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Traditional Decision-Making Processes in Garo Villages: PMGSY Implementation in Jamangre Village, Meghalaya

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Abstract

The paper examined the relationship between Garo traditional decision-making processes and the implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) in Jamangre village, South-West Garo Hills, Meghalaya. It also investigates how traditional institutions such as Nokma (Village Chief), Chra (maternal uncles or brothers), and Maharis (maternal clan) oversee local government, resource management, and participation in development projects. The study found a considerable discrepancy in infrastructure development between the Garo Hills region and surrounding communities such as Khasi and Jaintia. Interviews with village authorities (Nokma and village elders) and observations of village meetings in Jamangre village reveal that the implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana did not satisfy community expectations. The study identified several challenges with the integration of PMGSY in Jamangre. The residents are dissatisfied with the use of substandard materials for road building and the lack of complete road connectivity. Landowners whose property was used for road construction received no recompense from the government or village officials, prompting discontent. Different objectives and priorities among government officials (standardised procedures, fiscal limits, and village authorities' distinct local needs and cultural values). The road development under the PMGSY was completed after four years in 2020, benefiting the locals. However, the absence of tree planting along the road indicates a lack of community involvement due to a failure to meet community demand.

Keywords: Traditional, Decision-making, Nokma (Garo Village Chief), PMGSY Implementation, Jamangre Village.

Introduction:

In the diverse cultural land of India, traditional communities play a significant role in shaping development initiatives. Culture has a strong influence on community development. Rural villages and residents derive their identity from their local culture. This identity promotes common understandings, traditions, and values, all of which are essential for developing action plans to improve well-being. Culture helps to create a sense of local identity and togetherness. It influences rural communities' confidence in working together to address specific needs and challenges. This local commitment among citizens, regardless of economic or political circumstances, can be a powerful weapon in shaping the success of development options and local actions. Such dedication, rooted in culture and shared identity, has the potential to be a powerful tool for maintaining local

Traditional Decision-Making Processes in Garo Villages: PMGSY Implementation in... Wenfield D Sangma governance, development, and social improvement initiatives.¹ The Garo Community is one of the indigenous groups in the Northeast region and possesses rich cultural traditions and a unique decision-making process that influences different aspects of community life, including development projects. Primarily the Garo people live in the western part of Meghalaya, have ethnological roots in the Tibeto-Burman group of the Mongoloid race, and their language is part of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family.² In the Garo societal structure, the matrilineal tradition was followed where lineage and inheritance were passed down through the maternal line, with clan titles originating from the mother and males moving to their spouses' homes after marriage. Women own the entire family property, but men handle governance and family issues.³ According to Tiwari, B. K. (2019) the Garo region lacks the same level of development in education, healthcare, and infrastructure as the Khasi and Jaintia communities. This statement highlights a picture of inequity, demonstrating that the Garo-inhabited region falls behind in terms of critical services and infrastructure when compared to neighboring Khasi and Jaintia groups. Infrastructure is essential for increasing economic growth, improving living standards and promoting sustainable development. Well-planned and maintained infrastructure contributes to the durability and prosperity of the Garo communities.

The Jamang village is one of the Garo villages from South-West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. People from this village continue to live their social and political lives under the guidance of indigenous institutions, oral traditions, customary laws, and a strong feeling of community. These cultural connections are seen in everyday activities like agriculture, festivals, conflict resolution and even in local government.

In such a socio-political landscape, the implementation of the development schemes particularly Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) must engage with the existing traditional leader (Nokma) and community members. The success and failure of such a development scheme is not solely administrative process but are closely connected with the decisions made by the Village Authority. In order to understand the relationship between development scheme and the traditional decision-making process in Jamanggre village employed a combination of interviews and observation. The village chief (Nokma) and village elders were interviewed, and the village meeting was carefully observed to comprehend the role of the Nokma and village elders. This paper explores the indigenous governance of the Garo community and their decision-making process related to the infrastructure development scheme of PMGSY in Jamanggre village. Furthermore, it

¹ Brennan, M. A. (2005). The Importance of Incorporating Local Culture into Community Development: FCS9232/FY773, Pp. 1-2. (Accessed on 13 May 2024 <https://extension.psu.edu/importance-of-incorporating-local-culture-into-community-development>).

