

## **Electoral Participation of Indigenous People in Bangladesh: A Case Study on the Garo Community**

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**Abstract:** Bangladesh is a country of diverse culture of different people. The Bengali are the majority, and there are minorities of ethnic, the indigenous people of Bangladesh. The Population Census Report of Bangladesh (2001) states that the total number of indigenous people is 1.2 million, comprising of 27 district ethnic groups, which constitutes 1.13 percent of the country's total population. Among them the Garo is one of the largest indigenous communities of Bangladesh. Their participation in politics is important for improving the democratization process and people's empowerment. This study aims and identifies the level of electoral participation of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election in Bangladesh. It is observed from the study that almost all the respondents of the community cast the vote in different elections regularly. They are politically conscious and responsive to their voting rights which are similar to that majority Bengali people. It is also found that Garo people's participation in electoral meetings, processions, and campaigning are lower than voting. Garo people, who are young at age and have a higher level of education, are more active in electoral participation than those of old aged and lower level of educational status. The study finally concludes that the Garo people consciously participated in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election and their participation level was satisfactory.

**Keywords:** Electoral Participation, Voting, Electoral Meetings, Processions and Campaigning.

### **Introduction**

Election make a fundamental contribution to democratic governance. Because direct democracy is a form of government in which political decision are made directly by the entire body of qualified citizens, is impractical in most modern societies. Democratic government must be conducted through representatives. Election enables voters to select representatives to hold them accountable for their performance. Moreover, elections thus provide political education for citizens and ensure the responsiveness of democratic governments to the will of the people. The elections also reinforce the stability and legitimacy of the political community. Voting is an important instrument of electoral participation and a common mode of participation in any democratic system. (Carl. J. Friedrich, 1986, p. 280). Voting gives people an opportunity to have their say and through expressing partisanship, to satisfy their need to feel a sense of belonging. There are other forms of electoral participation such as attending electoral meetings, and processions, campaigning activities etc. Electoral participation rates depend on many factors, including the type of electoral system, the social groupings to which voter belongs, the voter's personalities and beliefs, their places of residence, and a host of their idiosyncratic factors.

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The rate of electoral participation always depends on the nature of elections. Electoral turnout is greater in national than in state or provincial elections, and greater in the local elections. Whether an election is partisan or nonpartisan also affects turnout, as fewer people participate in nonpartisan elections. Supporters of political parties vote more often than those without a partisan identity.

Relatively low levels of electoral participation are associated with low levels of education, occupational status, and income. Those groups in society that have been most recently enfranchised also tend to vote at lower rates. For a significant period in the 20th century, women voted less frequently than men, though the difference had been erased by the end of the century in most countries (Serajul Islam, 2006). However, the rates of participation of racial minorities are generally lower than those of majority groups, and members of the working class vote less frequently than members of the middle class. In many countries, the participation of young people is significantly lower than that of older people. In order to measure the level of participation rates in elections in a democratic system, a comprehensive study is important. This study explores the participation rates of an indigenous community in Mymensingh district that unveils the nature of a democracy and how the indigenous community to integrate themselves with their electoral participation in 9<sup>th</sup> national elections in Bangladesh.

Garo, one of the major indigenous communities in Bangladesh with distinct ethnic identities is selected for research. Though they are well known as “Garo”, they like to identify themselves as “Mandi”, which means human being (Barling, 1997 p.5). The present population size of Garo in Bangladesh is 150,000 (Kibriaul, 2014 p.11.) They live in the districts of Tangail, Jamalpur, Sherpur, Mymensingh, Netrakona, Sunamganj, Sylhet and Gazipur with the highest concentration in Haluaghat and Dhobaura upuzilas of Mymensingh, Durgapur and Kalmakanda upuzilas of Netrokona, and Madhupur upuzila of Tangail district. Besides Bangladesh, they live in Asam, Nagaland, Tripura and West Bengal of India ( Ellen Ball, 2007 p. 23). However, their present population around the world is approximately half a million, of them about one-fifth of the total population of the Garo live in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2007). The Garo society is matrilineal and mothers inherit property and they are the head of their respective families. Each husband or the father of children works as a manager of the family. The children assume the surname of their mother. According to the Garo customs, daughters inherit the family property. However, only the selected daughter, known as “Nakna” in Garo language enjoys that opportunity. Generally, the youngest daughter of a family is selected as “Nakna” (Jeremy, Cooper, 1992 p.54). At present, the male children are also given shares in the landed property through registered deeds in Garo society during the lifetime of their parents. The Gar rely on nature. Their profession is hunting and warrior known as “Matgrik”. They practise jhum cultivation which is the most common agricultural tradition. For more than 4,000 years, the Garo have been practicing jhum cultivation. It was their main profession. But in the last 50 years the most changing scenario of the Garo ethnic people is the changing of professions. They are now influenced and have adapted to the modern technology and professions. They are engaged in Government and non-government jobs in Bangladesh. The entire Garo society is divided into 13 groups. These

