



## **Participation of Garo Women in Village Administration in Meghalaya**

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### **Abstract**

*Women's empowerment may be important in decision-making that influences their lives and society. However, women face lots of discrimination in society as well as in the village administration. In the Meghalaya state of northeast India, the population comprise three major tribes, i.e., the Garo, the Khasis and the Jaintias. They follow the matrilineal system, where a child takes the title of their mother, and after the marriage, men must live in the wife's house. Women in Garo society are highly respected, and they inherit property and reside after marriage. Being a matrilineal society, the property belongs to the women, and the A•king Nokma (Landowner) are women. However, in practice, the decision is made by her husband and the Chras (uncles and brothers). Even their participation in the local administrative units, like village councils, is minimal. Despite having full state status since 1972, Meghalaya has not seen a steady rise in women's political empowerment. This paper evaluates the status of women in the Garo society and the lack of women's participation in politics in the village administration of Garo Hills.*

The paper consists of the following parts:

1. Introduction:
2. Women's Participation in the Village Administration in Garo Hills.
3. Challenges the Garo women face vis-à-vis their political empowerment
4. Strategies to enhance the presence of Garo Women in village administration
5. Conclusion:

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Garo Hills, Village Administration, Garo Women.

*"Guard your light and protect it. Move it forward into the world and be fully confident that if we connect light to light to light, and join the lights together of the one billion young people in our world today, we will be enough to set our whole planet a glow."*

### **1.Introduction:**

Empowering women is a complex social process in various fields, including sociology, psychology, economics, politics, and others, and helps them control their own lives. It facilitates the ability of people, organisations, and communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise authority, and achieve their goals. Women can enhance their skills

and abilities both individually and collectively (Krishnan, S, 2019). If we compare the previous and present generations, women are more educated and empowered. However, women continue to have the same standing in society and are empowered in their quest. Women still face challenges in their lives. In the latter decade of the 20th century, the focus on women's problems gradually shifted from protection, welfare, and development to participation and empowerment as part of the long and difficult fight to open the political realm to women. Despite making up half of society and being represented in all social strata and groups, they are still marginalised in every aspect of life. Women are likely to be socialised and be subservient in all facets of existence and are typically viewed as partial helpmates who provide for men's needs, including children, services, and pleasure (Ghosh Anjana, 2010). The indigenous community of Garo society follows the matrilineal system, women have historically held a strong position in the family and society. where lineage is passed through the mother.

### **Formation of Garo Hills:**

Meghalaya state is a part of India located in the northeast, where three major tribes live, the Garos, the Khasis and the Jaintias. Meghalaya is a unique state where three tribes follow the matrilineal system, where women are highly respected and inherit their ancestor's property. Another uniqueness of Meghalaya is that after the marriage, men need to live with their wives in the wife's house, and the children take the mother's title.

In 1866, the Garo Hills were formed into a district and are one of the constituent districts of Meghalaya. It is amid 25°1 of the north latitude and amid 89°49 and 91°2 of the east longitude. The district contains an area of 8160.86 square kilometres. It is bounded on the north and west by the district of Goalpara; on the east by the Khasi Hills, and to the south by the Bangladeshi district of Mymensing (Milton S Sangma, 2012).

The term "Garo" is typically used by other communities to refer to a specific group of people known as the "Garos," who primarily originate in the districts of Garo Hills and who also make up a share of the basic population of northeastern India, including West Bengal and Bangladesh. The "Garo" original name has been inferred. The origin and meaning of the Garo itself are disputed by several authors. In both official and informal contexts, the terms "Garo" and "Garo Hills" are more frequently used than "A•chik" and "A•chik A•song." In actuality, the Garos and Garo Hills are the names of the people and their districts. The people are referred to as Garos and Garo Hills, as are their districts. The terms "A•chik" and "A•chik A•song" are completely irrelevant. In their conversation among themselves, the Garos are the only ones who use the phrases instinctively. Nonetheless, the origin and derivation of all these terms have been very controversial (M. N. Sangma, 1995). The Garo tribes have their traditions and beliefs, and they originated from Tibet and settled in Koch Bihar approximately 1500 years ago. Then they proceeded to Dhubri, where the king welcomed them with open arms, who later forbade them from making a permanent home there out of fear for them. Then they made their way to Jogigopa, from which point they were once more forced to take off toward the south. Next, the Garo tribes proceeded to Guwahati, where they encountered further mistreatment by the local monarch. They eventually became resident of Boko's neighbourhood as they started to wander. But they were Tiger-men all around this land. Subsequently, the Garos relocated to the Habraghat Pargana, which is now part of the Assam district of Goalpara. Throughout this voyage, the

Garo tribe broke into different branches and ultimately settled in the Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya (S. M. Sangma, 1981)

Garo tribes retained their independence and customs, managing their territories under a distinct feudal structure. In Garo society, every village has its leader and is called A.king Nokma. This position was inherited and authorised by community agreement (Gurpreet, 2016).

