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Weekly Market System as a Rural Livelihoods and Local Economic Development in Garo Hills, Meghalaya

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Introduction

Meghalaya is an eastern hilly state that experiences humid subtropical weather, with rainfall ranging from 2,500 mm to 5,000 mm per year and temperatures between 4 and 30 °C. The state's undulating topography and predominantly acidic red and lateritic soils support diverse agricultural and horticultural activities. Tribal farmers, mainly belonging to the Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia communities, cultivate crops such as rice, maize, millets, and a variety of indigenous tubers, along with horticultural crops like pineapple, Khasi mandarin, oranges, banana, jackfruit, and arecanut. Spices are another major production in Meghalaya, including turmeric, ginger, black pepper, and bay leaf, while livestock rearing, such as piggery, goatery, and backyard poultry farming, plays a vital role in sustaining rural livelihoods and nutritional security.



The Garo Hills region of Meghalaya, comprising the districts of West Garo Hills, South Garo Hills, East Garo Hills, South West Garo Hills, and North Garo Hills, is home to the Garo community and other tribes, including Koch, Hajong, Rabha, and Banai. The rural economy depends on agriculture as the main source of income, and farmers have relied on the traditional farming system for their livelihoods. Some of the most significant indigenous institutions underpinning rural livelihoods in the area are the Weekly Markets (*Antini Bazar*). These markets have existed as centres of business and economic development for ages. These markets, which were initially restricted to local trade, have now become widespread in the rural Garo Hills. The weekly market is much more than a place to buy and sell; it is an arena for earning money, sharing information, purchasing household necessities, and building connections in the community. In most villages of the Garo Hills, farmers

plant crops such as turmeric, ginger, arecanut, banana, colocasia, tapioca, yam, elephant foot yam, sweet potato, and various vegetables. However, due to a lack of proper market facilities, farmers have difficulty selling their produce. This system of weekly markets is an ideal solution to this problem. Each market is held on a particular day of the week, drawing a large number of farmers and buyers from nearby villages. The farmers eagerly wait for the market day to sell their goods and earn money to cover their expenses. Among all weekly markets, the *Garobadha weekly market* is one of the largest, followed by the *Chibinang weekly market*, which is held every Tuesday. In this weekly market, most fresh vegetables are sold by farm women using the *bhaga* system instead of by kilogram. Depending on the type of vegetable or edible item, they are sometimes wrapped in banana or turmeric leaves to preserve their freshness.

The Story of Rural Farmers

Before Market Day

One day before the market schedule, the farmers harvest produce from their farm. The turmeric rhizomes are cleaned, the ginger is segregated, and the tuber crops are harvested carefully. Both women and men work in tandem to make the harvest ready for selling purposes. However, bamboo shoots are harvested early in the morning on the very day of the market, since customers tend to prefer freshly harvested shoots. This tradition reflects the importance of freshness and quality in indigenous food systems. Many farmers carry their produce on foot, on a motorcycle, in an auto-rickshaw, in a pick-up (Mahindra or Bolero), or in shared vehicles to reach the market early in the morning. Most people in remote areas reach the bazaar in a Mahindra or Bolero pickup, and when returning, they carry their purchases.

Activities in the Weekly Market

The rural weekly market, locally referred to as an *Antini bazar*, forms an integral part of the socio-economic activities of the tribal communities of Garo Hills. Weekly markets usually start at 7:00 AM and continue until approximately 2:00 PM, while some rural markets get over by 12:30 PM. The weekly market serves as an important meeting point for farmers, traders, and villagers for business and other social and cultural activities. There are several purposes for which the market is used in the lives of the Garo communities. The farmers come to the market with their produce to earn money for their families' needs. It also serves as a venue for villagers to purchase basic necessities and exchange seeds and other planting materials. There are also livestock and poultry trading at the market. Apart from economic activity, the weekly market also serves as a centre for social interaction, the exchange of indigenous agricultural knowledge, cultural

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exchange, and community networking. Several products cultivated by the tribal people are sold at the market. They include turmeric, ginger, arecanut, banana, colocasia, tapioca, yam, elephant foot yam, sweet potato, bamboo shoots, and several other seasonal fruits and vegetables cultivated locally. Many of these products are produced through traditional methods (*Jhum* or plain land cultivation) and hold high value for both household and commercial use. In turn, the farmers procure essential household products like dry fish, salt, chilli, pulses, vegetables, cloth, household goods, and writing materials. In this way, the weekly market acts as an important link between the rural producers and consumers. The income earned from the weekly market plays a significant role in covering the weekly needs of the tribal families in the Garo Hills region.

During festival seasons, the market committee occasionally reschedules the weekly market day when it coincides with a major festival. In such cases, the market is usually held on an earlier or alternative day to facilitate the festival's celebration and ensure maximum participation by traders and villagers.



Economic Impact

The weekly market system has become a crucial driving force behind rural economic development.

- **Benefit farmers:** Weekly market provides a venue to sell their products and helps sustain their livelihood
- **Direct produce marketing:** Farmers do not need intermediaries in selling their products
- **Instant money flow:** Produce is instantly turned into money
- **Less post-harvest losses:** The fresh produce gets sold fast and avoids any losses.
- **Markets for traditional crops:** The traditional crops, like colocasia, yams, and bamboo shoots, have plenty of buyers as they are all grown organically.
- **Livestock marketing facility:** The poultry birds and livestock are exchanged as well as sold on a regular basis
- **Exchange of seeds and planting material:** Farmers get good-quality planting material for the next season.
- **Social and cultural importance:** People from various villages gather at a single point. This helps them create strong social links and maintain their cultural identity. Market days are considered recreation days for many elders and women. The culture, language, and traditions remain alive thanks to these markets. The exchange of farming knowledge among farmers helps preserve their agricultural tradition.

Challenges

However, despite their significance, weekly markets experience certain difficulties, which include:

- Insufficient market facilities
- Inadequate storage facilities
- Lack of proper transport during the rainy seasons
- Inadequate facilities for value addition
- Price fluctuation
- Limited access to digital marketing facilities

Overcoming these hurdles would further increase the role of weekly markets in rural development.

Way Forward

For improving the efficiency of the weekly markets, the following strategies can be adopted:

- Construction of better market sheds

- Development of storage and grading centres
- Value-added products promotion
- Improved road connectivity
- Market information through digitization
- Empowerment of women entrepreneurs and farmers' associations.
- Branding of local products of Garo Hills

Conclusion

In the Garo Hills, the age-old tradition of weekly markets remains a vital means of sustaining the livelihoods of farming tribes. This is an effective intermediary between producers and consumers, providing food security, generating income, and preserving indigenous agriculture. The weekly market means much more for numerous rural communities than just another commercial venue, as it signifies the resilience of their culture and economic independence. With modernization underway, it is vital to preserve and improve this special foundation in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya.