains crucial. Moreover, it also discusses the impact of youth participation and leadership on the overall development of Meghalaya, considering the perspectives of sustainable development, community cohesion, and cultural preservation. By incorporating the voices of Garo youth, they themselves provide an authentic and inclusive view of their aspirations, challenges, and visions for the future. The objectives of the research article are, firstly, to examine the role of Garo youth in actively engaging in social, political, and economic activities, as well as their growing involvement in leadership roles within their communities. Secondly, this research aims to identify the barriers that hinder the full potential of Garo youth and suggest potential solutions for enhanced empowerment. Thirdly, the study aims to explore effective measures and policy interventions that can enhance Garo youth engagement and leadership, thus contributing to the overall development and prosperity of the community while fostering a sense of pride and ownership among the youth for their cultural heritage and identity. This research article adopts descriptive-analytical and qualitative methods. The study is based on secondary sources such as magazines, books, articles, newspapers, and online resources related to the topic. The delimitation

of the present study is that it focuses only on youth political participation in the Garo Hills of the State of Meghalaya.

Keywords: *Political Participation; Leadership; Empowerment; Sustainable Development.*

Introduction

Youth political participation and leadership are essential components of empowering the future generation and fostering a thriving democratic society. (Mitrayani & Peel, 2000). Engaging young people in politics and leadership roles brings numerous benefits that contribute to a more inclusive, informed, and progressive political landscape. The varied methods by which youth are nourished determine the evolution of society. The young generation is a crucial factor in the development of human resources, and they have the capacity to bring about significant changes in society, contribute to economic growth, and introduce innovative technologies. In order to ensure the future success of society, it is crucial to adequately equip the younger generation with the necessary skills and mindset to take on roles as leaders, protectors, supporters, innovators, and caretakers of the state by catering to their individual requirements and aspirations. In

order to acknowledge and address the issue, the government intends to devise and execute a range of purposeful actions that concentrate on multiple crucial factors that influence young people. This initiative aims to ensure that every youth is provided with an environment that fosters growth, enabling them to flourish and succeed as active, responsible, and efficient contributors to society. By doing so, the government hopes to create a supportive framework that empowers young individuals to reach their full potential. (“Youth Participation in Political Activities,” 2020)

Young people represent a constructive force with enormous potential to transform society. Nonetheless, as individuals traverse the crucial phase of transitioning from childhood dependence to adult autonomy and responsibility, they are exposed to various forms of vulnerability. Youth in Garo Hills, Meghalaya, are exposed to a dissimilar and perplexing environment compared to their preceding generations because of the impact of

globalization and the rapid dissemination of mass media, a shifting global financial system, worldwide violence, and the escalating accessibility of drugs and alcohol. Youths are more inclined to encounter significant socio-economic predicaments, such as joblessness, meagre earnings, physical and sexual assault, drug dependency, criminality, brutality, and a wide variety of health concerns, with females being the most affected. Given the numerous obstacles that children encounter, concerted effort is required to develop, implement, and assess youth initiatives so that the younger generation can have a future that is a matter of choice, not chance. The Ministry of Youth and Sports Affairs of the Government of India defines youth between the ages of 15 and 29 years, whereas the United Nations Youth Strategy classifies youth between the ages of 15 and 24 years. The National Youth Policy defines youth as being between the ages of 15 and 29. According to the latest estimates, this age group comprises around 11 lakh people and accounts for 30.6 percent of the total population of the state. (Government of Meghalaya, Meghalaya Youth Policy, 2021)

In the picturesque state of Meghalaya, the Garo community boasts a rich cultural heritage and a vibrant history. (Gassah, 1984). As the state navigates through the challenges of the modern era, there arises a critical concern about the level of active youth participation and leadership among the Garo population. This dearth of youth engagement not only affects the overall development of the community but also raises questions about the sustainability and empowerment of the future generation. (*Youth as a Critical Constituency of Meghalaya - The Shillong Times*, n.d.)

The problem at hand revolves around the underrepresentation of Garo youth in decision-making processes, community development initiatives, and leadership roles. A myriad of factors contributes to this issue, hindering the growth and progress of the community and its young members. The lack of Garo youth in political spheres results in inadequate representation of their interests and concerns. As a result, policies and initiatives that directly affect their lives are formulated without their active input, leading to potential disconnect and discontentment among the youth. (Sangma, 2018)

These issues are contrasted with those of the rich class, which benefits from different initiatives and possibilities. The government's primary interest has been the development of the tribal people, and a variety of projects have been devised and executed. Nonetheless, the Garo Hills remain one of the state's most backward regions, behind the rest of the nation (Thyrniang, 2014). Today, the Garo Hills lack a conducive socio-economic environment for overall growth. The region's demographic picture, economic condition, political position, cultural status, and social atmosphere have all evolved swiftly and grown more complicated. The Garo Hills have been plagued by insurrection and upheaval for many years. The insurgency has brought new and crucial elements to society's sociopolitical, cultural, educational, economic, and other challenges. Despite the state's ongoing conflict, Achik youngsters are notorious. As a consequence, not only its economy but also its social aspects are eroding.