## **2. Village Administration and Participation of Garo Women:**

In the Garo society, there is a unique political system with village headmen. Within the Garo tribe, there are also numerous exogamous groups known as Machong, as well as chatchi and subtribes. Even among the Chatchi, the Garo tribe is divided into numerous exogamous clans, or Mahari, and each clan has its own Nokma, who looks after the land and the clan. This is known as the A•king Nokma.

In the Garo society follow the matrilineal system is followed as the descent is always traced from the mother alone, and through her, it traces its origin back to the inordinate common ancestress and never from the father. All property goes to the woman, remains with her motherhood, and is passed on from mother to daughter and never to a son, through inheritance. Garo women are property inheritors and the land owners of the village or the clan, and that is called the A•king Nokma. The word 'A•king Nokma' means the 'Mother of the House' or 'Motherhood' (Nokni ma•dot or ma•bikrom). She is the custodian of motherhood, and the husband of the A•king Nokma or a male Nokma (husband) is the guardian and manager of his spouse's ma•chong property. In the A•king land, which is part of the ma.chong (motherhood), the women is the rightful owner. However, the husband is just the caretaker of his wife. She is to exercise her power and responsibilities bestowed on her by her Chra and the mahari through her husband to protect the unity and integrity of her ma•chong's A•king Land. Each clan have their own authority, and under that, each clan and some people live under the authority of the A•king Nokma. But the husband of the youngest daughter, who inherits the property, acts as the village head and takes care of all the land and clan and the problems of the society. Though women inherit property, she does not wield exclusive rights over it, and her husband has the final word in exercising authority over household possessions as well as landed property. There are inheritances when a nokrom or resident son-in-law squanders the family's possessions and property and ruins the family while his wife remains a dumb spectator. When a husband beats his wife, nobody objects; but when a wife beats her husband, it is considered a serious offence. Polygyny is practised with the consent of the principal wife and her chras (maternal brother and uncle). In the affairs of the mahari (clans), the women are completely voiceless. Such matters are decided completely by the male elders, and as males do not consider the opinion of women in such matters necessary, women have no say in Mahari affairs except concerning women, the view of the women concerned or all the women in general of the mahari is not considered as indispensable. Women must always follow the male elder's decision (Marak, 1985).

In the British era, Garo's village administration remained unchanged. The Nokma continued to receive assistance from the village councils, which comprised local elders, in maintaining law and order in the A•king land. They were also tasked with resolving all cases within their authority and producing offenders. The commissioner of Dacca, John Elliot, described the social and political life of the Garos in 1788 as when something specific needs to be decided, they all gather in their war attire, sitting in a circle with their swords

rooted in the ground in front of them. If their resolutions have to do with war, they are immediately put into action; if not, they feast, sing, dance, and become wasted. Francis Hamilton also said that the headmen of families gather in a meeting with the chief, known as Nokma (S. M. Sangma, 1981).

If we look at the history, it is clear from the Garo customs and culture that Women's names were not mentioned in the village administration. Women were excluded from the decision-making process. Despite Garo being a matrilineal society, where women get all the properties also the Head of the Village (A•king Nokma) was the women, but in the village administration, the women did not assist in any case that happened in the village; they women did not assist in any case. The decision to resolve the village people's issues was made by the chras and the spouse of A•king Nokma.

During the field observation at the A•king Nokma meeting in one village at Masalgre Rangsakona under the South West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. The researcher discovered that the genuine A•king Nokma was not leading during the Masalgre village's annual final meeting. Though she is the A•king Nokma. The meeting was conducted by the husband of the A•king Nokma and another male village resident. The other women of the village also attended the meeting as well, but they were seated in the corner or at the back of the A•king Nokma residence and listened to it. Women attended the annual A•king Nokma summit, but they were not found to be involved in making decisions. During the meeting, the researcher also discovered that the actual A•king Nokma, or women, stayed in the kitchen. She has not attended the village administrative meeting, but found herself busy preparing the tea for the attendees of the meeting.

The researcher discovered that in one village, which does not have an A•king Nokma but does have a songni Nokma(village head), even though it was not an A•king Nokma meeting, the contributions of women in village administration were very low. In the village administration at Sangkaregri, the male chaired the meeting and all the members were men. Women participated in the meeting but were found sitting at the back listening to the meeting and accepting everything which the men had decided for the village. However, the women's contribution to the village administration at Sangkaregri village was found to be very low. The Nokma of the village and the other male members of the village decided on the village's development and other needs during the meeting.

### **3. Women's Challenges in Participating in Politics:**

In whole empowerment process is political empowerment. It is an important step towards women's empowerment and involvement in decision-making, driving women's empowerment in the fullest sense of the word. In other words, gender can impact the issues gender can have an impact on issues that affect our lives in the community and society as a whole because of its increased decision-making authority.