² Culture & Heritage | South Garo Hills District Administration | India. (n.d.). Available at <https://southgarohills.gov.in/culture-heritage/> (Accessed on 30 April 2024)

³ Marak, M. N., & Thirumurugan, V. (2024). The Law Of Property Inheritance Among The Garo Women In Meghalaya As A Matrilineal Society. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(3), pp. 850-852.

Traditional Decision-Making Processes in Garo Villages: PMGSY Implementation in... Wenfield D Sangma attempts to identified differences between local authority and governmental roles in PMGSY implementation.

Traditional Decision-making in Garo Village:

The traditional decision-making process in Garo village is based on the traditional governance structure that prioritises community consensus, cultural norms, and social well-being. This decision-making process is based on centuries-old traditions and involves various groups of people among them Nokma, Chra and Maharis play a crucial role.

Nokma is the leader of a tribe of Garo people with a specified geographical. Nokma is the female inheritor in a clan-based Garo matrilineal society. However, Authority is exercised by her husband. Nokma (village chief) is central to this traditional system. He serves as the principal advocate and custodian of community interests. The Nokma's authority originates from both customary norms and community acceptance, emphasising the value of legitimacy and accountability in governance.⁴ Among the different types of Nokma, the A'king Nokma has political power in Garo villages. The Chra (Nearest male relatives of the wife`s side) and Maharis of the particular ma'chong (motherhood) make a consensus choice when selecting an A'king Nokma. This selection and appointment are in accordance with Garo customary laws, traditional rights, and traditions as recognised by the District Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. In cases of controversy about Nokmaship selection, the Chra or depante of the Nokma household makes the final choice.⁵ The A'king Nokma, duly selected and appointed by the Chras and the Mahari and registered in the office of the District Council, holds a position of stability within Garo society, yet certain conditions warranting removal exist. Primarily, the Nokma may be removed if released from the A'kim bond following the death of their spouse, or in cases of serious misconduct adversely affecting the interests of the ma'chong and the A'king Land. Furthermore, Nokma and her family may be removed if they permanently relocate outside of the A. king Land without guaranteeing the protection of the A. king and its people. Nokma may remove if she acts against the interests of the Ma.chong and the A. king Land, or elopes with another individual, abandoning her husband and children. A Nokma may also be removed from office if she has a mental illness or other incurable diseases, or if she marries someone who is not Tribal or from outside their tribe.⁶

In the Garo Tribe, land-based resources belong to the clan known as A. king land which is managed by female head (Nokma). However, Nokma alone has no authority to take decision or used them without the consent of the Chra, as such decisions are made collectively by clan representative (chra). The Chra are the mental uncle and brothers of the Nokma. The Chra plays a significant role in giving essential insight and opinion on different issues, including land usage, conflict resolution and other community concerns.

⁴Tiwari, B. K. (2019). Structure and functioning of traditional institutions in Meghalaya.

India, p.6. (Accessed on 12 May 2024,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334289400_STRUCTURE_AND_FUNCTIONING_OF_TRADITIONAL_INSTITUTIONS_IN_MEGHALAYA_INDIA.)

⁵ Marak, Julius L. R. (1985). Garo Customary Laws Tradition and Practices. Tura: D. J. Publication. pp. 339-340.

⁶ Ibid. p. 346

Their collective knowledge and opinion contribute to the decision-making process, ensuring that decisions represent the community's common wisdom and interests.⁷

Similarly, the Maharis, who are closely related by maternal ancestry, preserve traditions and ensure the community's well-being.⁸ The Mahari is an institution founded with the objective of protecting and maintaining household property. In Garo's custom, the property was not divided but passed from the individual to the Nokna (Who looked after the parents in their old age and inherited the ancestry property) upon death, maintained by her Mahari. This system of governance began at the household level, where allegiance was primarily to the mahari and then to the village. Male members typically joined their wife's families, with their allegiance remaining with the maternal mahari. The mahari functioned as a commune, with machong (motherhood) being unions of multiple maharis. Each ma.chong (motherhood) operated independently under a Nokma for political purposes. Every mahari has two functioning wings, Chra-pante and Paa-gachi. Chra-pante consisted of all brothers, and maternal uncles, who were not yet married and lived in the mother house. While Cha-gaachi is made up entirely of brothers, maternal uncles who married live in a distant home with their wives, but are concerned about the mahari's well-being and actively participate in its governance and management. They act as a judicial body, resolving disputes and ensuring justice among the mahari or clan. They are also in charge of enforcing marital agreements and ensuring that cultural norms and traditions are maintained, as well as distributing family property. Thus, they maintained the mahari structure but remained disconnected from its internal workings.⁹

These three institutions of Nokma, Chra and Mahari were the backbone of Garo villages' traditional decision-making system which providing a peace in the community, a sense of togetherness and solidarity among residents. In the Garo Communities, the decision-making is a collaborative process where discussion and consensus-building are valued more highly than precedence over individual interests. Nokma facilitates community conversation to reach the discussion by ensuring that all viewpoints are heard and take into account. This collective decision-making process ensures that decision is made using the community knowledge and preferences.

Nokma (Garo Village Chief):

In the Garo Tradition, Nokma holds exclusive authority. Nokma means "A rich man," referring to a wealthy individual who commands dignity and respect in a Garo community and society. However, within the context of Garo culture, Nokma refers to the leader of a

⁷ Iiwari, B. K. (2019). Structure and functioning of traditional institutions in Meghalaya. India, p.6. (Accessed on 12 May 2024,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334289400_Structure_And_Functioning_Of_Traditional_Institutions_In_Meghalaya_India.)

⁸ Ibid. p.6

⁹ Dey, P., & Das, S. (2016). Traditional Rural Self-Governing System of The Garos In Tripura: A Study. International Journal of Research in Social Sciences, 6(10), p. 1011. (Accessed on 12 May 2024,

https://www.academia.edu/43391079/Traditional_Rural_Self-Governing_System_Of_The_Garos_In_Tripura_A_Study)

Garo clan who has political power over his people and their territorial possessions, known as A. king. The Nokma is the chief and leader of a tribe of Garo people living inside a specified territorial boundary. Interestingly, the Nokma is a female inheritor in Garo's matrilineal society. However, her authority is exercised through her husband, who has been selected and empowered as the Nokma by the Chras, the council of elders. Therefore, the Nokma is generally the individual who marries a female inheritress and thus inherits the status of Nokma along with her territorial possessions, known as A. king. Nokma does not have dictatorial powers because all decisions are made by the village's elders in a joint assembly.¹⁰

The Tenure of the Nokma:

The Aking Nokma is based on the decentralised leadership methods within the Garo community, emphasising collective decision-making and participation. Unlike normal centralised offices with a single leader, the Aking Nokma is managed by a council of village elders, showing that the community's experienced members share responsibility and authority. The absence of a fixed schedule or duration for working indicates a flexible and organic approach to governance, with decisions taken as needed rather than according to tight deadlines.¹¹

Power and Functions of The Nokma:

An essential political institution in Garo society is the a. king nokmaship. It comes with a lot of duties and challenges, along with authority and function. The traditional Garo governance is centred on it. The Nokma has a number of powers, performs a number of duties, and has some advantages. The Garo society's customs, traditions, and experiences are the source of these privileges, powers, and functions.¹²

Financial power of the Nokma:

The financial authority possessed by the Nokma within the Garo community is closely linked to the management of the vast expanse of land known as A. king. Nokma equally distributed land among the villagers used for subsistence farming. Shifting cultivation is the traditional method of producing food, and the land is shared by all individuals. No individual has inherited rights to any section of this land. Everyone in the village has the right to farm the village land. Village land is typically divided into sections based on an annual rotation of jhum cultivation. Every year, each home receives one of these components based on the number of members. The Nokma family's share is allotted in the same way as the other families. The Nokma and village elder are in charge of land distribution which done is in accordance with customary regulations.¹³

Executive functions:

¹⁰ Sangma, Milton S. (1981). *Historical and Culture of the Garos*. New Delhi: R. K. Jain, pp. 61-62.

¹¹ Dey, P., & Das, S. (2016). *Traditional Rural Self-Governing System of The Garos In Tripura: A Study*. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, 6(10), p. 1008.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 1008.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 1008.