Those who hold a university degree but lack employment, those who are relocating from rural to urban areas, and those who have faced discrimination or

mistreatment from locals or authorities are especially at risk and susceptible to harm. These young people have few options for constructive participation and hence serve as a ready pool of recruitment for extremist organizations. Young people are unquestionably the worst victims, whether they are participants or victims in violent confrontations. (Draft Meghalaya Youth Policy, 2012)

The Meghalaya Human Development Report 2008 reveals that Meghalaya is lagging behind most other states in terms of development, thereby causing the state to fall behind in almost all areas (Bhavan & Mooshahary, 2008). The reason for this may be the lack of participation from the younger generation in the development process. However, if the labor force participation and productivity of adolescents are increased, there is great potential to enhance their contribution. (National Youth Policy, 2014). Youth play a significant role in contributing to the socioeconomic development of the community. This necessitates efforts to reduce their problems so that they can contribute more constructively and productively to the advancement of society and themselves. (Marak, 2000)

Addressing these challenges is crucial to empowering the future generation of the Garo community in Meghalaya. To ensure sustainable development and inclusive growth, it is imperative to devise strategies that promote active youth participation, remove barriers to leadership roles, and nurture an environment that supports the aspirations and ambitions of the Garo youth. (*Yess Meghalaya Rolled out in Garo Hills; to Empower Youth for Productive Engagement through Different Activities - Hub News, n.d.*)

The Meghalaya Youth Engagement and Training Programmes were initiated in all districts on March 14th, commencing with the Meghalaya @ 50 Youth Survey. The primary objective of this survey is to gather the opinions and perspectives of the youth, which will provide valuable insights for the state to enhance its youth development strategies. These strategies will be designed to align with the aspirations and sentiments of the youth. The project is a collaborative effort between the Government of Meghalaya's Department of Sports and Youth Affairs and the Education Department's Directorate of School Education and Literacy (DSEL). AVENUES, a social enterprise based in Meghalaya, is

responsible for implementing this initiative. This initiative marks a significant milestone in Meghalaya's history as it is the largest on-ground youth engagement activity to date, and it is also the first of its kind in Northeast India. The Aspire Meghalaya 2.0 initiative is a prominent program of the Meghalaya Young Engagement and Training Programmes. Its primary objective is to enhance the aspirations, job readiness, and overall preparedness of the youth. In order to kickstart the initial phase of this program, orientation sessions were conducted simultaneously in various districts. These sessions were attended by more than 550 teachers, representing over 290 campuses. Their role was to assist in conducting the Youth Survey on the ground, spanning across 12 districts. The projected number of adolescent respondents for this survey is 50,000. The Chief Minister, Shri. Conrad K. Sangma, made an announcement about Aspire Meghalaya 2.0 and introduced several initiatives for the people of Meghalaya during an event held on March 8, 2022, in Shillong. This event was organized to celebrate the fourth year of the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) government. In his speech, the CM highlighted the importance of every individual, especially the youth, in contributing towards the state's goal of being

among the top ten states in the country within ten years. He emphasized the need for the collaboration of all stakeholders in order to create a better and happier society, develop the nation, and ensure equality through reforms in education, healthcare, and other sectors. (Government of Meghalaya Directorate of Youth & Sports Affairs, 2022)

Guiding Principles of Youth Policy:

1. **Representation and Inclusivity:** Youth political participation ensures that the views and concerns of young people are represented in the decision-making processes. It promotes inclusivity in politics, making sure that diverse perspectives and experiences are taken into account.

2. **Civic Education and Awareness:** Involvement in political activities helps young individuals become more informed about the political system, governance, and public policies. It encourages them to stay updated on current issues and fosters a sense of civic responsibility.

3. **Youth-Driven Policy Priorities:** Youth leaders can advocate for policy priorities that are particularly relevant to young people, such as education reform, environmental sustainability, mental health

support, and affordable housing. Their input brings attention to issues that might be overlooked by older generations.

4. **Social Justice and Advocacy:** Empowering youth in politics can lead to increased activism and advocacy for social justice and human rights. Young leaders often play a critical role in promoting equality and pushing for change on important societal issues.

