

Sonaram R. Sangma and the Garo Movement: A Struggle for Identity, Land, and Autonomy

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Abstract

The Garo Movement, led by Sonaram R. Sangma (1914-1991), represents a significant struggle for cultural identity, land rights, and political autonomy in Northeast India. Emerging from systemic exploitation such as land alienation under the zamindari system, forced labor (begar), and heavy taxation the movement gained momentum through Sangma's Gandhian-inspired leadership. His strategies included mass mobilization, civil disobedience, and political advocacy, culminating in key events like the 1954 Tura Rally and the eventual formation of Meghalaya in 1972. While the movement achieved land reforms, political empowerment, and cultural revival, its legacy remains incomplete, with unresolved land disputes in Garo-inhabited areas like Goalpara. This study employs a multi-method approach, analyzing historical records, government reports, and comparative tribal leadership frameworks to evaluate Sangma's non-violent resistance against contemporaries like Jaipal Singh Munda (institutional lobbying) and Rani Gaidinliu (armed rebellion). The findings highlight Sangma's unique blend of grassroots activism and constitutional advocacy, which secured tribal autonomy under India's Sixth Schedule but fell short of full self-determination. Institutional neglect from colonial-era land laws to post-1947 partial accommodations underscored the movement's challenges. Sangma's enduring influence is evident in Meghalaya's political landscape and cultural revival efforts like the A-chik Theatre Festival. Yet, his vision of equitable self-rule remains unrealized, reflecting broader tensions between symbolic statehood and substantive tribal sovereignty. The study underscores the Garo Movement's role in shaping tribal rights discourse in Northeast India while advocating for deeper engagement with indigenous perspectives in postcolonial policymaking.

Keywords: Garo movement, Sonaram Sangma, Tribal Autonomy, Meghalaya, Land Rights, Non-Violent Resistance.

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I. Introduction

The history of North-East India is marked by a series of regional and ethnic movements that reflect the deep-rooted aspirations of its indigenous communities. Among these, the Garo Movement stands out as a significant struggle for cultural identity, land rights, and political autonomy. At the forefront of this movement was Sonaram R. Sangma (1914-1991), a prominent leader and voice of the Garo people. His leadership emerged during a period of socio-political transformation, when indigenous groups across India were asserting their rights against marginalization and the encroachment of their traditional territories. Sangma's efforts were not only pivotal in mobilizing the Garo community but also in shaping the broader discourse on tribal autonomy in the region. This movement represents more than a political campaign, it is a narrative of a people's resilience, a fight for self-determination, and a quest to preserve their cultural heritage amidst the pressures of integration and modernization (Sangma, 1981).

Born in Damra village (Goalpara, Assam), Sangma's early life was deeply shaped by the harsh realities faced by his people, including exploitation of Garo peasants land grabs by zamindars and moneylenders, the imposition of forced labor through the begar system on Garo peasants, and the burden of heavy taxation under both British and post-colonial administrations. A defining moment came in his youth when he confronted a Bengali moneylender who had seized his father's land. This encounter ignited his lifelong resistance against injustice. Though he had limited formal education, Sangma was deeply influenced by Gandhian principles and the Indian freedom struggle. Unlike militant tribal leaders, he championed peaceful mass mobilization. His leadership was marked by courage such as during the 1954 Tura Rally, where he stood before police rifles and declared, "Shoot me first, but Garo land will never bow" (Sangma, 1981).

Sonaram R. Sangma remains one of the most influential tribal leaders in Northeast India who is a revolutionary, social reformer, and political activist who spearheaded the Garo Movement (1940s-1970s). His struggle was not merely political but it was a fight for identity, dignity, and survival against exploitative zamindars (landlords), moneylenders, and an indifferent administration. It was also against economic exploitation, land alienation, and political marginalization of the Garo tribe in present-day Meghalaya and Assam. The movement played a crucial role in shaping tribal rights and autonomy in Northeast India. It laid the foundation for tribal self-rule, culminating in the creation of Meghalaya in 1972 (Momin, 2003).