In the broadest meaning, political participation is not only participating in the election: voting and election for public office, but it goes far beyond the elections. When it comes to women's participation in politics or decision-making, or ministerial positions within legislative bodies, women are a distinct minority. Women were not given the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. Even when the decisions are to affect their well-being, women are merely spectators (D, 2005).

Women are highly respected, honored and kept in high positions in the state of Meghalaya. Once Jawaharlal Nehru said, "To awaken the people, it is the women who must

be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves." This line is undeniable if women were not developed and not given equal rights as men, a nation cannot move and develop if women are not stepping forward to take their rights, there will not be an increase in the number of women in politics. Many women in Garo Hills are educated, but when it comes to politics, women's participation in the general election or the Legislative Assembly is still lagging. Though the government of India give 33% reservation seats for women in the parliament, the participation of women in the general election is still lacking. There are very few women from the Garo Hills in the political arena. The member of the Garo Mothers' Union stated, "Women find it too difficult to campaign in the rural areas and terrain. The mobility of women is also restricted. As men display a lot of money and power, especially in this field, thus disabling women are disabled from contesting the elections. The culture of 'muscle power' is practiced in all aspects of competition, be it the elections, the market, the forest, or the land" (Trivedi, 2011).

According to the source of the Meghalaya handbook and the website of the Chief Electoral Officer in Meghalaya. Since 1972, when Meghalaya got statehood, till the 2024 election, the women who got elected in the Meghalaya legislative assembly were only 24 members. If we look at the scenario of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, women's contributions to the general assembly were very low, and if we look at the 2024 election of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, only three women from each hill there is only one candidate elected in the legislative assembly. In the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, the women member who is elected in the legislative assembly is the only one to date. However, many Garo women are educated now and independent and have developed in their socio-economic status, also contributing to the family and the breadwinners. However, participation in politics is still lacking. This is also because many Garo women have developed low self-esteem in the past, and they think that they are not capable of taking part in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly or decision-making. In the village administration, the Garo women were found to be very low. Though they are the A•king Nokma, it is mostly seen that the husband of the Nokma makes the decision either or the chras of the Nokma. Though they are the head of the village women's village, they are only for the namesake; the decision is always taken by their husbands or the Chras (maternal uncle or brother). This is also the reason that most Garo women do not want to participate in clan or administration meetings, since they believe that their primary responsibility is to care for the children and handle domestic chores. This is a common misconception of many women that if they go out of the house and join politics, there will be no one to take care and they are not capable of making decisions, and politics is better for men. The men are better at handling the administrative system, and they are good at politics. Even in family matters, Garo women continue to depend on males.

#### **4. Strategies to enhance the presence of Garo women in village administration:**

The political participation of Garo women in the village administration in the Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya has seen gradual progress compared to before. However, they continue to encounter obstacles in various forms, such as prevailing power structures, traditional roles, and cultural norms. To improve and encourage the Garo women in the village administration and decision-making process, several strategies can be implemented.

- i) The matrilineal society of the Garo tribes needs to provide an opportunity for womanhood to be empowered by encouraging their rights under traditional

- governance. Women's responsibilities would be strengthened if current laws were strengthened and revised to more explicitly include them in the traditional governance system's decision-making processes.
- ii) The Garo women require assistance or motivation in their academic pursuits. Even though there is no discrimination in the education system, women nevertheless receive less education than men.
  - iii) Regular workshops, community engagement, and educational outreach regarding the implementation of women's participation in governance should be organized. These workshops could be aimed at both men and women to promote a cooperative and encouraging atmosphere
  - iv) Garo women must play more important roles in the traditional village council and other local administrative organisations to strengthen the matrilineal structure and incorporate it into traditional administration. Decision-making should prioritise the opinions of women, and the community should honour and celebrate their leadership.
  - v) Women's representatives and coordinators of women's affairs are just two examples of the characters that the village administration should specify for women. By doing this, Garo women would have a specific area to discuss matters that directly impact them.

## **5. Conclusion:**

In Conclusion, the Garo women's participation in the village administrative system in Meghalaya is a vital component of the region's governance and development. Though sociocultural norms and traditional power dynamics frequently restrict women's active participation in decision-making processes, the matrilineal society of the Garo tribe offers a distinctive basis for women's leadership. However, there are a lot of things that need to be done to enhance the role of Garo women in village administration through efforts in legal reforms, capacity training, economic empowerment, and community sensitisation. The creation of gender-inclusive government institutions, leadership development programs, and educational opportunities for Garo women may all help remove current barriers. There is a need to better educate the Garo women for actively participating in village affairs; measures ensuring their representation in local administrative bodies need to be promoted in tandem with initiatives to expand economic prospects. In society, there is a need for a supportive atmosphere that encourages more inclusivity can be created through cooperation between women's networks, community leaders, and local governance systems. To achieve more equitable, efficient, and sustainable local governance, Garo women must be involved in politics and village administration on a larger scale. Through the inclusion of varied viewpoints and the empowerment of women to influence the futures of their villages, it will also enhance the community.

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