



## Impact of Socio- Economic Factors on Voting Behaviour and Political Participation in Meghalaya- A Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

*The main objective of this study is to provide an analysis of voting behaviour and political participation in Meghalaya. The focus is to enquire about the socio-economic factors that lead to the determination of voting behaviour and involvement of the masses in the electoral process. This paper uses public opinion surveys conducted in the urban and rural areas of East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya to investigate individual's choices to participate. Empirical findings showed that in Meghalaya, apart from education, income, money power and occupation as the main determinants, clan and religion also occupy central place in analysing electoral support. In view of the fact that many complex factors influence the choice of the eligible voters, the analysis of voting determinants is a difficult affair. Analysing the impact of these factors on the outcome of election results in the state, it is shown that the era of coalitions has well and truly arrived in the state.*

### INTRODUCTION

Meghalaya state was born on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1972. It has 60 legislative Assembly Constituencies, 2(two) House of People (Lok Sabha) constituencies and 1(one) council of States (Rajya Sabha) constituency. It has 2 divisions and 11 districts. The khasi and jaintia Hills division consists of 36 Legislative Assembly Constituencies and 1 parliamentary constituency. The Garo Hills division has 24 Legislative Constituencies and one parliamentary constituency. The total population of the State is 29.64 Lakhs as per 2011 census. The total number of voters at the beginning of 2011 is 13,16,201 and it has 100% coverage of photo Electoral Rolls and EPICs.

Elections have proved to be a powerful instrument of mass education and of political socialization. They have had a modernizing influence on political behaviour. Acting through available channels of political expression, the people of Meghalaya have emerged as central pillars of their representative government. Their interest in politics has considerably increased.

The growing popularity of democracy has resulted in the belief that the common man has a right to enjoy some political freedoms and he must be provided with enough opportunities to exercise them effectively. As a result, a large number of people are entering the political system.

It is believed that the introduction of universal adult suffrage will bring enlightenment and promote the standard of living, and the welfare and well being of man as the suffrage gave a voice and power to the people. Over the years the participation of the people of Meghalaya in political activities has greatly increased. However, the participation of the citizens during elections is not identical. In rural areas there is a higher percentage of turn out while it is not so in the case of urban areas. The study will look into the factors that influence the voting behaviour and political participation of the people.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A compulsory element in every political system is political participation. Political participation is used in two different senses-narrow and broad. In the narrow sense it includes activities like discussion of politics, convincing people to vote in a particular manner, doing party propaganda by distributing party literature, attending political meetings, contributing money for purpose of campaign etc. In the broad sense, political participation means " all behaviour through which people directly

express their political opinions ". This political participation includes conventional activities like voting and discussions of politics as well as unconventional acts like demonstrations, sit-ins, marches etc.

In a multilingual, multi-cultural democratic set up like Meghalaya, voting behaviour is dictated by a plethora of complex issues. From time and again it has been proved that political parties in Meghalaya cannot rely upon any particular factor to win the trust and confidence of the voters .Such is the complex and perplexing electoral psychology of the voting behaviour that even the best of the social scientists or even genius politicians failed to read public psychology on numerous occasions.

Many socio economic factors influence political participation and voting behaviour in Meghalaya. The social determinants are education, religion, urban and rural bias, and clan and the economic determinants are income, money power and occupation. It is difficult to determine conclusively which of these factors are more decisive. Presumably, their influence is a function of complex and intermeshed determination. Their influence may also vary from place to place and election to election.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Meghalaya is one of the few states in the country where there is a frequent change of government and Chief Ministers. Almost all the MLAs wanted to get a ministerial berth in the cabinet. The state has had 23 state governments since its inception in 1972 with a median life span of less than 18 months. Only three governments have survived more than three years. In particular, the life span of governments in the last three assemblies has fallen drastically with only a few surviving beyond six months. Given that a stable government and political institutions play an important role in the economic and social development process, this pattern in the state polity may have adversely affected the cohesion and synergy in programme formulation and implementation that are critical for development. Due to the frequent changes of government the development of the state suffers as the MLAs are busy saving their chairs. In some of the constituencies some elected candidates could not even get 50% of the majority votes and the state faced the problem in getting representatives who are educated, decisive ,responsible and interested in the development of the state. The State also faced problem in the low turnout of voters in urban areas while there is a high

