

TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE KHASI JAINTIA HILLS OF MEGHALAYA: A PROACTIVE ROLE IN CONTAINING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *The Covid-19 pandemic is having a significant impact on all aspects of life, be it social and economic wellbeing. In Meghalaya, The Tradition Institution plays a very important role in our day-to-day life. This paper tries to examine the proactive role which the traditional institutions played in supporting the government in their effort to contain the Covid-19 pandemic and to construct a research model on the relationship between Government and Traditional Institutions to mitigate the impact of Covid-19.*

Keywords: Traditional institution; Government; covid-19

Introduction

The coronavirus virus 2019 (COVID-19) widespread is having a significant impact on all aspects of society, but the Social and Economical well being has been hit the hardest. In spite of the fact that the essential affect is on the human wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic isn't as it were a wellbeing and economic emergency; it is additionally an emergency for democracy, human rights and administrations. COVID-19 is a new disease and evidence is evolving. The infection is thought to spread mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets and contact with these droplets on surfaces (World Health Organisation). To mitigate this threat is exceptionally significant to the human life and reducing distortion of livelihood.

While in other part of the country the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) play a very important role in the day to day governance of the country, and in Meghalaya the Traditional institution is still very active and strong. The office bearer of these institution are voluntary and are democratically elected by different electoral college depend on the level.

Very often when we talk about addressing national emergencies, pandemic such as the present, natural calamities and so on, we always think of a large organised institutions as the government at the national level and organisation at the international level. we rarely think of small bodies and agencies in such cases and in many cases they are always eclipse by the actions of larger bodies and agencies. This paper turns the spotlight from the efforts of government both at the national and the state level and put it on institutions and bodies that many of us would not have thought at the present moment and I feel that these smaller bodies have as much a role to play in addressing the impact of pandemic as any other bigger bodies do.

Grassroots governance such as Traditional Institutions is an important aspect of democracy which had only been recently introduced to the world and very recently in our country. In broad terms, grassroots governance is a people community driven actively at the lowest level of the political ladder but having a very strong social and communal structure. Even though in many ways it can be seen to be very basic in its function and forms it has been said to have a direct implication on the lives of the people operating at the level of villages, localities and regions. It plays a pivotal role in the development of rural communities. I am proud of the fact that our country in the 64th amendment of 1989 of the constitution during the time of Rajiv Gandhi and its 73rd amendment of 1992 of the constitution during the time of P.V. Narasimha Rao took the initiative to embrace and consolidate the movement for the establishment of grassroot level of governance. The initiative taken by our country in this regard and gender human effectiveness by improving and mobilising ordinary people at the grass root level has borne much fruit and will continue to do so.

At the outbreak of this Global pandemic, the Government of Meghalaya understand the threat at hand, and without any hesitation it ropes in the Traditional Institutions to be the torch bearer in spreading the awareness in the community about the Virus and how to abide the basic Do's and Don'ts in containing this Virus. The Dorbar Shnong with the active participation of the community has till date won over the virus.

This paper focus on how Traditional Institutions in the state of Meghalaya have worked during the last many months in address the issues raised by the pandemic. Our Traditional Institutions functioning at the level of the Shnong (village), Raid (cluster of villages) and Hima (state) have contributed much to the growth, welfare and progress of the local people. In many areas of the state, we are still very much attached to or have great affinity to the institutions that exist at these three levels and one of them being our Dorbar Shnong (village council). These institutions played a great role in implementing government schemes at the local level and also assist in national level events such as elections, disseminating information, scheme and policies governing communities and so on so forth.

Research Method

The current study was conducted by survey research in areas where weekly local markets are held. The statistical population consist of the headman (Sordar Shnong/Rangbah Shnong) and his executive committee, people who visit the market and 15 households were chosen from their respective village, randomly. 286 people who visit the weekly local market were interviewed using a well structured close-ended questionnaire. In order to increase reliability, the Cronbach Alpha test has been conducted after the pilot survey to check the internal consistency and reliability. The value of cronbach's alpha came out to be above 0.7. Also, the validity i.e. appropriateness of the test was improved, so that instrument measures the phenomenon exactly. The instrument was shown to the respondents, just to see their response and to consider their issues. if missed prior to its implementation. Also, several round of consultations has been done with the expert to rate the instrument separately.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study is to examine the proactive role which the traditional institutions played in supporting the government in their effort to contain the Covid-19 pandemic and to construct research model on the relationship between Government and Traditional institutions to mitigate the impact of Covid-19.

