

# The Rise of Programmatic Regionalism: A Socio-Political Analysis of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) in Meghalaya

Nangiaisank Kharlukhi & Mary M. Kurbah

This study examines the rapid ascendancy of the Voice of the People Party as a significant political influence within Meghalaya. Traditionally, regional politics in North East India has been viewed through the lenses of ethnic identity, tribal protection, and the transactional dispensation of political patronage (Bijukumar, 2023). However, this inquiry suggests that the VPP's emergence signifies a fundamental paradigm shift toward "programmatic regionalism." This movement focuses on systemic issues—such as honest government, anti-corruption, and transparency—rather than narrow ethnic interests or personal political deals. Utilising cleavage theory and frameworks concerning party-voter linkage, this paper delineates the mechanisms through which the VPP transitioned from a nascent political movement to a formidable electoral contender. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, comprising a survey of four hundred individuals across four salient areas and interviews with political leaders and scholars. The findings demonstrate that the VPP connects strongly with urban youth and the middle class, who are disillusioned with the "money power" and favour-seeking systems of older parties. The study further elucidates the VPP's utilisation of social media as an economically viable medium for voter outreach. By providing novel primary data, the paper concludes that the VPP's success may signal a shift toward an electorate motivated by shared values, notably integrity. Ultimately, this research contributes to the study of regionalism and the evolving dynamics of democratic participation in North East India.

**Keywords:** Voice of the People Party, Meghalaya, Regionalism, Programmatic Politics, Clean Governance, Electoral Behaviour, North East India

## Introduction

Meghalaya is a significant location for examining regional political dynamics in North East India (Guenauer, 2018). Since becoming a state in 1972—the result of a campaign led by the All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference—Meghalaya has undergone substantial structural change (Khan, 2024; Satapathy, 2014). Initially, political discourse centred on a single objective: preserving tribal identity and achieving local autonomy (Singha & Nayak, 2015). In subsequent decades, however, this unity faded, and the regional

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political landscape became increasingly fragmented, characterised by the rise of minor parties and politicians frequently switching allegiances for personal gain (Satapathy, 2014; Ufen, 2021).

This division encouraged a pattern where political support was often traded for personal gain. In such an environment, a party's success relied more on the financial resources and the individual influence of local leaders than on clearly defined policy objectives (Satapathy, 2014). The Voice of the People Party emerged in November 2021, within this climate of political fragmentation and eroding ethical standards. Its rapid rise may signal a significant departure from the political practices that have characterised Meghalaya for five decades.

The VPP's participation in elections challenges the prevailing political system. Historically, established parties, such as the United Democratic Party and the Hill State People's Democratic Party, have relied on two primary strategies: promoting ethnic unity and utilising influential local figures (Guenauer, 2016). In contrast, the VPP—led by Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit and academics such as Dr Batskhem Myrboh—has advocated for 'Clean Politics'. This approach aims to restore ethical standards to the state's democracy, asserting that a representative's personal integrity is as significant as their ethnic identity.

The party's electoral impact has been significant. Following a strong performance in the 2023 Assembly elections, the VPP achieved a major victory in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, winning the Shillong seat by an unprecedented margin (Kharpuri, 2025). However, this success appears to be currently limited to specific geographical constituencies. While the VPP's victory in Shillong was historic, its influence is mainly concentrated within the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The Garo Hills in the western part of the state have not yet seen this shift towards policy-based politics and continue to be led by the National People's Party and the All India Trinamool Congress (Kharpuri, 2025). Consequently, while this investigation covers the broader regional landscape, its primary focus remains on the changes unfolding within the state's eastern regions. The investigation into the Voice of the People Party is significant, as it may provide fresh insights into the political dynamics of North East India. Historically, academic research in this region has focused on ethnic conflicts, border disputes, and tensions between the state and the central government. While these topics remain relevant, there is a gap in our understanding of how regional political groups are changing, particularly their shift from focusing on identity to prioritising policy programmes. The VPP serves as a distinct example of a localised political phenomenon that prioritises institutional reform and governmental transparency within the existing legal framework.

### **Theoretical framework: From Cleavages to Programmatic Appeals**

Academic discussion regarding sub-national political groups in India has shifted significantly over the decades, reflecting the evolving complexity of the world's largest democracy. In the years immediately following independence, scholars were largely concerned with the threat of national disintegration, fearing that assertive regionalism was a destabilising force that could undermine the new Indian state. However, modern political science has re-evaluated this view, seeing regionalism not as a threat to national unity, but as a vital component of Indian federalism that strengthens the democratic system. Within the framework of cooperative federalism, regional parties serve as essential channels for expressing the unique social, cultural, and economic needs of a diverse population.