turnout in rural areas. This problem of low turnout of voters and getting responsible representatives is due to socio-economic factors which influence the voting behaviour and political participation of the people. A study of the above factors will help in analysing the above problems faced by the state.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Courses in methods of social research have come to occupy an important place in social science curricula within the past 25 to 30 years. The term method means the systematic way of doing research like in every science. Such systematic approach consisting of objectives study is an important aspect in social research. Therefore, certain methods are adopted through which fact is collected, analysed and put into proper forms to draw conclusion from the collected data or facts.

### 1. SELECTION OF THE AREA

There is one district selected for this study, the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya. The present study was conducted on eligible voters of the district.

### 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- (i) To study voting behaviour and political participation in East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya.
- (ii) To study the socio-economic factors influencing voting behaviour and political participation in the district.

### 3. TYPE OF STUDY

The present study is descriptive and explanatory in nature.

### 4. SAMPLING.

Sampling implies the selection of a few items from a given group to be investigated in such a way to secure information on the basis of which conclusion could be drawn from the population. Sampling thus, is a smaller representation of the larger whole. There are various types of sampling methods. In the present study "Cluster sampling Method" was used. In this method there is representation of mixed group of the sample.

The sample for the study included some eligible voters in East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya. Hence, the objective of this study is to assess the role of socio-economic factors in determining voting behaviour and political participation of the people. As the programme itself is a group oriented, therefore, it has been decided to take 100 eligible voters from urban area and 100 voters from rural area. Thus, it consists of 200 voters.

### 5. TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION

The tools for the study are considered as instruments developed by the researcher. In this study the researcher used interview technique in English for the voters of urban area of East Khasi Hills District and in Khasi language (local language) for the voters of rural area of the district. The interview was used for obtaining information from the voters.

The researcher selected the voters on a cluster manner. Contact was made with the respondents and the purpose of study was explained to them. The researcher started taking interview of the selected respondents. News articles and various other materials form the secondary data supporting the primary data.

### 6. INTERPRETING THE DATA:

In the context of the electoral process of Indian democracy only those people who have reached the age of eighteen years can qualify as active political actors. In this study, a field work was conducted and the information on the socio-economic factors determining voting behaviour was collected from 200 voters hailing from the urban and rural areas of East Khasi Hills District.

After the collection of data with the help of interview schedule from the voters who formed the sample size for this study, the researcher scrutinized the data and classified them on the

basis of different variables. After classification, the data was analysed in terms of variables. The analysed data is presented in the form of percentage.

In Meghalaya, more than 80 percent population is in rural areas of the state with a literacy rate of only 57.00 percent. On the other hand the literacy rate in the urban areas is 87.19 percent which is much higher. The educational factor has a great impact on voting behaviour. It is seen in the last election that voters turnout in rural areas where majority of the people are illiterate is higher than in urban areas inhabited by the educated lot. Out of 100 respondents, 80 percent say that the educated people show greater interest in political participation like interest in politics, political discussion, political influence, activities etc., but show lesser interest in active participation like voting, attending public meetings and rallies etc. Further, less educated people's greater participation is due to motivations of clan, lure of money, religion etc. However, 50 percent of the respondents felt that here a vast change is coming about. A large number of rural based students are entering colleges and these students are showing greater interest in politics, political discussion and other political activities. Our society is continuously being paralysed by lethal venom of illiteracy. On this, 48 percent of the respondents are of the view that the majority of the Indian voters are poor and illiterate. They are open to all sorts of temptations. The rich candidates often exploit this situation to ensure a maximum turnout of the poor and illiterate voters on the polling day. This has a great impact on the number of votes secured by the winning candidate vis-à-vis the losing candidate.