are Aoye, Abeng, Attong, Ruga, Chibok, Chisak, Doyal, etc (MdRafikul Islam, 2008 p.8) The marriage institution of Garo is totally controlled by inter caste system. Most Garos are now Christians in faith. They started to embrace Christianity by the end of the 19th century when the Christian missionaries came to their settlements. The members of Garo community had achieved a remarkable success in attaining higher literacy rate with the support of those missionaries. At present every Garo village has a primary school and the literacy rate is as high as 80%(N.Nasmul and Hossain, 2009 p. 23) Earlier the Garos believed in animism. In the Garo's old-religion society only priests had knowledge about the existence of god-goddesses and their role. Most festivals of Garo are based on agricultural cycle of crops. The harvesting festival 'Wangala' is the biggest celebration of the Garos happening in the month of October or November every year. It is the thanksgiving after harvest in the honor of the god "Saljong" provider of nature's bounties.

They speak their own language 'AchikKuchik' that is of the Tibeto-Burman origin. But the language has no Alphabet. It is rich in proverbs, legends, rhymes and folk tales. They are also rich in music and dance (Suvas Gencham, 1994 p. 14). They have distinct cultural features which are different from the majority people. As they are an indigenous minority community, they may have a particular tendency of participation in politics which needs to be examined. In this study, I have tried to look at the level of electoral participation of the Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. For this reason, I have selected four modes of electoral participation: (1) voting (2) attending electoral meetings (3) attending electoral processions (4) Campaigning activities and selected some demographic variables such as Age, Education and Occupation. As there is no comprehensive study on this issue to explore the participation rates of indigenous groups in the context of Bangladesh, this study explores the real picture of electoral participation of the Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study has been designed to focus on the level of electoral participation of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election of Bangladesh. The main objectives of the study are as follows:

- (1) To investigate and analyze the level of electoral participation of the Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election;
- (2) To investigate and analyze the influence of demographic variables of Garo people on electoral participation in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election.

### **Electoral Participation: Conceptual Clarity**

Electoral participation is considered an essential part of the democratic process. Electoral participation is a term having many meanings. It is applied to the activity of ordinary citizens and to the activity of political leaders. It is used to refer to many different kinds of activity. Voting in elections, attending electoral meetings, attending electoral processions and participation in campaigning activities. The last decade, and in particular

the late sixties, could be characterized as an era of the “participation revolution”. Many Indigenous groups, especially blacks, students, and women campaigned vigorously for better and presumably equal opportunities in participate social decisions (Milbrath and Goel, 1977:144). We must begin, therefore, by defining and delimiting the meaning of electoral participation.

Sarzzak D. (1998: 13) states that Electoral participation is the range of activities used by individuals to try and affect the outcome of an election. The most common form of participation is voting, but it can also take the form of volunteering for a campaign, unofficially talking up a candidate to a colleague, or participating in a non-partisan activity, such as a voter registration drive.

Marlan C. (1986: 21) had described that participation can be measured by how often and to what extent it is performed. In many cases, certain groups of people tend to give more time or resources to a campaign than others, which is called participatory distortion. This type of bias in who participates more in the election process can lead to bias toward one group over another on the part of candidates.

Nelson J. (1976:38) States that Participation can also be measured by how much information relayed to the candidates or political parties by the participants. Voting, for example, indicates preference for one candidate over another, but does not provide a reason behind the action, while other types of participation, such as; candidates and their campaign.

Milbrath and Goel (1977:2 defined, “Electoral participation may be defined as those actions of private citizens by which they seek to support government and politics”.

Therefore, it can be said that electoral participation in any activity that shapes, affects or involves the political sphere. Electoral participation refers to those activities of the citizens that are related to voting activities and all activities that aim to influence decision making procedure of a political system.

