

Grassroots Democracy in Post-Colonial Mizoram: An Evolutionary Overview

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Abstract

Mizoram, an aesthetically pleasing state situated in the North-Eastern region of India, possesses a significant historical background influenced by its pursuit of autonomy and the subsequent period of decolonization. This study examines the notion of grassroots democracy in Mizoram, investigating the transformation and success of traditional institutions and democratic practices within the post-colonial framework. Through an analysis of the historical context of Mizoram and the significance of traditional institutions, a deeper comprehension may be attained regarding the genesis of grassroots democratic frameworks, namely village councils and district committees. Moreover, this study explores the fundamental tenets of participatory decision-making and examines the obstacles and prospects encountered in the successful implementation of grassroots democracy. This study aims to analyse the effective implementation of grassroots democracy in Mizoram, evaluating its implications for local communities and exploring its potential for future development.

Keywords: Post-Colonial, Grassroots Democracy, Village Council, Participatory, Governance, Inclusivity, Empowerment.

Introduction

Mizoram, located in the north-eastern region of India, has seen a distinctive trajectory in its pursuit of autonomy and the establishment of democratic governance during the post-colonial period. This article examines the historical context and the significance of grassroots democracy in influencing the political framework of Mizoram. The quest for self-determination in Mizoram commenced around the mid-20th century, when the region was encompassed within the broader territorial expanse referred to as the Mizo Hills (Lalfakzuala, 2017). The Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) played a pivotal role in mobilizing demonstrations and advocating for self-governance then, in the year 1972, Mizoram underwent a transition to become a Union Territory, and then attained the status of full-fledged statehood in 1987 after the Mizoram Peace Accord was signed between Mizo National Front (MNF) insurgent groups and the Indian government (Prasad & Chakraborty, 2006).

Similar to numerous other places in India, Mizoram also underwent the effects of colonial governance. The Mizo people saw notable transformations in their traditional government institutions as a result of

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the introduction of administrative systems and laws by the British (Sailo, 2019). The aforementioned historical influence had a long-standing impact on the subsequent establishment and progression of grassroots democracy in the area.

Historical Background: The Emergence of Grass root Democracy in Mizoram

Mizoram possesses a historically significant heritage of democratic institutions ahead of the era of colonial governance. Gaining insight into the historical context is crucial in illuminating the progression of grassroots democracy within the area.

Prior to the advent of colonial powers, Mizoram has a robust governance structure that operated on the foundations of consultation, consensus-building, and active involvement of the people (Chaltuahkhuma, 2001). The *Lals* or Chiefs, with their Chieftainships had significant importance in the processes of decision-making, dispute settlement, and resource management (Sailo, 2019). As Lewin (1869) stated, these *Lals* or Chiefs were the sovereign authorities, and he also added that village administration was held upon by them as being a President or Dictators. Each village constitutes a separate unit of administration, where *Lals* or Chiefs headed each village (Shakespear, 1912). The Chiefs, although enjoy executive power within himself, had his Council of Elders or *Lal Upas* play advisory role, and in consultation with them, perform legislative functions. The aforementioned democratic activities served as the basis for the establishment of grassroots democracy in the state of Mizoram.

The advent of British colonial administration had a profound impact on the traditional governing structures of Mizoram. The implementation of a more centralized type of governance by the British administration resulted firstly in the demarcation of boundaries between Chiefs (Thanhranga, 2007). Secondly, the colonial administration resulted in reduction of power of Chiefs in terms of administration of justice; and orders of the Chiefs were also appealable to the Superintendent Officer of the British. Thus, power transition had a significant influence on the democratic processes that were in place prior to it, resulting in a challenge to uphold customary principles while also adapting to the changing political environment (Zorema, 2013). However, as Parry (1992) stated, as the terrain of Mizoram was challenging and to cut down administrative costs, the British had no intention of taking over power from Chiefs for village administration. It was for them, pragmatic to govern over the Chiefs and continue with traditional system of administration.

The Role of Traditional Institutions: Preserving Cultural Values and Democratic Practices

In spite of the profound influence exerted by colonial governance, traditional institutions in Mizoram persist in their vital function of safeguarding cultural values and democratic principles.

Village Council have always served as the fundamental pillar of grassroots democracy in the state of Mizoram. The councils are comprised of elected members who collaborate closely with the community to tackle local concerns, foster growth, and uphold conventional principles (Pakhuangte, 2018). The village council system plays a crucial role in facilitating communication and connection between the local population and the wider political structure.