Theoretical Perspective of Traditional Institutions

Meghalaya falls under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution. It has a multi-layer governance structure. At the state level, there's a State government, and at the District there are the Autonomous District Council (ADC) which have their own elected representative, many a times the action of the state government, clash with that of the District Council. In Khasi Hills the traditional governance structure consists of the Syiemship (Chieftain) at the top and the Dorbar Raid at the province and the Dorbar Shnong at the grassroots. At the village level, we have the Dorbar Shnong or village council headed by Sordar/Rangbah Shnong (village headman) who is elected by adult residents of the village and heads the village administration. Every adult member of each household in the village is a member of the village council and is therefore expected to actively participate in the deliberations of the council and facilitate in decision making. In some areas, we also have another tier above the village council which is known as the Dorbar Raid which is the council of cluster of villages presided over by Basans or Lyngdohs. At the top of this structure is the Hima (comprising of villages/Raid) which is governed and ruled by Dorbar Hima (council of adult male members from every constituent village and Raid). The Syiem (chieftain) is the head of the Hima and is generally elected by a small electoral college from a particular clan (Syiem clan). Similarly, his assistants (Myntri) are elected from a particular clan. In the Jaintia Hills, the traditional governance structure is similar to that existing in Khasi Hills, except that in place of the Syiemship we have the Dalloiship (Nongkynrih, 2002; Gassah, 2002).

The traditional institution of the Khasi tribe is more elaborate than that of the Garo and Jaintia tribes in terms of structure and composition. A typical traditional institution in the Khasi community constitutes larger territory base (the Hima) which is controlled by the Syiem. The head of the village council is known as Rangbah Shnong, Sordar or Myntri Shnong who is responsible for governance of forests and other common property resources of the village. The clan chief has its own authority and functions within clan affairs regarding matters concerning the village. All affairs pertaining to the forests owned by the clan are looked after and controlled by the head of

the clan and the elders. The family comes under the clan where the father plays a very important role in decision making though the lineage is through the mother. The head of the family is represented in the village council.

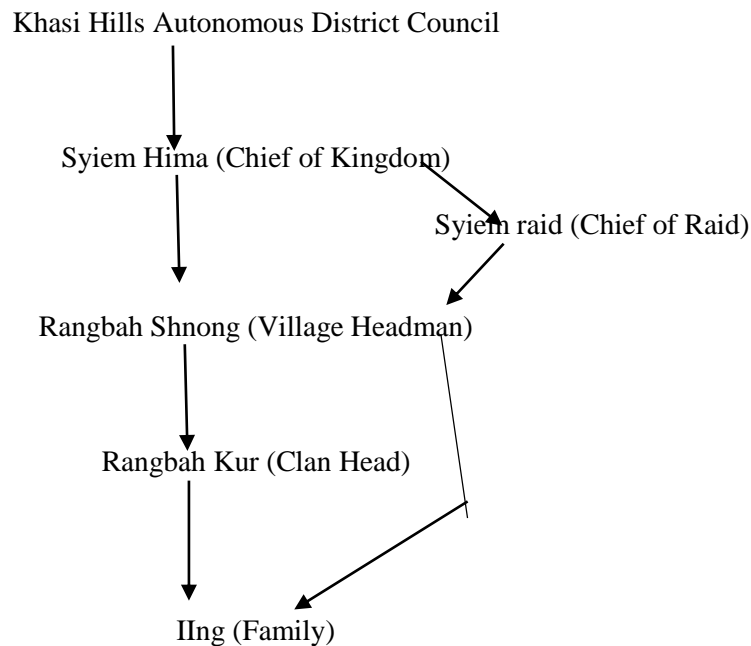


Figure: Typical hierarchy of traditional institutions in Khasi Hills, Meghalaya

Source: B. K. Tiwari, 2019

The people of Meghalaya especially the Khasis and the Jaintias had their own unique, distinct and well-established form of governance. It is something that evolved from within the community and which is in fact the best form of governance. Our forefathers understood really well that power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Therefore, the traditional chief/headman was not vested with absolute power to govern over his subject and real power was vested with the people. According to observations made by the British Administrators, they observed that form of government or society existing among the Khasis is the absence of any recognised organ of supreme power which is remarkable. They show no particular courtesy of bearing towards their Raja. Indeed the latter do not seem to have much power (Giri, 1990). In a Khasi state the chief is nothing without the Dorbar (Cantlie, 1974).