### **Methodology**

This study is mainly quantitative in nature. Both the secondary and the primary data were used for collecting the data. For primary data, the survey method was followed for collecting data from the field. For this purpose, structured questionnaire survey method was applied. Pre-test of the questionnaire was conducted in the area to ensure the validity of the survey. Moreover, this study has applied observation method for this study. Nevertheless, necessary data and information were also collected from the secondary sources as well. Different books, articles, papers, concept notes and related website concerning the issues were reviewed to support the study findings. One typical village of Komoria in Norail union under Haluaghat upazila of Mymensingh district was selected as the study area. The district has a significant number of Garo people who mainly live under the Haluaghat Upazila. These villages which are selected for the study as Garo are mostly inhabited in these areas. However, total Garo population of Komoria village is 690 and the total area of the village is about 5 square kilometers. Some local institution like some NGOs; such as Grameen Bank, BRAC, ASHA are functioning of the village.

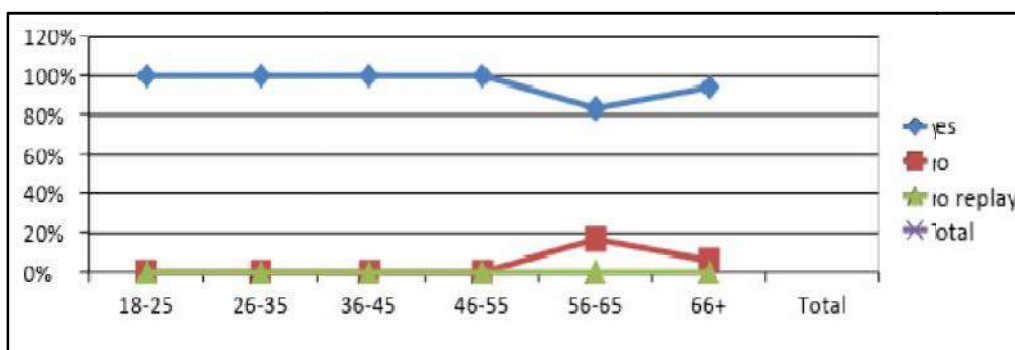
There are two Garoprimary school under Asha NGOs. Radio, Television and mobile phones are the main communication media of the villagers. Most of the Garo people of the research are day laborer and illiterate. Stratified random sampling technique was used for concluding the survey. Firstly, every family was counted and then one person of each family was interviewed through random sampling. A total of 201 families have been included in the sample. As a technique for collecting information, structured questionnaire based on direct interview have been used to obtain information from the respondents. Later on, the collected data were coded and analysed using SPSS software in accordance with the objectives of the study. Data were collected in August, 2013. The findings of the research are as follows:

## Findings and Discussions

### Demographic Variables on Voting

Voting is the most frequent citizen activity. Voting turnout is used as a measure of citizen participation. It exerts influence over leaders through generalized pressure, but it communicates little information about voter performance of leaders, the scope of outcome is very broad, affecting all citizens. This combination of low information about citizen performances and high pressure on leaders with broad outcomes is what gives voting is unique characteristics as blunt but powerful instrument of control over the government. Voting involves the citizen in conflict, since the electoral situation is by definition a conflictual one-at least if the election is competitive. The voting acts on the other hand, is an individual act. And voting differs from other political acts in that it requires relatively little initiative. The occasion for voting is presented to the citizen in the form of regular elections; he does not have to create the occasion. These characteristics of voting is fairly obvious, but they are useful, for they highlight some contrast with other modes of citizen activity (Shariful Islam & Nazia Zabin, 2012 p. 83). Now we analyze the voting turnout of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by the specific demographic variables: age, education and occupation.