The maintenance of democratic processes in Mizoram is facilitated not just by village councils, but also by the presence of esteemed community elders and leaders. The positions and role played by *Upa*, *Tlangau*, *Ramhual*, *Zalen*, *Thirdeng* and *Puithiam* had profound significance on democratic procedures too (Lalfakzuala, 2013; Zakhuma, 2001). These individuals possess a wealth of knowledge and

expertise, which they utilize to provide guidance in decision-making processes, facilitate dispute resolution, and uphold the democratic principles that underpin the community.

The Evolution of Grassroots Democratic Institutions: From Village Councils to District Committees

Over the course of time, grassroots democratic institutions in Mizoram have undergone a process of evolution in order to effectively respond to the dynamic societal requirements and the aspirations of its populace.

Village Councils were established in Mizoram under the provision enshrined in Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India, where Autonomous District Councils and Regional Councils had been provided with legal authority to constitute Village Councils within their jurisdiction (Thanhranga, 2007). In accordance with this, The Lushai Hills District (Village Councils) Act of 1953 authorised the establishment of Village Councils and thus, the first Village Council was set up on 16th August, 1954 after an election to the office was held on June in the same year (Thanhranga, 2007; Pakhuangte, 2018). Village councils have undergone adaptations in response to evolving circumstances, thereby extending its scope beyond conventional government responsibilities. They engage in active involvement in regional development initiatives, advocate for the advancement of education, healthcare, and environmental preservation, and serve as intermediaries in facilitating communication and collaboration between the government and local communities (The Lushai Hills District Village Councils Act, 1953). To further strengthen grassroots democracy, Mizoram introduced District Committees as an additional layer of democratic representation. These committees consist of elected members from the Village Councils and are responsible for coordinating and addressing collective issues at the district level (Zoram Hriattirna, 1952; Thanhranga, 2007). The establishment of District Committees has enhanced decentralization and empowered local communities in decision-making processes. Thus, Mizoram in the post-colonial era has witnessed the resilience of grassroots democracy, rooted in traditional governance systems, despite the legacies of colonial rule. Village councils, along with traditional institutions and evolving democratic structures like District Committees, continue to play a pivotal role in preserving Mizo cultural values and fostering community participation in decision-making.

Participatory Decision-Making: Empowering Citizens in Grassroots Democracy

Empowerment of citizens constitute the prime feature in Grassroots Democracy, it was a co-operative and collaborative effort between the government and the people that brought fruitful results in governance. Citizens when empowered assumed responsibility for their own development, leading to enhancements in infrastructure, enhanced accessibility to education and healthcare, and augmented opportunities for livelihood. Empowerment of citizens through Grassroots Democracy could be achieved by:-

1. Inclusivity and Representation:

The manifestation of inclusivity and representation in post-colonial Mizoram is exemplified through the implementation of grassroots democracy. In contrast to top-down governance systems, grassroots democracy facilitates the redistribution of power to the general populace. The process guarantees that choices are reached by collective participation, allowing all individuals to contribute to the formation of their community's destiny (Kaufman & Alfonso, 1997). Gram Sabha meetings were meant to approve

the annual plans, programmes, and initiatives for economic and social growth in the village in consideration (The Lushai Hills District Village Councils Act, 1953).

In this theoretical framework, the principle of inclusion has paramount importance. Active participation is strongly encouraged for all individuals within the community, irrespective of their diverse backgrounds or socio-economic status. Grassroots democracy therefore guarantees the inclusion of all citizens' viewpoints (Andersen & Siim 2004; Lister, 2004). This practice not only fosters a sense of ownership and belonging but also facilitates the inclusion of varied perspectives and experiences, hence enhancing the quality of decision-making processes.

Furthermore, the concept of representation holds significant importance in the context of grassroots democracy. By means of a mechanism involving the selection of representatives, local communities are able to proficiently communicate their interests and concerns to higher tiers of government. This practice guarantees that decisions are formulated with the primary objective of benefiting the individuals who are directly impacted by them, as opposed to being imposed from a distant source.

2. Ensuring Active Citizen Engagement:

Active citizen participation plays a vital role in fostering grassroots democracy in the state of Mizoram. As Lister (2004) stated, merely participating in electoral activities is insufficient for citizens; they must sustain their involvement in the decision-making process continuously.

Citizen engagement in this context basically refers to individual as well as collective efforts of citizens to combat and address the issues which were of public concern (Adler & Goggin, 2005). In order to accomplish this objective, a range of measures are implemented to foster and promote citizen engagement. Public meetings, town halls, and community forums function as arenas for the facilitation of open discourse and deliberation. This enables individuals to articulate their viewpoints, articulate their apprehensions, and suggest remedies to the challenges they encounter. The active involvement of citizens would have resulted in the cultivation of a heightened sense of community, wherein individuals collaborate collectively to tackle mutual obstacles and commemorate collective accomplishments.

In addition, grassroots democracy utilizes technology as a means to augment citizen participation. The advent of online platforms and mobile applications has facilitated convenient access to information for citizens, enabling them to offer comment on government programs and engage in online discussions (Ferro et al., 2013). This not only enhances the accessibility of decision-making processes but also empowers residents to actively participate in the governance of their community.

Challenges and Opportunities: Navigating the Path to Effective Grassroots Democracy

Mizoram undergoes a transition towards grassroots democracy, which presents the inherent issue of preserving its culturally significant traditional values amidst the tremendous societal transformations it experienced. The influence of Mizo traditional practices and cultural norms has historically been substantial in shaping communal decision-making processes. The preservation and integration of these ideals within the dynamic democratic framework necessitates a judicious approach. Keeping this in view, Village Councils also need to take into account the societal norms and values, and restrict those that could possibly instigate communal hatred, or avoid legislations that hurt citizens' sentiment.

One such strategy involves integrating conventional leaders and institutions inside the framework of grassroots democracy. By acknowledging and valuing the knowledge and expertise possessed by individuals, it is possible to achieve a state of equilibrium that encompasses both the preservation of established customs and the pursuit of advancement.

Although grassroots democracy has significant promise, it is necessary to confront socio-economic and infrastructural difficulties that may impede its progress. Numerous populations residing in the state of Mizoram have challenges encompassing poverty, restricted availability of essential services, and insufficient infrastructure. These obstacles have the potential to impede the efficacy of citizen involvement and participation.

In order to give a solution to these obstacles, it is imperative to allocate resources and focus on grassroots development. Through the mitigation of socio-economic gaps and the establishment of essential infrastructure - such as durable energy supply (which the State generated is insufficient at the moment) and reliable internet connectivity across the State, grassroots democracy has the potential to enhance inclusivity and accessibility for all members of society.

Assessing the Impact and Future Prospects of Grassroot Democracy in Post-Colonial Mizoram

The post-Colonial governance in Mizoram has witnessed the emergence of grassroots democracy as a formidable force, showcasing its capacity to empower individuals, foster inclusiveness, and facilitate efficient decision-making processes. Through the implementation of inclusive practices that prioritize the amplification of many perspectives and the promotion of active civic participation, this particular framework has effectively catalyzed transformative processes within communities, resulting in tangible improvements in the well-being and quality of life experienced by individuals.

Despite the presence of certain problems, such as the preservation of traditional values and the mitigation of socioeconomic inequities, the future possibilities for grassroots democracy in Mizoram display considerable promise. By persistently prioritizing inclusivity among different sections in the society, active representation of citizens, and with ‘basic necessity’ infrastructural development, the grassroots democracy in Mizoram has the potential to further fortify the social structure, enabling individuals to actively influence their own future.

Conclusion

The introduction of Grassroots Democracy in the post-Colonial Mizoram has represented a notable advancement in the empowerment of its populace and the safeguarding of cultural heritage. The role of traditional institutions, from *Lal* or Chieftainship to the introduction of Village Councils in facilitating citizen engagement and promoting inclusive decision-making processes has been of paramount importance in their evolution. Despite the current obstacles towards development, such as the necessity to confront socio-economic barriers, the progress made by Mizoram in establishing a robust foundation for grassroots democracy is undeniably commendable and serves as a source of motivation. For Grassroots Democracy to unveil its optimum capacity in Mizoram, it is imperative to sustain and enhance grassroots democratic processes wherein individuals play an active role in shaping their localities and making substantial contributions to the overall advancement of the state.

Conflict of Interest:

There is no conflict of interest on any parties involved in this research paper.

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