Consequently, analysing the contemporary emergence of the Voice of the People Party requires a nuanced theoretical approach that avoids simplistic binary interpretations of power dynamics. This investigation aligns with the foundational observations set out by Sen Gupta and Myrboh. Whilst their work provides a vital macro-level explanation for the ‘VPP phenomenon’ within Meghalaya’s broader historical context, this article seeks to build upon that analysis by providing micro-empirical survey data. Such data is essential to validate the ‘Governance Turn’ from the perspective of the electorate. This transition requires a rigorous examination of the systemic shift from transactional to policy-oriented political linkages, the evolving nature of sub-national identity, and the state’s long-term political trajectory.

Cleavage Theory, originally articulated by (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), provides the primary framework for analysing the origins of new political organisations; this perspective posits that political parties are internal expressions of deep-seated societal divisions that typically arise during critical junctures of state formation. One of the most persistent divisions in post-colonial states is the centre–periphery cleavage, which describes the tension between a centralising core and a culturally distinct periphery. In the Indian context, the ‘centre’ represents the concentrated power of the federal core in New Delhi, while the ‘periphery’ encompasses distant regions such as the North East, which are often characterised by geographical isolation and distinct ethno-linguistic identities. Historically, regional parties in this periphery have acted as the primary vehicles for ‘identity cleavages’, mobilising voters against perceived cultural homogenisation or administrative neglect by the federal centre (Kohli, 2012). For several decades, Meghalaya’s political landscape was defined almost exclusively by these identity-based claims, centred on the historical struggle for statehood and the preservation of tribal hegemony.

However, the rapid and unprecedented rise of the Voice of the People Party suggests the emergence of a new divide: a clear separation between a status quo based on patronage and an electorate seeking institutional modernisation. This development indicates that the traditional divide based on identity may be systematically supplemented—though not entirely replaced—by a governance-oriented divide, pitting the beneficiaries of systemic patronage against a public demanding transparency and ethical accountability. This shift is illustrated by the transition from patronage to policy-based politics, a key debate regarding the fundamental nature of how parties connect with voters. (Kitschelt, 2000) offers a clear classification of these approaches, distinguishing between clientelist and policy-based mobilisation strategies. Within a clientelist framework, the relationship between the political actor and the voter is primarily characterised by a system of imbalanced exchange, where transactional mobilisation relies on parties securing support through the strategic distribution of individualised benefits.

A critical, yet often overlooked, aspect of this transition is the theoretical tension between digital mobilisation and conventional political engagement. Historically, political communication in the region was mediated by traditional “gatekeepers,” including established print media, village durbars, and resource-intensive campaign organisations. The emergence of the VPP, however, indicates a significant shift in this dynamic. By utilising digital platforms—specifically Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube—the party has bypassed established gatekeepers, enabling newer and less well-funded groups to establish direct, unmediated communication with the electorate. Through the strategic use of these digital tools, the party has challenged traditional

electoral finance models; by relying on digital connectivity to reach voters, particularly within the youth demographic, the party has reduced the necessity for substantial financial capital.

Unlike transactional models, programmatic strategies represent a shift towards policy-oriented mobilisation, where parties engage voters by providing collective goods and universal policy packages. In this approach, support is not gained through the promise of personal favours or individual benefits, but through an ideological alignment with the party's platform. Furthermore, to understand the VPP's electoral success, it is necessary to consider the concept of 'valence' mobilisation. While conventional electoral competition often involves parties diverging on 'positional' issues where they take different stances on a policy spectrum, 'valence' issues relate to goals with broad societal consensus, such as integrity, administrative competence, and fiscal responsibility (Clarke et al., 2004; Stokes, 1963). When the VPP campaigns under the banner of "Clean Politics", it appears to employ a valence strategy that resonates deeply with an electorate characterised by an awareness of perceived moral failings in governance.

The rise of the Voice of the People Party must be viewed within the long-term context of sub-nationalism in North East India, which has historically been defensive, prioritising the protection of indigenous land and cultural hegemony (Biswas & Das, 2021). While the VPP remains committed to these foundational principles, its brand of regionalism appears more proactive and outward-looking, representing a significant maturation of regional identity. This evolution is best understood by examining the development of Meghalaya's politics, which has transitioned into an era defined by parliamentary coalitions and executive instability (Satapathy, 2014). The decline of early ideological unity led to a fractured mandate, marking a period where regional groups frequently compromised their core principles to maintain power within asymmetric coalitions (Bijukumar, 2023; Satapathy, 2014).