Despite his influence, Sangma remained humble and deeply connected to his community. Locals affectionately referred to him as king of the Garos, a title he humbly declined, insisting, he was just a servant of his people. His dedication was most evident in moments like the time he walked 50 kilometres barefoot to mediate a land dispute between two villages, steadfastly refusing any reward for his service. This article thus, explores Sangma's life, leadership, government responses, and his legacy in comparison with other tribal leaders like Jaipal Singh Munda and Rani Gaidinliu. The study adopts a comprehensive multi-method research approach that combines historical, qualitative, and analytical methodologies to thoroughly examine Sonaram R. Sangma's leadership and the socio-political impact of the Garo Movement. The research design incorporates both exploratory and descriptive elements, detailing Sangma's leadership strategies, government responses, and the long-term consequences of the movement.

The study relies on secondary sources, including M.S. Sangma's *History and Culture of the Garos* (Sangma, 1981), academic journals, government reports (e.g., Meghalaya Statehood Demand Committee, 1969; Tribal Land Commission, 1980s), and contemporary media coverage of key events like the Tura Rally (1954) and Meghalaya's statehood (1972). Thematic analysis identifies patterns in land alienation, non-violent resistance, tribal identity, and autonomy demands. A comparative lens contrasts Sonaram R. Sangma's Gandhian approach with leaders like Rani Gaidinliu and Jaipal Singh Munda. The theoretical framework integrates Subaltern Studies, Social Movement Theory, and Postcolonial Theory to highlight tribal agency and critique post-1947 state policies. This interdisciplinary approach balances historical depth with tribal perspectives, with future research exploring Sangma's unpublished diaries and broader comparisons across Northeast movements.

Institutional Neglect and the Roots of the Garo Struggle for Land and Autonomy

An examination of historical government records and official reports reveals a persistent pattern of institutional neglect and partial accommodation regarding the land rights and political aspirations of the Garo people. During the colonial period, the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886 failed to recognize indigenous landholding systems, instead reinforcing the authority of non-tribal zamindars and exacerbating dispossession among tribal communities. Although a 1935 British government report acknowledged the grievances expressed by the Garos, it ultimately led to no substantive policy intervention. In the post-independence era, particularly between 1952 and 1968, the Assam State Archives document numerous petitions submitted by leaders such as Sangma, who advocated for land reform and greater tribal autonomy. These demands gained formal recognition with the 1969 report of the Meghalaya Statehood Demand Committee, which explicitly cited Sangma's movement as instrumental in mobilizing tribal support for statehood. The enactment of the Meghalaya Formation Act in 1972 marked a partial fulfilment of these demands, resulting in the creation of a separate state for the hill tribes of the region. However, the exclusion of several Garo-majority areas, notably parts of Goalpara district, from the new state boundaries left lingering dissatisfaction. Subsequent assessments, including reports from the Tribal Land Commission during the 1980s, highlighted continued patterns of land alienation and inadequate implementation of protective measures in the Garo Hills. These persistent challenges contributed to Sangma's growing disillusionment in the final years of his life. In a candid statement before his death in 1991, he remarked, "Meghalaya is ours, but the fight for true self-rule is not over," encapsulating the enduring tensions between symbolic recognition and substantive autonomy for tribal communities in Northeast India.

The movement emerged as a response to multiple forms of oppression and injustice faced by the Garo people. One of the primary reasons was economic exploitation. The introduction of the zamindari system allowed non-tribal landlords to control Garo lands, stripping the indigenous population of their traditional rights. Additionally, the imposition of high revenue taxes pushed Garo farmers into severe debt, while moneylenders (Mahajans), exploited the situation by charging exorbitant interest rates, often resulting in the loss of land. Another key factor was land alienation. Traditional Garo customary land rights were systematically ignored, allowing outsiders including Bengali, Assamese, and Nepali settlers to take control of tribal lands. Political marginalization further fueled the unrest, as the Garos had no representation in the governance of Assam. Moreover, the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886 failed to safeguard tribal lands, leaving the Garo community vulnerable to displacement and exploitation.

Sonaram Sangma's Leadership and Strategies

Sonaram Sangma played a pivotal role in organizing the Garo masses by employing a multi-faceted approach that combined grassroots activism with political advocacy. He often drew upon Garo folklore and traditional songs to unite and inspire his people, likening their movement to the epic tales of Jappa Jalimpa, a revered Garo hero (South Garo Hills, n.d.). He began by mobilizing the people through mass meetings, or durbars (village councils), which served as platforms to unite Garo villagers and build a collective sense of resistance. Through these gatherings, he encouraged non-cooperation with exploitative landlords. Civil disobedience was another key strategy, as Sangma led campaigns that involved the refusal to pay taxes to oppressive zamindars and the boycott of forced labor practices, known as begar. Politically, he advocated for the autonomy of the Garo Hills within Assam and eventually pushed for the creation of a separate tribal state, which later became Meghalaya. Additionally, Sangma contributed to the formation and strengthening of tribal organizations. He worked closely with the Garo National Council (GNC) and collaborated with other tribal groups, forming alliances with Khasi and Jaintia leaders to build a united front for tribal rights and self-determination.

The tribal assertion movements across India during the colonial and postcolonial periods saw the emergence of several key figures, each embodying distinct strategies, ideologies, and outcomes. Among them, Sonaram Sangma played a pivotal role in the Garo Movement from the 1940s to the 1970s, employing peaceful methods such as mass protests and repeated petitions to government authorities. His efforts contributed significantly to the eventual creation of the state of Meghalaya in 1972 and the initiation of land reform discussions in the region. Sangma's activism was rooted in Gandhian principles and focused primarily on safeguarding tribal land rights and autonomy within constitutional frameworks. In contrast, Jaipal Singh Munda (Toppo, 2024), leader of the Adivasi Mahasabha during the 1930s to 1950s, adopted a more institutional route by engaging in political lobbying and negotiations. A well-educated former ICS officer, Munda worked within both British and independent Indian political systems to secure Scheduled Tribe (ST) status and formal political representation for Adivasi communities, especially in central India. Another contemporary, Rani Gaidinliu (Niumai, 2018), led a spiritually infused Naga resistance in the 1930s that took the form of armed struggle against British colonial authority. Though her rebellion was less focused on political reform, she emerged as a symbol of Naga identity and resistance, blending religious revivalism with anti-colonial sentiment. Earlier still, Birsing Munda played a crucial role in the Santhal Rebellion of 1855 (Datta, 1940), which utilized guerrilla warfare to resist British land revenue policies and local exploitation. Unlike Sangma's peaceful mobilization, Birsing Munda's revolt was marked by violence and occurred well before the rise of nationalist movements. These varied trajectories highlight the diverse methods tribal leaders adopted, ranging from constitutional engagement to armed resistance, while contrasting sharply with Sangma's sustained, non-violent struggle focused on land and identity within the modern Indian state.

One of the key takeaways from the analysis of Sonaram Sangma's leadership in the Garo Movement is his strong alignment with Gandhian principles, setting him apart from other tribal leaders like Rani Gaidinliu and Birsing Munda. While Gaidinliu and Munda were involved in more militant and armed forms of resistance, Gaidinliu leading an armed Naga rebellion and Munda spearheading the violent Santhal Rebellion, Sangma adhered to a non-violent, Gandhian approach of peaceful protest and mass mobilization. This focus on non-violence and grassroots activism distinguished Sangma's leadership style from others who favored more direct, confrontational methods of resistance. Furthermore, unlike Jaipal Singh Munda, who was deeply embedded in mainstream politics and worked within the structures of both British colonial and independent Indian systems, Sangma remained firmly rooted in grassroots movements. He believed in mobilizing the local Garo population to demand their rights, especially land reforms and political autonomy, without seeking political integration into the broader Indian political system. Finally, while movements like those of the Naga groups, including Gaidinliu, had strong separatist tendencies, Sangma's cause was fundamentally about achieving self-rule within the larger Indian framework. He did not advocate for secession but rather sought greater autonomy for the Garo people within India, reflecting a more inclusive vision of self-determination rather than a call for complete independence. This distinction highlights the nuanced nature of Sangma's political ideology, which sought to preserve tribal identity and rights without rejecting the Indian state.