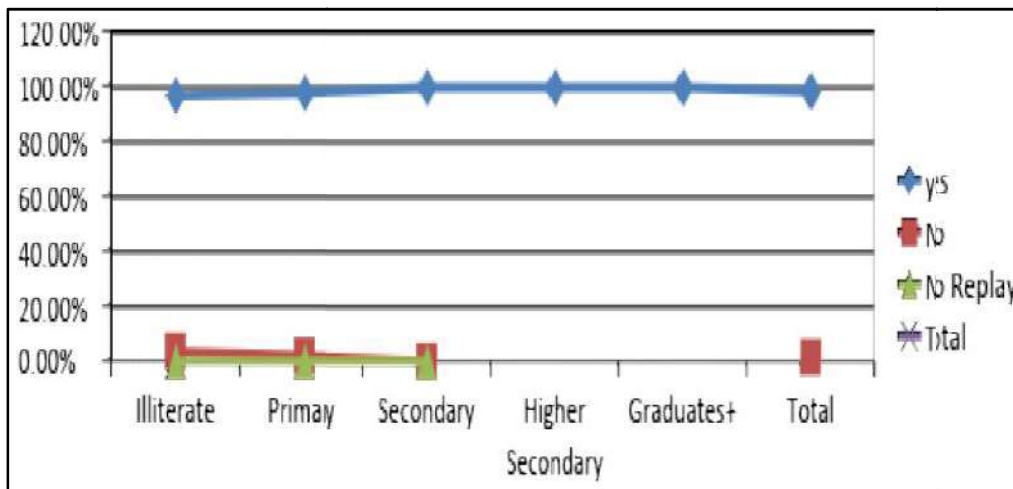
**Figure-1: Voting turnout of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by age groups (in%)**



Source: Field Survey, 2013

Figure-1 Demonstrates that out of 201 Garo respondents, almost all (98.51) respondent voted regularly in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. All (100%) 18-25, 26-35, 36-45 and 46-55 age groups voted in 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. On the other hand, 16.66% and 5.88% respondent belong to 56-65 and 66+ age groups did not vote. From the above discussion, we can say that the respondents of young and middle age groups are both socially and politically more active and concern about their voting than old age groups. Therefore, age is a significant variable in analyzing voter turnout in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. There is a positive relation between age and casting vote of the Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election.

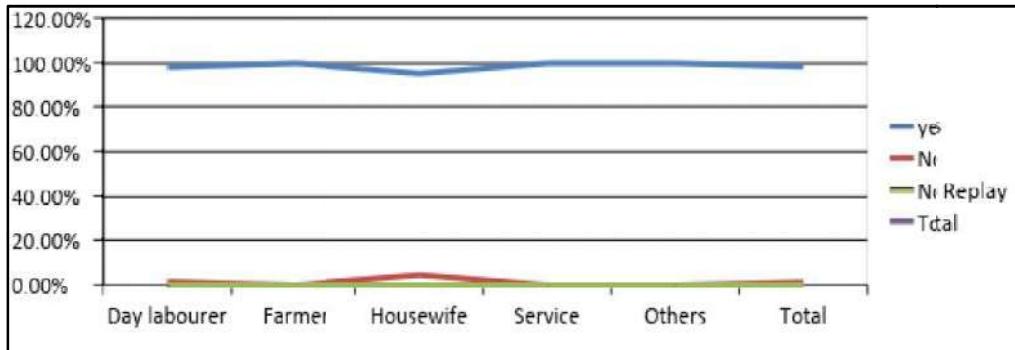
**Figure-2: Voting turnout of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by education groups (in %)**



Source: Field Survey, 2013

Education is a significant variable in analyzing the voting turnout of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. Figure-2 shows that 100% respondents belong to the group of secondary, higher secondary and graduate their vote in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. 96.96% of the respondent, belonging to the illiterate group. 2.4% respondents did not vote in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. From the above discussion, we can say that there is a positive correlation between voting and education of Garo people.

Figure-3: Voting turnout of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by occupational groups (in %)



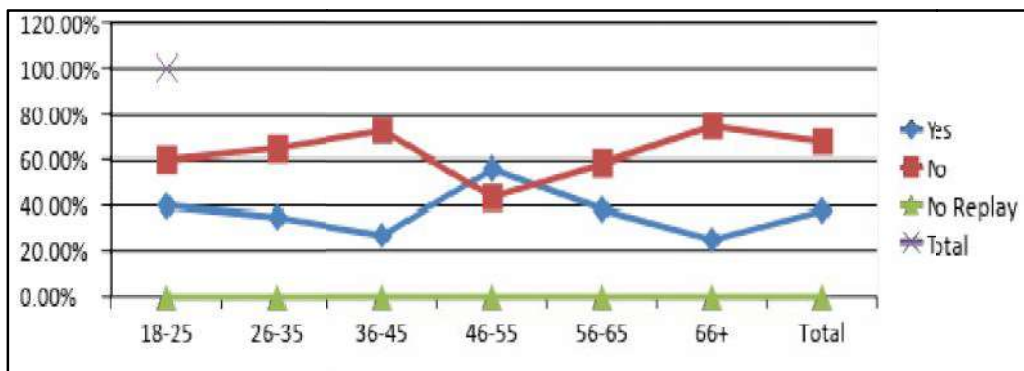
Source: Field Survey, 2013

Occupation is one of the most significant variables in analyzing voting turnout of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. Figure – 3 depicts that farmer, service and others (Driver and Weaver) occupation group 100% voted in 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. 4.4% and 1.73% housewives and day labourer did not vote in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election.