On urban-rural bias determining voting behaviour, the common view shared by the respondents is that the residents of urban communities in Meghalaya are more interested in political matters than the residents of rural communities. But in participation like voting, attending public meetings etc rural people are more active than the urban people. This difference in rural urban behaviour is due to differences in education, income levels, exposure to public media like newspapers etc. The percentage of rural respondents who put forward the view that the rural areas are generally faction ridden and during elections these factions align themselves with competing political parties is 45 percent. Faction becomes a vehicle of political mobilisation and voter turnout. As majority of the people live in villages, political leaders and parties focus greater attention on campaigning in rural areas. This contributes to greater voting rate among the rural people. There appears to be a consensus among 53 percent of the urban respondents that it seems politics has not yet become an object of effective orientation for the urban voter in so far as he refuses to be drawn into election meetings and campaign. Urban voters do not feel it important to vote as the election promises are too trivial to encourage them to vote. People in general and younger generation in particular are losing interest in the political issues. Fewer people now go to cast their ballots and less and less number of young men and women discuss about politics. The common people in whose name the show goes on have now learnt that the government have nothing much to offer to them. The educated electorate fails to see their rights as powerful metamorphosis for a political change.

Coming to occupation of the people as a factor which determines the way people exercise their votes, 51 percent in the urban area and 59 percent in the rural area felt that there is a very close relationship between occupation and political participation. Generally professionals like lawyers and journalists are more deeply involved in politics but their turn out at voting, attending public meetings or making financial contributions is not very high. On the other hand farmers and businessmen show active interest in politics including voting. They show great interest in public meetings, political discussions and political influence activities; but their financial contribution to the parties is very low. Businessmen participate in politics through their financial contributions to the parties. Government employees too are active in politics, while unskilled workers and agricultural labourers are least active in

politics. They turn out only during voting due to the influence of clan and other factors.

Income and money are other main components which have very deep impact on political alignments of the people and in determining their voting behaviour. It is generally believed that economically poor people are more active in political participation. Out of 200 respondents, the percentage who attributed to this view is 74 percent. People with less income always feel the necessity of approaching the politicians in times of financial needs. The voters seek money or goods in return for their votes for a candidate. It is alleged in certain quarters that money plays an important part in elections in the state. It is said that money is being distributed to the masses during electioneering. In recent years the role of money and allurements in securing electoral victories are highlighted. Money power was not as important and as pervasive as it has become in more recent decades. Money is playing a major role and it influences the election results of every constituency particularly in the rural areas. While deciding to vote, not many people seek or go by the opinion of caste or community leaders. The voters seek money or goods in return for their votes for a candidate. An overwhelming proportion of 88 percent said that the role of money in elections is what has got us the MLAs and MPs we do not deserve. The complexity of the issue of money power in elections leads us to another question as to who started such dangerous practices that is infecting the state today. However, 27 percent of the respondents shared the view that money has not always proved helpful either for the party or the candidate. When other vital issues grip the people's mind, the monetary considerations lose their relevance. Again, if the general trend of the people is against a particular party, money cannot tilt the balance in its favour. Of course, election campaigns of those who have bagged fulls of money are more impressive and often fruitful. In the normal circumstances they do influence the decisions of the voters through various baits and favours.

Another factor having a great role in influencing voting behaviour and political participation in Meghalaya is clan. Like other North Eastern States, Meghalaya also has powerful clans playing an important role during elections and is considered as an important factor of political participation. Survey data shows that more than 42 percent of the respondents consider that Clan is as important an entity in Meghalaya politics as an individual. It is one among the several other factors that influence voting. Illiteracy among the people and lack of awakening among the rural folk are some of the factors responsible for the prevalence of the clan factor in elections. In some constituencies, the winners or candidates were representatives of important clans. Because the electoral constituencies were small, the candidates had close ties with them through family and friends, which facilitated their victory. Similar outcomes and conclusions were observed after the local general elections. In these elections, local political analysts stressed the influence of kin and blood ties as opposed to party memberships, party platforms and ideas. Only 10 percent of the respondents said that is the most important consideration.