Key Phases of the Garo Movement

The Garo Movement refers to the historical, social, and political struggle of the Garo people, an indigenous group primarily based in the northeastern regions of India, particularly in the state of Meghalaya. The movement encompasses several key phases that mark the evolution of the Garo community's efforts for self-determination, cultural preservation, and political recognition. From early resistance to external influences, through the formation of political and social organizations, to demands for autonomy and rights, the Garo Movement has been shaped by various challenges and changes over the decades.

The key aspects of the movement led by Sonaram Sangma largely revolved around advocating for the rights and autonomy of the Garo people in Meghalaya.

1. Anti-Zamindari Protests (1940s-1950s): During the 1940s and 1950s, the Garo Hills region witnessed strong opposition against exploitative zamindari (landlord) systems, where peasants were forced to pay excessive and often illegal taxes. The Garo tribal peasants, led by leaders like Captain Williamson A. Sangma, organized protests and refused to pay these unjust levies. In response, landlords, backed by the colonial and later post-independence administration, retaliated with force. Police crackdowns led to numerous arrests, further fueling resentment among the tribal communities. These protests laid the foundation for a larger movement demanding land reforms and the abolition of oppressive feudal practices, highlighting the exploitation faced by tribal peasants under the zamindari system.

2. Tura Rally (1954): A significant turning point in the Garo tribal movement was the “Tura Rally of 1954”, where thousands of tribal peasants gathered to demand land reforms and self-rule. Organized by leaders like Captain Williamson A. Sangma, the rally voiced strong opposition to the exploitative revenue policies imposed by the Assam government, which then administered the Garo Hills. The protesters called for autonomy, fair land distribution, and an end to oppressive taxation. While the government acknowledged their demands and promised reforms, actual implementation was delayed, leading to further disillusionment among the tribal population. This rally strengthened the resolve for a separate tribal state and became a crucial milestone in the struggle for Meghalaya’s statehood.

3. Role in Statehood Movement (1969-1972): Captain Williamson A. Sangma’s leadership was instrumental in merging the Garo tribal movement with the broader struggle for a separate tribal state in Northeast India. The movement gained momentum as Khasi and Jaintia leaders also joined forces, demanding autonomy from Assam. The sustained protests, rallies, and political negotiations eventually pressured the Indian government to recognize tribal aspirations. In 1972, Meghalaya was carved out of Assam as a full-fledged state, marking a historic victory for tribal self-rule. Sangma, who became the first Chief Minister of Meghalaya, symbolized the success of the tribal movement in achieving political autonomy and preserving indigenous identity. The formation of Meghalaya fulfilled decades of tribal resistance against exploitation and marginalization.

Theoretical Framework

The Garo Movement and Sonaram R. Sangma's leadership can be effectively analyzed through three critical theoretical lenses such as- Subaltern Studies, Social Movement Theory, and Postcolonial Critiques.

Subaltern Studies Perspective

The movement reflects a subaltern resistance against both colonial and postcolonial state structures that systematically marginalized tribal voices. One example of this marginalization is the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation (1886)(Government of Assam, 1990), which ignored Garo customary land rights, highlighting how state laws silenced indigenous systems. This parallels Ranajit Guha’s critique of elite historiography, which often overlooks the experiences of subaltern groups. Documents such as Sangma’s petitions, spanning from 1952 to 1968 and housed in the Assam State Archives, reveal how subaltern groups like the Garo people made efforts to negotiate with power structures. However, these attempts often faced “institutional neglect,” with only token recognition in 1935 and partial statehood granted in 1972.