The tribes developed the institution of governance out of their own genius and perhaps after many trials and tests till they arrived at a form of governance they considered good for themselves. The tribe with a system involving three stages of governance- the village, cluster of villages and the state or *Hima*- was the Khasi-Jaintia. The basic unit of political organisation in the Khasi-Jaintia society was the village. Village administration was conducted by an assembly of all resident adult males under an informal headman elected by them from among the number. The tribal societies put safeguards in their governance through the village council that perform the work of a village, a cluster of villages or the larger conglomeration (Syiemlieh, 2006). The articles of Toki Blah are brought into discussion. Blah's essay appeared in a popular daily. He begin his essay with the respect the community has for the institutions. He feels that the Dorbars could have been facilitated, trained and capacitated to take up the responsibilities within an urban set-up. He concludes with an appeal to recognise the potentials of these self-governing bodies and orienting them towards closer cooperation with the administration (Blah, 2004).

As a community, the Khasis never lack behind in matters relating to administration and governance and had embraced true democracy since time immemorial. So is the case with Traditional Institutions or Dorbar Shnong where power is not vested with individual but lies with the people. The head of the traditional body is only implementing decisions adopted by the Dorbar through the executive committee appointed by the Dorbar. Dorbar means the body

comprising of all members of a village or community except minor.

Traditional Institutions in Meghalaya in the context of governance they are only some kind of governing or ruling authority. They are yet to be the rational legal authority which is base on laws or rule of law and in fact

base on the liberal democratic principles. Traditional Institutions in Meghalaya even today are based on the traditional practices that we have been following. They are more concerned with maintaining, sustaining and advancing ethnic and cultural identity. The possibility of democratising the Traditional Institutions in Meghalaya would be rather difficult in the present context until and unless we go for certain reforms.

Proactive role of traditional institutions in containing the impact of Covid-19

The office of the Dorbar Shnong (village council) were held with a lot of respect. Time has change, rule of law has to come into force but no forces would overwrite the importance of the village council which have appeared from time immemorial and have naturally solidify themselves into effective concrete instruments of the community. The Covid-19 has to a great degree created a new mechanic with regards to governance and public management where the role of the Traditional Institutions has been brought back to the forefront of the community life. The Traditional institutions are the reckoning instruments to aid the government in the battle to combat Covid-19 and even in time of another crisis. The Traditional Institutions is an instrument that can connect directly with the general public and the common masses. The Government with its finally charted plan and designs ready to combat Covid-19 needed village council to be implemented and hence the village council support, collaboration alone could bring forth a meaningful result to all the Government efforts in combating this pandemic. The village council translating the plans of the Government and disseminate the awareness of the disease and provide hope to the community members who are panic and also used its local authority at its disposal to make sure that the common man obeys the standard protocols in letter and spirit are the daily engagement of the village council. The other important task that the village council undertake is to address the economic impact of the lockdown. It's a heavy responsibility where every village council has to make steps to address the plight of daily wage labourers and the economically marginalised group who have been deprived of livelihood on this three months lockdown. Most villages on their own mobilised funds to provide relief in the form of free rations and essential commodities on a regular basis for such affective families in their respective villages. The reality of the three months lockdown has taken a heavy tolls on the family means of livelihood. If we consider that 70% of the people of Meghalaya for the families depend on non-salaried engagement for their livelihood. I can confidently say that had the Dorbar Shnong (village council) ignored this pertinent part, there would have been chaos and disorder that would have cripple the district administration effort to tackle Covid-19.

On the very first instances people don't belief that the Corona Virus has reach out country. There was a state lock down, but still people underscore the threat from this virus. Initially people are very sceptical in wearing mask, washing hands and social distancing, only educated people vaguely knows about the virus, whereas the rural populace understand nothing. They never thought the invisible virus can eliminate us. But with the involvement of the Dorbar Shnong (village council) through their constant effort to increase the awareness level, it has delivered a significant population-level results, like containing / stopping the spread of the virus till date via community transmission and been able in relaxing the lockdown timing.

In the Khasi Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya, the traditional Institution especially The Dorbar Shnong (Village Council) has always played a very important role in the daily life of its citizens, in maintaining law and order and in tackling all other issues facing any member the community.

At this time of Covid-19 pandemic, we experienced, once again, the power of the Dorbar Shnong. The Meghalaya state government got it right when they invited the traditional institutions to be part of the institutional mechanism to combat the spread of the disease. Had the government tried to combat this pandemic on its own, without involving the Dorbar, we would not be having the low statistics we have today. Yes, there is a slight increase in cases but most of the cases come from the central forces which falls outside the purview of local institutions.