5. **Political Innovation and Fresh Ideas:** Youth participation brings new ideas, innovative approaches, and a willingness to challenge the status quo. This can lead to more progressive and forward-thinking policies that address current challenges effectively.

6. **Increased Voter Engagement:** When young people actively participate in politics, it encourages their peers to get involved as well. This leads to increased voter engagement and higher voter turnout, contributing to a healthier democracy.

7. **Leadership and Skill Development:** Youth leadership roles provide opportunities for skill development, including public speaking, negotiation, teamwork, and strategic thinking. These skills are valuable not only in politics but also in various other aspects of life.

8. **Inter-generational Bridge Building:** Youth political participation fosters inter-

generational dialogue and collaboration. It helps bridge the gap between older and younger generations, fostering understanding and cooperation.

9. **Promoting Long-Term Vision:** Empowering youth to take on leadership roles encourages a long-term vision for the country or community. Young leaders are more likely to be concerned about the future consequences of their present decisions, leading to more sustainable policies.

10. **Building Trust in Political Institutions:** When young people actively participate in politics and leadership, it can lead to increased trust in political institutions. Youth involvement helps dispel the perception that politics is reserved for a select few and shows that the system is open and accessible to all.

Therefore, empowering the future generation through youth political participation and leadership is crucial for building a stronger, more democratic, and more inclusive society. By giving young people a voice and opportunities to take on leadership roles, we can ensure that the decisions made today consider the needs and aspirations of those who will shape the future tomorrow. (National Youth Policy, 1999)

Garó Youth Political Participation and Leadership

Garó youth political participation and leadership play a crucial role in empowering the future generation of the Garó community. Empowering young people to actively engage in decision-making processes and take on leadership roles not only benefits the youth themselves but also contributes to the overall development and progress of the entire community. (Dutta & Aber, 2017)

(a) **Representation and Inclusivity:** Encouraging youth engagement is the most effective way to ensure that young Garó people's thoughts, perspectives, and concerns are acknowledged and considered in community affairs. This inclusive approach creates a sense of belonging and ownership among the youth, leading to an increased level of investment in the community's growth.

(b) **Skill Development:** Participating in leadership positions provides young Garó individuals with the opportunity to cultivate crucial abilities such as effective communication, adept problem-solving, astute decision-making, and proficient conflict resolution. These proficiencies are not only advantageous for personal development but

also for establishing a solid groundwork for their forthcoming professional pursuits and societal contributions.

(c) **Youth-Driven Initiatives:** Empowering young Garo individuals to take the lead in various initiatives and projects allows them to address issues that are particularly relevant to their generation. This approach can result in innovative solutions and a better understanding of the challenges faced by young people today.

(d) **Social and Cultural Preservation:** By actively involving young Garo individuals in preserving their cultural heritage, customs, and traditions, the community ensures that this knowledge is passed down to the next generation. This preserves the unique identity of the Garo people and strengthens their cultural resilience.

(e) **Community Development:** When young people are actively involved in decision-making and leadership roles, they can contribute fresh perspectives and ideas to address existing problems and create opportunities for the betterment of the entire community. This fosters a sense of collective responsibility and a shared vision for the future.

(f) **Mentorship and Guidance:** Empowering youth doesn't mean leaving them to navigate everything on their own. It's essential to provide mentorship and guidance from experienced individuals within the community. This support system helps young Garo leaders grow and develop, ensuring the continuity of strong leadership.

(g) **Advocacy and Social Change:** Youth participation in leadership allows young Garo individuals to advocate for issues they are passionate about, including social justice, environmental sustainability, and education. As active agents of change, they can influence policies and practices that align with their values and aspirations.

(h) **Sustainable Development:** Engaging young Garo individuals in leadership roles helps instill a sense of responsibility towards sustainable development and the environment. They can work towards preserving natural resources and implementing eco-friendly practices, ensuring a better future for the next generation.

(i) **Networking and Collaboration:** Encouraging youth participation in leadership opens up opportunities for networking and collaboration with other communities and organizations. This collaboration can lead to the exchange of ideas,

resources, and knowledge, enriching the Garo community as a whole.

(j) Inspiration for Others: Young Garo leaders can serve as role models for their peers and inspire them to actively participate in community affairs. This creates a positive ripple effect, encouraging more and more youth to step forward and become agents of change.

Therefore, empowering Garo youth through participation and leadership is vital for building a strong and sustainable future for the community. By providing opportunities and support, the community ensures that this young generation grows into capable, responsible, and visionary leaders who will positively shape the destiny of the Garo people.