In the Garo community, the Nokma serves as the village's executive head, supervising concerns of common interest in collaboration with the village elders. One of their primary roles is to organise and host village gatherings where people can address common issues. The Nokma, as the head, is responsible for summoning and presiding over these sessions, ensuring that all perspectives are heard and considered. Once discussions have concluded, conclusions are decided by consensus, with the Nokma making the ultimate declaration. The Nokma, along with the elders, is responsible for ensuring that decisions taken at these meetings are carried out effectively. Their rulings carry the weight of law in the village, requiring all residents to follow them. This collaborative approach to governance emphasises the importance of community participation and consensus-building in decision-making. By respecting the authority of the Nokma and the elders, the community maintains cohesion and order, ensuring that choices represent the villagers' collective will and best interests.¹⁴

Jamanggre Village:

Jamanggre is a village located in the Rerapara C&RD block of the South-West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. From Ampati's district headquarters, it is around 28 kilometres away. Jamanggre village has a total population of about 714, consisting of 336 men and 378 women, according to Census 2011 data. The literacy rate in Jamanggre village is roughly 50.28%, with 45.50% of women and 55.65% of men being literate. About 124 households live in Jamanggre village.¹⁵ This low literacy rate of the village highlights various kinds of challenges. They face several challenges in accessing fundamental amenities such as road infrastructure which affects inhabitants' general well-being.

PMGSY Implementations in Jamanggre:

The Pradhan Mantri Gramme Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) is a government development scheme to reduce poverty in rural areas, which was established on December 25, 2000, and aims to provide all-weather road connectivity to unconnected rural habitations that meet particular population criteria based on Census 2001. This covers plain areas with populations of 500 or more, special category states with populations of 250 or more and select tribal, desert, and backward districts. Furthermore, in the most intense Integrated Action Plan (IAP) blocks, settlements with populations of 100 or more are considered eligible. PMGSY includes the upgrade of existing roads in districts where qualifying habitations have previously received all-weather road access. The National Rural Roads Development Agency (NRRDA) provides operational and management support, while works are carried out by various Executing Agencies designated by State Governments, including the Public Works Department, Rural Engineering Service, and Zilla Parishad, with Programme Implementation Units (PIUs) at the district level. State governments select a Nodal Department in charge of rural road management and maintenance, which in

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 1009.

¹⁵ Jamanggre Village in Betasing (West Garo Hills) Meghalaya | villageinfo.in. (n.d.). Available at <https://villageinfo.in/meghalaya/west-garo-hills/betasing/jamanggre.html> (Accessed on 5 May 2024)

Traditional Decision-Making Processes in Garo Villages: PMGSY Implementation in... Wenfield D Sangma turn selects a State Rural Roads Development Agency (SRRDA) to receive funds from the Ministry of Rural Development.¹⁶

The implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Gramme Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) in Jamangre village reveals the complex relationship between government officials and grassroots participation. As the wheels of progress revolve, it becomes clear that sustainable development is dependent not only on top-down instructions but also on the active participation of community members. Jamangre's experience with PMGSY indicates this partnership. Government funds and directions set the framework, but the village's customary decision-making institutions bring the initiative to life. Community leaders and local authorities use conversation and consensus-building to connect the PMGSY objectives with the village's specific needs and aspirations. Furthermore, the implementation process promotes community empowerment. As roads connect previously isolated areas, economic opportunities expand, social bonds develop, and access to key services increases. This expanding effect is the outcome of more than just concrete and cement; it also originates from the collaborative attitude that propels PMGSY forward in Jamangre. However, challenges remain on the path to success. Balancing modern infrastructure demands with environmental concerns, protecting cultural legacy, and ensuring equal distribution of benefits are all challenges that necessitate complex answers. Here, the interaction of government agencies, civil society organisations, and local communities is essential. The story of PMGSY in Jamangre is more than just a road construction story; it symbolises the transforming power of inclusive development. Heavy machinery creates the way for connectivity, but it also makes the way for a future in which governance systems and grassroots initiatives work together to build a better tomorrow.

Issues Implementation of PMGSY In Jamangre Village:

Road construction under PMGSY in Jamangre Village has encountered several significant issues. Here are the key challenges:

1. Cost Reduction: Jamangre villager state that the Roads construction under the PMGSY in their village was used sub-standard materials and not fully connected to the larger road. Therefore, residents of this village unsatisfied with the road construction who expect higher quality materials and construction methods to ensure durability and long-term usability of the roads. The village authority s insistence on specific construction standards, reflective of local needs and expectations.