#### Demographic Variables on Attending Electoral Meetings

Attending electoral meeting is a significant mode of participation in the electoral process. Electoral meetings are organized during the period of election and these are good channels for having information. Though electoral meeting people not only get information of the candidate, they express their demands. Now we explain the attending electoral meeting of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by three different demographic variables: age, education and occupation.

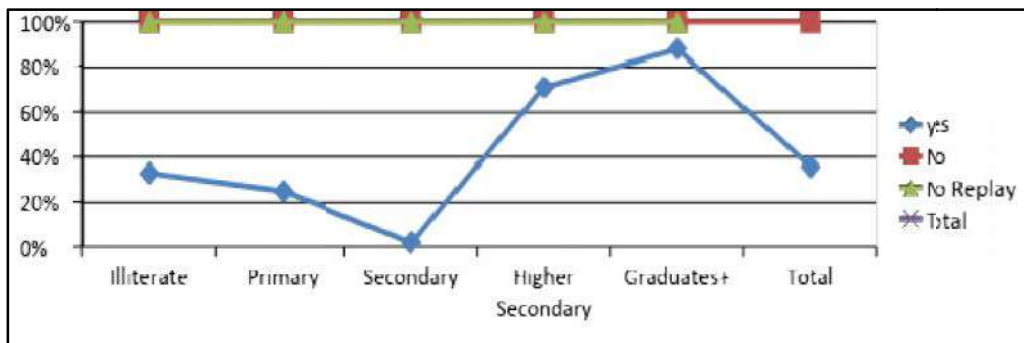
Figure-4: Attending electoral meetings of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by age groups (in %)



Source: Field Survey, 2013

Figure-4 demonstrates that 38% of the respondents attended the electoral meetings respectively. The highest percentages 38% of the respondents belong to 18-25 and 46-55 age groups. The respondents from 18-25 and 46-55 age groups participant at the rate of 40% and 56.25% respectively. 66+ age groups are less participatory 25% in electoral meetings. It seems that the respondents from Demographic Variables on Attending Electoral Meetings

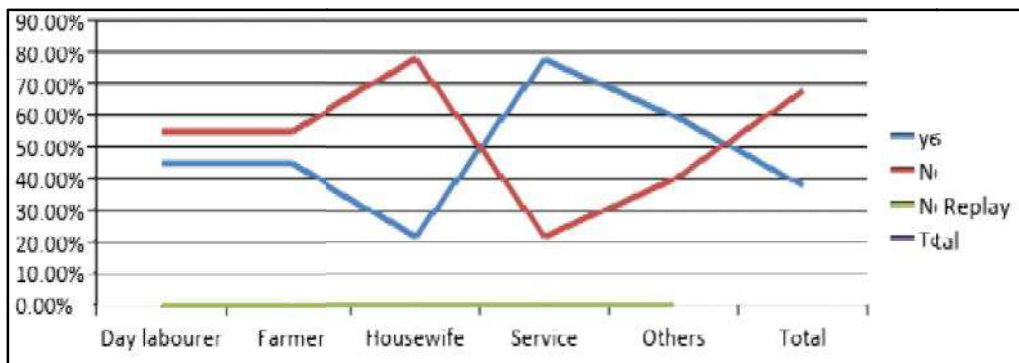
Figure-5: Attending electoral meetings of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by **education groups** (in %)



Source: Field Survey, 2013

A widely documented research finding is that people with higher levels of education tend to participate at a higher level than those with less education. Figure-5 shows that there is a significant relationship between education and electoral meeting of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. The figure shows that 25.5%, 67% 71% and 88% respondents participated in electoral meetings in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election of primary, secondary and higher secondary, graduates educated groups respectively. So the respondents of higher educated group are more active in participation.

Figure-6: Attending electoral meetings of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by **occupational groups** (in %)



Source: Field Survey, 2013

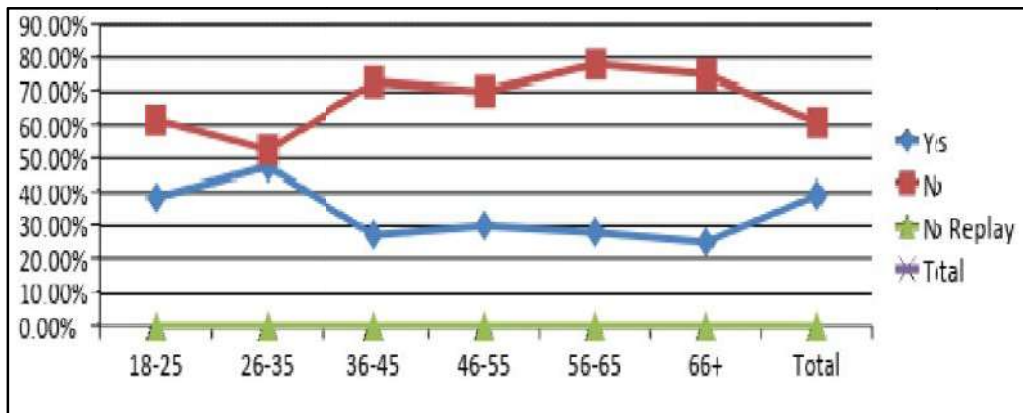


Figure-6 demonstrates that almost all professional groups in my research area are less participative in electoral meetings. Majority of 78.3% service holders Garo people participate in electoral meetings in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. 21.5% only Garo housewife participates in electoral meetings. So the respondents from day labourer and housewives are more keen to these types of participation.

### Demographic Variables on Attending Electoral Processions

Electoral Processions are one of the central elements of popular politics in the early nineteenth century. Governing authorities and accepted corporate bodies used civic and patriotic processions to separate themselves from the inhabitants who were assigned the role of spectators, and echoed the customary practice of 'beating the bounds' in asserting their authority symbolically over urban space. Actually electoral processions are organized to attract the people to a particular candidate. Generally, the people who are conscious of an active to politics attending such processions. Now I will attempt to assess the impact of age, education and occupation an electoral procession of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election.

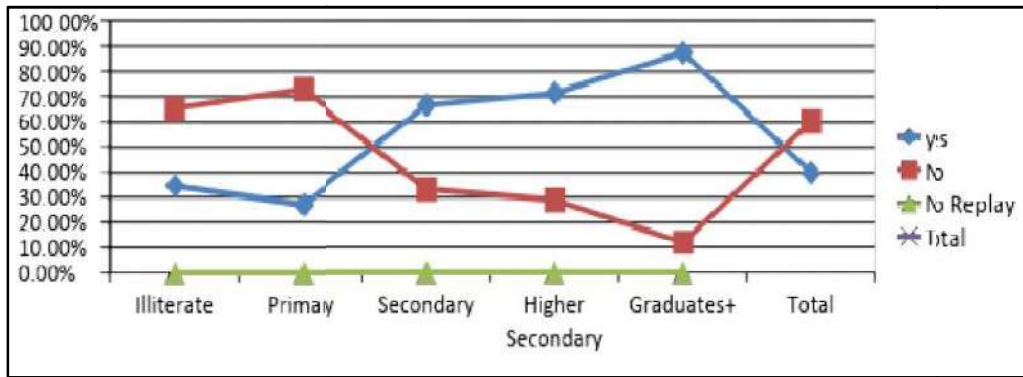
**Figure-07: Attending electoral Processions of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by age groups (in %)**



Source: Field Survey, 2013

Figure-07 demonstrates that 39.20% of the Garo respondents are attending electoral processions in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliament respectively. The highest percentages 39.20% of the respondents belong to 26-36 age groups (47.45%). The respondents from 18-25 and 46-45 participate at the rate of (38.46) and (30%) respectively. 36-45 and 66+ age groups are less participatory in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. It seems that the respondents from the young age group are more active and participate in these types of electoral activities.