Culturally, Sangma’s leadership exemplified resistance through the use of Garo folklore (Jappa Jalimpa) and durbars (village councils), which align with the subaltern emphasis on non-institutional forms of protest. This approach re-centered tribal epistemology and offered a counter-narrative to the dominant discourses of the time. Despite these efforts, the limits of subalternity are evident. Even after the creation of Meghalaya, the exclusion of Goalpara’s Garos illustrates how subaltern groups remain fragmented by state boundaries, echoing Gayatri Spivak’s question in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" about the persistent silencing of marginalized voices(Spivak, 1988).

Social Movement Theory

Sangma’s movement can be analyzed through the lens of Social Movement Theory, particularly in terms of mobilization strategies, political opportunity structures, and framing processes. His use of Gandhian non-violence, such as tax refusal and beggar boycott, aligns with resource mobilization theory, which emphasizes the strategic use of cultural symbols like Garo folklore and organizational networks such as the Garo National Council. These tactics were effective in uniting dispersed communities and fostering collective action.

The movement also exploited the political opportunity structures available after 1947, particularly the constitutional provisions such as the Sixth Schedule (The Constitution of India, 2024), which offered a framework for autonomy. However, these opportunities were often met with resistance, as evidenced by Assam's delay in land reforms following the 1954 Tura Rally, reflecting the challenges of navigating closed political spaces.

In terms of framing, Sangma framed the movement's demands as "self-rule within India," carefully distinguishing the movement from the armed resistance of figures like Rani Gaidinliu. This strategic framing helped gain broader legitimacy for the cause, portraying it as a peaceful, integrative effort rather than a separatist one.

Finally, compared to Jaipal Singh Munda's elite lobbying efforts, Sangma's approach leaned more toward grassroots mobilization, resonating with New Social Movement theory. This theory emphasizes identity specifically the Garo A-chik identity over class-based struggles, highlighting the movement's focus on cultural and ethnic pride rather than economic or class-based grievances.

Postcolonial Critiques

The movement can also be analyzed through postcolonial critiques that highlight the persistence of colonial structures and the challenges of true decolonization. The zamindari system and post-1947 land alienation exemplifies how colonial exploitation continued under the "developmental" Indian state, a process critiqued by Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee, 1993). These colonial continuities demonstrate how the state maintained exploitative practices even after independence, particularly regarding land rights.

Additionally, the state's "partial accommodation" of the Garo community, as seen in the creation of Meghalaya but the exclusion of Goalpara, reflects Frantz Fanon's concern about postcolonial elites replicating the hierarchies of their colonial predecessors (Fanon, 1963). This marginalization shows how the promise of postcolonial statehood did not fully address the needs of indigenous communities.

In terms of cultural resistance, Sangma's use of Gandhian methods combined with Garo traditions reflects Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" a space where identity is negotiated between colonizer and colonized (Bhabha, 1994), resisting both colonial assimilation and tribal isolationism. This cultural hybridity allowed Sangma to develop a unique approach to self-rule that integrated indigenous values with modern political strategies.

Finally, Sangma's 1991 statement, "Meghalaya is ours, but true self-rule is not over" echoes Aimé Césaire's critique of formal independence without substantive liberation (Césaire et al., 2000). Despite the creation of Meghalaya, the struggle for genuine autonomy and empowerment remained unfinished, underscoring the ongoing challenges of decolonization in postcolonial societies.

Legacy and Unfinished Struggles

Sonaram Sangma was a prominent political figure and social leader from the northeastern state of India, particularly known for his contributions to the Garo community. He was widely recognized for his efforts in improving the socio-political landscape of the region, particularly advocating for the rights and welfare of indigenous communities. As a key member of the Indian National Congress (INC), Sonaram Sangma held several significant roles throughout his career, earning respect for his leadership and dedication. His influence extended beyond politics, with his advocacy for education, economic development, and social justice leaving a lasting impact on the state and its people.