2. No Compensation: Neither the government nor the village authority provide compensation to landowners whose property is utilised for the construction of roads under the PMGSY. Landowners feel unjustly burdened when they have to give up a significant portion land for the sake of the community and receive nothing in return.

¹⁶Ministry of Rural Development. (2015). Impact Assessment Study of Improved Rural Road maintenance System under PMGSY. Available at <https://www.ilo.org/publications/impact-assessment-study-improved-rural-road-maintenance-system-under-pmgsy>. (Accessed on 12 May 2024).

4. Transparency and Trust Issues: Villagers are unhappy with the quality of road construction under PMGSY, fearing that the materials used were inferior and not long-lasting. This promotes tension and mistrust between locals and the government officials.

5. Differing Priorities and Expectations: The divergent priorities on road construction between government authorities and the village generates tension. Villagers feel that their specific needs are not given enough consideration, and government officials view village demands as unrealistic and impossible to fulfil within the allocated budget because the funds must be shared with the entire state and district.

6. Local Autonomy and External Control: Another point of disagreement in the construction of a road under PMGSY in Jamnagar village is with the village authority and government officials. Village authorities believe that local input is ignored and undermined by the government officials in the implementation of the PMGSY, which leads to a sense of disenfranchisement and a lack of ownership over the project, hampering its execution.

Recommendations:

The study on the decision-making process in the implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Gramme Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) in Jamanggre village has revealed effective insight into development initiatives. The several recommendations to inform future policy making or improve implementation strategies in the tribal rural regions.

1. Strengthening Traditional Institutions in Participatory Planning:

Traditional institutions such as Nokma, Chra, and Maharies play important roles in decision-making in Garo Village. However, their input was not considered in the implementation of PMGSY. This failure to address the indigenous community's specific needs resulted in dissatisfaction a lack of ownership, and implementation problems. Therefore, there is a need to establish formal channels for discussion between government officials and village authorities that are easily accessible in order to increase local ownership and response.

2. Culturally-Sensitive Implementation Models:

The Garo Community has a traditional institution which emphasizes collective decision-making toward the welfare for all people; neglecting these cultural dynamics leads to tension. Thus, in the implementation local contributions or decision must embrace in order to effectively and the timely complete road projects.

3. Capacity Building for Local Stakeholders:

The difficulties in implementing PMGSY occurred in rural areas due to a technical mismatch between local authorities and government officials on the planning strategy. In rural regions of the Garo Hills, most village leaders and community members lack technical knowledge, while government officials are unaware of the cultural competence required to connect with traditional communities or ignore customary decisions made by villagers and village authorities. To bridge the gap, a capacity-building program is required. A proper awareness program, technical training, and sensitization of officials to traditional governance systems are required to foster mutual respect.

Conclusion:

The Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) implementation in Jamanggre Village, Meghalaya, is a striking case study of the interaction between modern

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development programs and deeply ingrained traditional governance institutions. The traditional governance structure in the Garo Community was made up of Nokma (village head), Chra (maternal uncle and brothers), and Maharis (maternal clan), who together formed the backbone of local power in decision-making. These collaborative decisions are made for the benefit of residents and reflect community interests and values. The implementation of the PMGSY road construction project is a collaboration between the government and traditional institutional bodies. The government provides critical finance and technical support, but the traditional village authority makes the final decision on resource allocation for the project. The traditional institution decision is influenced by cultural and community values which provide a mechanism to be a flexible face of modernization and outside influences, guaranteeing efficient governance and sustainable development. The PMGSY road project in Jamanggre village was initiated in July 2016 and with the help of traditional institutions completed in December 2020 which has undeniably brought tangible benefits. Despite the many challenges, villagers now experience easier access to essential medical facilities, enhanced transportation of agricultural products which is leading to visible socio-economic growth and better maintenance of law and order in these regions, after the road construction newly shops established along the route. But even with this improvement, there is noticeable lack of community ownership because no single tree planted alongside the constructed road which raises questions about community involvement and environmental sustainability of projects that do not fully integrate local perspectives and traditional practices. The experience of Jamnagar village with PMGSY clearly indicates that the true success of development is not just creation of infrastructure but also a collaborative environment where traditional wisdom and modern development goals are able to converge which ensures progress is effective and deeply rooted in the community's collective identity and well-being.

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