Findings & Discussion:

Meghalaya ranks ninth in India, with a youth population in the defined age group of 15-24 years comprising 20.60%, slightly higher than the national average of 19.16%. This percentage is marginally higher than the national average of 19.16%, thereby ranking Meghalaya ninth in India. Furthermore, when the overall Scheduled Tribe population in Meghalaya is considered, the youth population accounts for 20.71%. It is worth mentioning that the state witnessed a noteworthy 28.3% increase in the ST population between the years 2001 and 2011. Interestingly, Meghalaya boasts of having the largest percentage share of children aged between 0 and 4 years old in India, standing at 13.7%. In addition, it ranks second in the age group of 5–9 years, with 13.1%, and fourth in the 10–19-year age group, with 23.9%. This clearly highlights the state's potential in terms of its young population, which may play a pivotal role in driving the region's growth and development.

Percentage of Garo youth population, Meghalaya, 2011

| State or District | Youth % |
|---------------------------------|---------|
| State: Meghalaya (17) | 20.60 |
| District: West Garo Hills (01) | 20.39 |
| District: East Garo Hills (02) | 20.54 |
| District: South Garo Hills (03) | 19.84 |

Source: Government of Meghalaya, Statistical Handbook Meghalaya 2017

At the district level, East Garo Hills boasts the largest proportion of young people, amounting to a staggering 2054 percent, while South Garo Hills has the lowest share with only 19.84 percent.

Literacy Rate of Garo Youth Population, Meghalaya, 2011

| State or District | Person | Male | Female |
|---------------------------------|--------|-------|--------|
| State: Meghalaya (17) | 85.30 | 84.15 | 86.40 |
| District: West Garo Hills (01) | 86.23 | 87.62 | 84.89 |
| District: East Garo Hills (02) | 84.90 | 86.38 | 83.52 |
| District: South Garo Hills (03) | 84.48 | 85.53 | 83.44 |

Source: Government of Meghalaya, Statistical Handbook Meghalaya 2017

Literacy enhances the standard of living and livelihood of individuals, thereby improving the overall quality of human resources. In Meghalaya, Christian-dominated communities have a relatively high literacy rate of 74.43% as of 2011. However, despite the matrilineal culture, the female literacy rate (71.88%) is lower than the male literacy rate (75.94%). Nevertheless, it is encouraging to note that the younger population has a better literacy rate, with an overall rate of 85.30%. Among them, females have a higher literacy rate of 86.40% compared to males, with a rate of 84.15%.

Conclusion

As per estimates from the Census of India, the youth population of Meghalaya is on the rise, which is in line with the national trend of a young population. However, unlike other major states in India, the age and gender distribution here does not indicate a reduction in birth and death rates. Although literacy rates have improved among the youth in Meghalaya, there still exists a significant gender gap that hinders effective development. The state continues to heavily depend on agriculture, as there are no substantial large-scale enterprises. However, the plantation economy cannot sustain a continuously growing population.

Moreover, the state's relatively large young population faces a high dependence ratio, especially with regards to children, which poses another obstacle to realizing its benefits.

The youth of the Garo community in Meghalaya play a pivotal role in shaping the future of their region. Through their active participation and leadership, they have demonstrated a commitment to empowering themselves and their fellow community members. The initiatives and programmes aimed at engaging the Garo youth have proven successful in fostering a sense of belonging, self-confidence, and responsibility among the younger generation. By involving young individuals in community affairs, their unique perspectives and fresh ideas are harnessed, leading to more inclusive and innovative solutions to the challenges facing the Garo people.

Additionally, the efforts to nurture leadership qualities among the Garo youth have resulted in a new generation of capable and dynamic leaders who are prepared to tackle the complex issues of the modern world. These young leaders exhibit resilience, adaptability, and a deep-rooted

connection to their cultural heritage, enabling them to strike a balance between tradition and progress. Furthermore, empowering the Garo youth has not only contributed to the well-being of their community but also to the broader development of Meghalaya. The positive impact of youth-led initiatives can be seen in areas such as education, healthcare, entrepreneurship, and environmental conservation. However, challenges persist in the journey of youth empowerment. To sustain and enhance the progress made so far, continued support from the government, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders is crucial. Adequate resources, mentorship programmes, and capacity-building opportunities are essential to nurturing and expanding the leadership capabilities of Garo youth. However, the empowerment of Garo youth in Meghalaya is a transformative force that will shape the trajectory of the region's future. By recognizing the potential within its young population, Meghalaya has sown the seeds of a brighter and more prosperous tomorrow. Embracing their heritage while embracing the opportunities of the modern world, the Garo youth are paving the way for a stronger, more inclusive, and sustainable community for generations to come. Their

journey is a testament to the power of youth political participation and leadership in building a promising future for the entire Garo society and beyond.

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