In the last week of March, 2020, when the government announced the national lock down, there was a lot of panic everywhere, and there was uncountable fake news doing the rounds in social media , especially on shortage of dry ration and other food stuff. When there was a few hours of relaxation, hordes of people poured into the market place, flooding banks and Doctors Clinic. It was chaotic everywhere. However, the Dorbar Shnong, with the active participation of their respective Executive Committee members along with the Youth group (Seng Samla), systematically managed to control the surging crowd, and all precautionary protocols were followed.

When the first COVID -19 patient was detected in the state everybody was caught off guard, not a living soul was seen on the street other than frontline workers. The Dorbar Shnong, however, took things in its stride and had a closed door meeting with all its stake holders to prepare for the next course of action.

When a second case were detected, it was from the village of the domestic help who worked in the house of the first victim. The Dorbar Shnong there stood firm by supporting the patient and quarantined those who might have come into contact with the patient. While in the mainland India even medical practitioners were targeted and treated as carriers even by their immediate neighbour, the Dorbar Shnong here makes sure that no one is harassed or stigmatised. It gives strength and courage to the others who have returned from other high-risk states in India and to those who have to go to work and may be exposed to carriers.

- In Smit village, for example, under the supervision of the Dorbar Shnong, a village level “Task force Committee on Covid 19” was formed, consisting of the Executive Member of the Dorbar, the youth group, the student body, the youth wing of many churches and a development Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO). No financial assistance was sought from the government. The Dorbar Shnong appealed for support, and many came forward to help. The NGO Rilum Foundation came forward to install 4 water tanks for hand washing and enough personal protective equipment (PPE) materials for the high-risk workers in the market area. The KSU donated 500 locally made face masks. The Dorbar Shnong also set up a Community Quarantine Centre (CQC) to provide support to the returnee. Endless people came forward to support. Yes, this may not be true of other localities, however, they may yet rise to the occasion.

One of the most beautiful things happened here in Meghalaya. On TV, we saw the mass exodus of people heading to their native place. Upon reaching their home state, they were sprayed with disinfectant, they were not allowed to go home, but there was no quarantine centre for them to stay in either. If there were, they were already packed. Some chose to stay on tree branches, some under the culvert and few died due to snake bite. In Meghalaya, the Dorbar Shnong within which the returnee had a home welcomed the returnee, and gave her or him a separate bedroom and separate toilet. The food was also taken care of.

Had it not been of the active participation of the Dorbar Shnong, returning migrants of Meghalaya would have been in distress and the government would have collapsed from the bad press. Moreover, the Dorbar Shnong continues to successfully manage the Community Quarantine Centre where it is not like the rest of India - where returnee face a lot of humiliation. Here, they were welcomed straight to their own villages or urban localities where their community take good care of them and warm-hearted people come to bring drop off nicely-packed, home cooked meals till the end of their quarantine.

Based on the foregoing discussions, the following research questions have been framed to enable the paper to focus on the argument of the same.

- i. Is there any significant relationship between Government and Traditional Institutions?
- ii. Is there any significant relationship between Government and Covid-19?
- iii. Is there any significant relationship between Traditional Institutions and Covid-19?

The construct of the research model

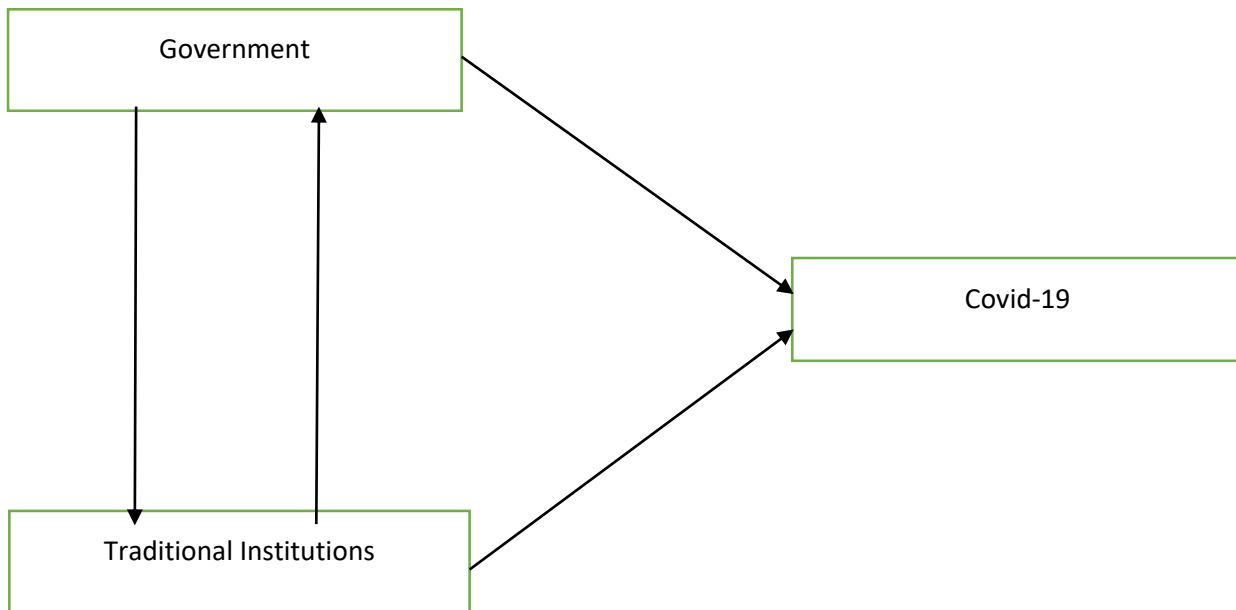
In the present paper, Government and traditional Institutions are the two variables in addition to Covid-19. In addition to descriptive statistics, Regression, Correlation and Chi Square test can be used to measure the significance relationship between these variables. The following Fig. 1 illustrates the model constructed in this paper.

Based on the said model, the following hypotheses are framed for those studies that might adopt the model.

H1 – There is a significant relationship between Government and Traditional Institutions.

H2 – There is a significant relationship between Government and Covid-19.

H3 – There is a significant relationship between Traditional Institutions and Covid-19.



Research Model. Source: developed by the researcher

Challenges

People are of the opinion that Traditional Institutions are becoming so corrupted, not democratic and are answerable to none. I will partially agree with their sentiments. However, I feel that we cannot paint every institution with the same brush just because some of these institutions have failed to deliver and perform their duties as expected. In fact, there are many of these institutions which really performed and people benefitted despite many difficulties and hardship that they encounter with. What we see today in the functioning of some Dorbar is perhaps the present trend due to the absence of prescribed rules and regulations to guide their functioning. The actual state of affairs of these Traditional Bodies is supposed to be democratic, transparent, accountable respectable and conducive for members of the society to come forward and actively involved in its processes. However, it is very unfortunate that the Traditional Institutions are left to rot due to the indifferent attitude of those at the helm of affairs. It seems to me that the Government is shying away from conferring constitutional status to the Traditional Institutions for fear of losing control over them.

Way Forward

Traditional Institutions are yet to be the formalised institutions of grassroots governance in the state of Meghalaya because they are incongruence with the concept of governance and not local government/authority within the Indian Constitution. Therefore, there is an urgent need to integrate, recognise and involve constitutionally and strategically into the process of governance as the institution of governance. Reforms are needed on the part of Traditional Institutions by including the democratic principles and accommodation on the part of the Government of India and Government of Meghalaya and Autonomous District Councils. Traditional Institutions have actually evolved into a system of inclusiveness and it would be really wonderful to see that these institutions have been empowered and put into formalised system of governance for which the Government at the end could benefit.

Conclusion

In order to ensure that the advisories/protocol as specified by the health department is put into place, there must be a change in the behaviour of the people. Behavioural change does not happen through scaring people but through constant repetition of the good habits, using the checklist prepared by the health department that has to be followed by the people in the process of fighting the virus. The concern line department of the Government, through the Dorbar Shnong should continue this hand holding approach which is a win-win situation for both. The government should create a road map for a bottom up approach or a two way traffic not only in fighting

this unseen enemy but also in bringing the behavioural change among all citizen in this era where the new normal is a norm. Hence it is the duty of each one of us to strive for the empowerment and constitutional recognition of the Traditional Bodies. I would conclude by the recent comment made by Dr. N. Roy of the World Health Organisation that the rest of India has to learn from Meghalaya in tackling Covid-19 speaks volume. This comment is another stamp of approval on the positive role of the Traditional Institutions. This paper is also to develop a research model on the relationship between entrepreneurial intention, job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Some relevant hypotheses were also framed based on the developed research model. Both the research model and hypotheses might be useful to study the relationship between the three above mentioned variables.

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