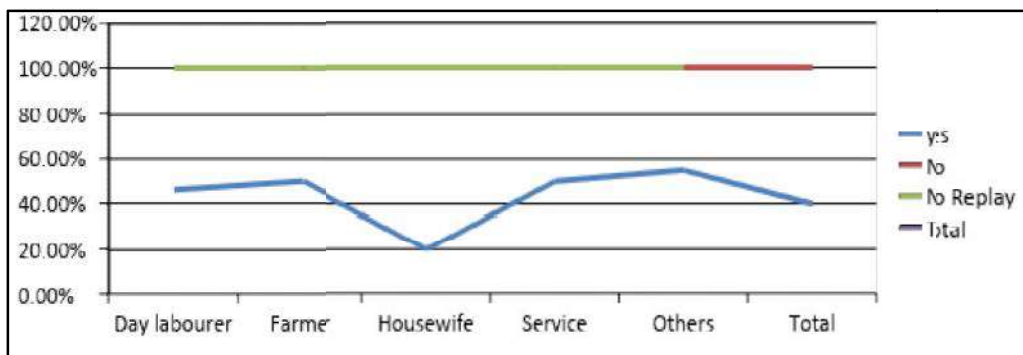
**Figure-08: Attending electoral Processions of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by education groups (in %)**



Source: Field Survey, 2013

A widely research finding is that people with higher levels of education tend to participate at a higher level than those with less education. Figure-08 shows that 82.6%, 70.2% and 65% respondents, participated in electoral processions in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election of graduate, higher secondary and secondary groups are respectively. Illiterate and primary educational groups, (37.3%) and (21.8%), has less participation in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election.

**Figure-09: Attending electoral Processions of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by occupational groups (in %)**



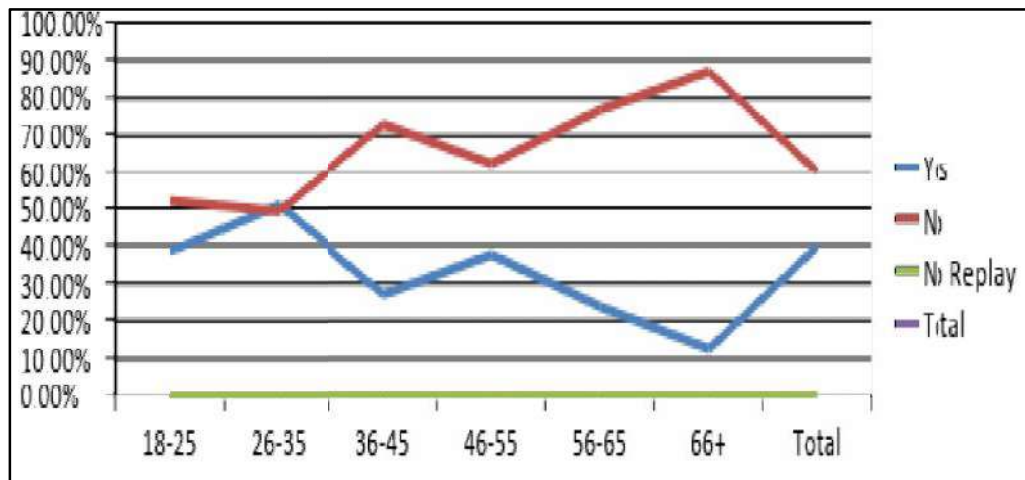
Source: Field Survey, 2013

Occupation is a somewhat more tricky variable to interpret than education or Income. Several studies show that professional persons are the most likely to get involved in politics. Figure-09 illustrates that (46.1%), (50%) and (50.2%) of day labours, farmers and service Garo people participated in electoral processions in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. Housewife and day labour respondents have less participation (19.1) in electoral processions.

### Demographic Variables on Campaigning

Campaigning is a familiar instrument in election politics. Through campaign activity people get information almost the candidate. It is a significant mode of participation in the election process. Like the vote it exerts a lot of pressure on leaders. But it can communicate more information about the participants' preferences because campaign activists are a more clearly identifiable group with whom candidates may be in close contact. Campaigning, like voting, procedures collective outcomes. Unlike voting, it requires the cooperation of citizens. It involves the citizen in conflictual situations. And more initiative is required of the citizen than in relation to the vote; campaigning is clearly a more difficult political act than mere voting. Now I explain the campaigning activities of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by the different demographic variables: age, education and occupation.