The last factor is religion. India is a secular country but religion seems to be an inseparable part in our political setup. Religious differences have contributed to the support of one political party or another. Religion is another pull down factor of Meghalayan electoral politics. Rather than uniting people, religion has mostly divided the state into many watertight compartments. Amongst the respondents, those holding the opinion that in Meghalaya there has never been an election in which the bonds of religion have not affected the judgement of some sections of voters account for 49 percent. It is not without reason that experts while assessing trends results of elections, often take into account the religious breakup of the electorate. A lack of clear ideology and a platform by most political parties may be a valid reason for the continued importance of religion based voting.

## CONCLUSION

Political participation is an important and compulsory element in

every political system. In every society, though the political power is concentrated in few hands, attempt is made for participation of the maximum number of persons in the political system. This increases political stability and provides validity to political authority. In Meghalaya, some of the citizens feel that their political activity does not give significant results, they therefore reduce participation. Most of the persons feel that political influence depends upon income, social status, political experience, educational attainment and the personality of the person concerned. In the absence of these factors one may not hope to achieve any political influence. Some of the people who are absolutely disillusioned of the political system in the state also leave political participation. Presently there is a distressing trend in the public life and that is the growing cynicism about politics and politicians. The elite class of thinkers and the educated masses feel uselessness of casting the votes in elections. The people have lost faith in political parties and the promises of the leaders have proven hollow.

In their absolute dissatisfaction, they think that the political system is so corrupt that it cannot be reformed or that they have no power to reform it. It is only before election that the speed of political participation increases.

Public opinion is extremely fickle. Some facts are just so stark we cannot ignore them. Most people have shown their ability to shift their attention and passions from one identity to another, frequently and with great fluidity. The vote banks by now have ceased to be stable and exclusivity. The unsophisticated masses in the rural area and in urban slums are unable to make a distinction between myth and reality and are prone to emotional mobilization, their voting act is not isolated from the socio-economic setting.

In Meghalaya, the devastating impact that the exploitation of clan and religious feelings has had on the political system is often ignored. In terms of social behaviour, voters preferred clan and religion than other groupings during elections. In such elections, the interest of the state and the society on the whole are altogether ignored. But here again the debate has been skewed. To expect clan and religion to be wholly absent in a profoundly clan and religious ridden society is to hope for the impossible. But this should not preclude efforts to keep clan and religion to a restricted domain. Although the comprehensive reforms in the political system, may decrease the spectrum of clan and religious influences, it appears that these phenomena will continue to exist in one form or another for a long time because of their entrenchment in the Khasi society. The bonds of clan, community and other loyalties affected the judgement of many voters. Besides, Money will continue to play a major role and it will influence the election results of every constituency particularly those in the rural areas despite what the Election Commission of India rules.

In the urban area, the voters are becoming more balanced and less emotional about elections, rather thoughtful and less sensational, more pragmatic and less blindly committed or loyal to parties, persons and manifestoes. The electorate of Meghalaya has attained enough maturity to script the nemesis of individual players and political parties, demolishing the predictions of the psephologists, exit polls and poll surveys. The electorate presented a pattern of preference in exercising their franchise.

Rural voters are actually pursuing personal agendas. From the interview it has been found out that when a rural voter says he wants to see change it means a change of face probably because the sitting MLA did not attend to his personal needs. He is not articulating some esoteric political ideology. Some vote on personal issues like being of the same clan, same religion, or because the candidate has rendered help at a time of need. People attach importance to their immediate needs as far as exercising their vote is concerned.

Thus voting is a complex act. The voter exercises this right under a constellation of influences, including the advice of a friend, fondness of a particular candidate, feeling about a

particular issue, his personal whims etc. . It is well- nigh impossible to neatly delineate the various determinants of voting behavior in a country of India's diversities and assign precise and coherent casual weights to them. In view of the fact that many complex factors influence the choice of the eligible voters, the analysis of voting determinants is a difficult affair. The party factor is important but it may be confounded with other factors. Therefore alliance to parties representing their interests, rather stability through one party was their concern. As a result, coalition government has been the norm in the

state and the chapter of a single party rule in Meghalaya has become a matter of the past. If all voters remain faithful to a candidate of their respective religion, clan and communities, the system of elections would become redundant and political balance would be frozen to the numerical strength of various communities. The future of democracy and the system of parties in the state depend upon the willingness of the society to change according to the demands of democracy.

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