Sangma's legacy is characterized by his work to uplift marginalized groups and foster a sense of unity and identity among the Garo people. His ability to bridge traditional cultural values with modern political challenges has made him a revered figure in the region's history. In this discussion, we have explored the achievements and lasting legacy of Sonaram Sangma, highlighting his contributions to the political, social, and cultural fabric of the Garo community and beyond.

1. Land Reforms: One of the most significant achievements of the Garo tribal movement was the abolition of the oppressive zamindari system in tribal areas, ensuring that landlords could no longer exploit peasants with illegal taxes and forced labor. The movement also succeeded in securing legal protections for Garo customary land rights, preventing outsiders from encroaching on tribal lands. These reforms were institutionalized after Meghalaya's formation, with laws recognizing the unique traditional land tenure systems of the Garos, Khasi, and Jaintia tribes. This safeguarded tribal communities from displacement and preserved their socio-economic autonomy.

2. Political Empowerment: The movement dramatically increased tribal representation in politics, first within Assam and later in the newly formed state of Meghalaya. Leaders like Captain Williamson A. Sangma played a crucial role in ensuring that tribal voices were heard in legislative bodies. His leadership inspired future

generations of Garo politicians, most notably Purno A. Sangma, who became a prominent national leader and Speaker of the Lok Sabha. The movement's success in achieving statehood empowered tribal communities to govern themselves, shaping Meghalaya's political landscape for decades.

3. Cultural Revival: Beyond political and economic gains, the movement strengthened Garo identity and self-respect, countering decades of marginalization. It promoted the Garo language and traditions in governance, ensuring that tribal customs were respected in administration and education. The establishment of Meghalaya as a tribal-majority state allowed indigenous cultures to flourish, with greater emphasis on traditional festivals, oral histories, and community-based governance systems. This cultural revival helped preserve Garo heritage against the pressures of assimilation.

4. Influence on Northeast Tribal Movements: The success of the Garo movement set a powerful precedent for other tribal struggles in Northeast India, including the Bodo, Khasi, and Naga movements. It demonstrated that organized resistance and political negotiation could lead to autonomy and self-rule. The movement also highlighted tribal autonomy as a critical issue in Indian politics, influencing policies like the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which grants special protections to tribal areas. The legacy of the Garo movement continues to inspire indigenous rights activism across India, reinforcing the importance of self-determination and cultural preservation for tribal communities.

Sonaram Sangma's legacy continues to resonate in both political and cultural spheres, shaping the trajectory of Garo identity and aspirations well beyond his lifetime. His political influence is particularly evident in leaders like Purno A. Sangma, who served as the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and was a prominent figure in Indian politics. Purno, a relative of Sonaram, carries forward his vision of regional autonomy and tribal rights, ensuring that the Garo community remains a significant political force in the national landscape. In addition to his political influence, Sangma's cultural impact is also deeply felt.

The A.chik Theatre Festival in Meghalaya, for instance, stands as a testament to his ideals, celebrating Garo culture and identity while promoting the unity of the community through the performing arts. This festival honors his vision of preserving indigenous traditions while fostering a sense of pride and collective consciousness among the Garos. However, despite these achievements, Sangma's struggle remains unfinished. Land disputes in Garo-inhabited areas, particularly in Assam's Goalpara district, continue to be a major issue. These unresolved land conflicts, stemming from historical land alienation and the complexities of statehood, remain a pressing concern for the Garo people, reflecting the unfinished nature of Sangma's fight for true self-rule and justice. His legacy, therefore, is not only marked by the successes he achieved but also by the ongoing struggles that continue to define the political and social landscape of the Garo community.

II. Conclusion

He was a visionary leader who skilfully blended tradition with activism. While his movement played a pivotal role in the creation of Meghalaya, his broader fight for full tribal self-determination remains unfinished. His life offers a powerful lesson, real and lasting change emerges from the people themselves, not merely from policies or legislation. As Meghalaya continues to evolve, Sangma's legacy endures, a poignant reminder that the struggle for justice, land, and identity is an ongoing journey.

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