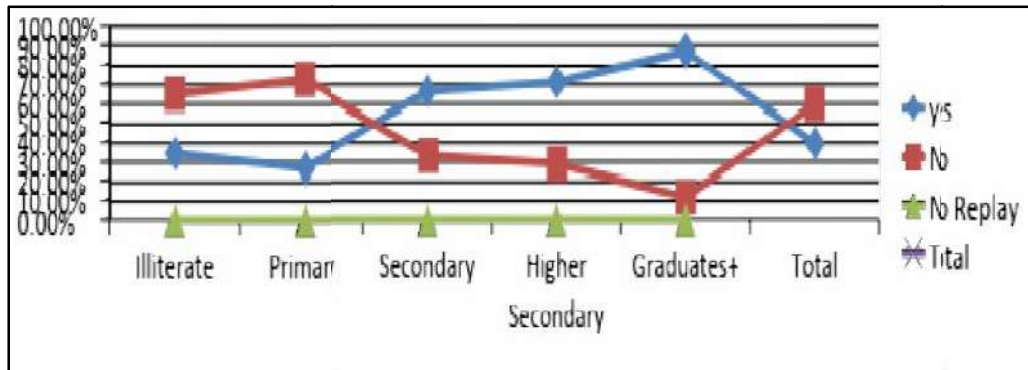
**Figure-10: Campaigning Activities of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by age groups (in %)**



Source: Field Survey, 2013

Figure-10 demonstrates that 39.80% of the respondents campaigned in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. The highest percentage (47.45%) of the respondents belong to 26-35 age groups. 18-25 and 46-55 age group participant at the rate of (38.46%) and (30%) sincerely. 66+ age groups are less participatory (25.1%) in campaign activities. So it is clearly identified that the respondents from (18-26) young age group are active in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election.

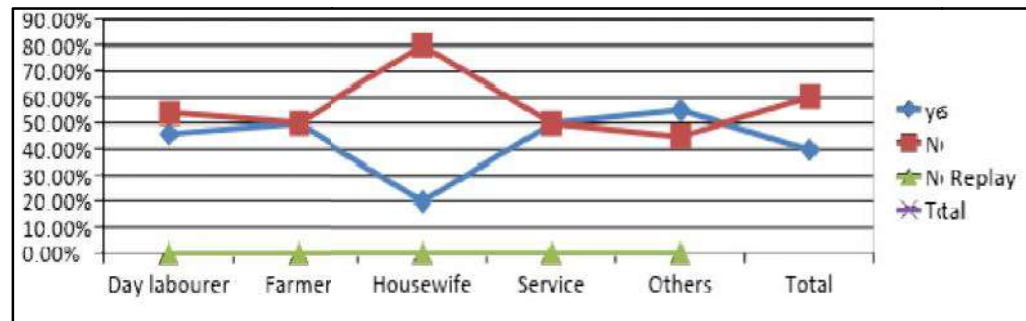
Figure-11: Campaigning Activities of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by educational groups (in %)



Source: Field Survey, 2013

Education is the vital variable in the electoral participation of campaigning activities. Figure -11 shows that Secondary, higher secondary and graduate Garo people participate in campaigning at a higher rate (63.2%), (77.4%) and (94.8%) respectively. Illiterate and primary educational groups are less participative to these activities in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. It seems that the respondents of higher education groups are more conscious in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary campaigning activities.

Figure-12: Campaigning Activities of Garo people in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election by occupational groups (in %)



Source: Field Survey, 2013

Figure-12 demonstrates that all occupational groups participated in campaign activities but their participation rate is not the highest. (45.10%), (55%) and (57.3%) Day labour, farmer, service holder and others (driver and waiver) groups participated in the campaign activities in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election. Housewives Garo people only (19.15%) participated in campaign activities. There are many causes for less participation in campaign activities. They think that campaigning activities are the work of men. Their work is related to the household affairs.

## Conclusion

Electoral participation is a necessary ingredient of every political system. In this perspective, a major indigenous group, Garo people are active in electoral participation in Bangladesh. In the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election, almost all Garo people cast their votes. Voting turnout by age, education and occupation were different. There is a positive relation between voting and age, education and occupation. On the contrast, the level of electoral meetings, electoral processions and campaign activities are lower than the voting which is a normal trend in any political system. Our study reveals that Garo people are conscious and responsive for the voting like all other indigenous groups in Bangladesh. The data demonstrates that education can play a significant role in the electoral participatory activities of the Garo people. The finding of the study shows that the highly educated respondents are more active (98.7%) than illiterate and less educated respondents. Occupational groups are positive in electoral meetings, processions and campaign activities but only housewives are less positive than other occupational groups. The study finally concludes that the Garo people are not apathetic in the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election and their participation rate is good, which is similar to that of majority Bangalee people in Bangladesh.

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