This has resulted in what this study terms a "representation gap"—a systemic failure where the modern aspirations and ethical demands of the citizenry are characterised by a lack of resonance within the established political machinery. Addressing a gap in the current literature, this research suggests that the Meghalaya electorate is experiencing a shift in priorities, leading to a re-evaluation of the purpose of voting. For a significant period, the prevailing academic view was that voters in North East India were motivated almost exclusively by ethnic sentiment (Haokip, 2020; Jamir et al., 2021). This study, however, contends that an increasing segment of the public is now adopting a policy-oriented approach, viewing the ballot as a strategic investment in future public policy outcomes rather than merely an expression of identity. Consequently, the focus of electoral analysis is shifting from descriptive questions of representation to substantive evaluations of ethical competence and effective governance.

### **Data and Methodology**

To investigate the VPP's influence on Meghalaya's political landscape, this study adopts a mixed-methods research design. By integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from elite interviews, the study achieves methodological triangulation. Consistent with social science rigour, this dual-stream approach enhances the validity of the findings by cross-referencing statistical trends with stakeholder perspectives, offering a comprehensive analysis of the party's emergence. Focus

group discussions were also held with non-tribal communities in mixed-population wards to capture diverse perspectives on inclusivity and governance.

#### *The Study Area: A Socio-Political Micro-Environment*

The study was conducted across four deliberately selected legislative constituencies in Meghalaya: Mawlai, North Shillong, Pynthorumkrah, and Myllem. These sites were chosen to capture a representative range of the socio-economic and political demographics that define the state's primary urban and peri-urban areas. The qualitative research involved three focus group discussions with non-tribal residents in the Mawlonghat and Police Bazar areas of North Shillong to ensure the findings reflected the state's multi-ethnic political environment. By selecting these varied locations, the study endeavours to capture the multifaceted nature of the regional electorate, while acknowledging the distinct pressures and political cultures present within the capital's sphere of influence.

The primary focus of the site selection was the urban core, represented by the constituencies of Mawlai and North Shillong. These areas serve as vital urban centres, characterised by high levels of political literacy and a long-standing commitment to regionalist ideologies. Mawlai, in particular, is often identified as an intellectual and cultural hub of the Khasi Hills, with a high concentration of students, scholars, and youth activists who play a key role in shaping contemporary political discourse and driving institutional change. Consequently, these constituencies provide a suitable setting to observe how informed and politically active citizens respond to appeals based on governance.

Beyond the urban heartland, the study included the constituencies of Pynthorumkrah and Myllem, which bridge the gap between major urban centres and more traditional settings, offering a varied demographic profile. Including these constituencies is essential to assess the broader appeal of the Voice of the People Party's "Clean Politics" platform. Specifically, this diversity allows the study to determine the extent to which the party's policy-focused regionalism resonates beyond the urban core and reaches more varied socio-economic groups where traditional patronage networks have historically been strong (Das et al., 2021).

Selecting these four constituencies in the Khasi Hills is a deliberate methodological choice. As the Voice of the People Party's primary operational base and ideological cradle, the Khasi Hills provide an ideal context for evaluating the transition to policy-driven regionalism. However, excluding the Garo Hills from this empirical study is a recognised limitation. The political landscape of the Garo Hills is distinct, characterised by different patronage networks and linguistic identities that have not yet shown the same receptivity to the VPP's 'Clean Politics' narrative (Das et al., 2021). Further longitudinal research is necessary to determine whether this policy shift can transcend the 'Chicken's Neck' of Meghalaya's internal regional divide.

#### *Quantitative Phase: The Empirical Voter Survey*

The first phase of the study involved collecting empirical data through a cross-sectional survey. We recruited 400 participants in total, with 100 respondents from each constituency to ensure statistical comparability. To minimise selection bias and ensure the findings were representative of the electorate, we employed a systematic random sampling technique.

This systematic sampling method involved selecting respondents at fixed

intervals—specifically, every fifth household or individual within designated survey tracts—to ensure a balanced distribution across various socio-demographic variables, including age, educational attainment, and occupation. This approach ensured that the quantitative data captured the broader socio-economic diversity of the Khasi Hills.

The primary tool for data collection was a structured questionnaire, designed to measure three dimensions central to the study’s research questions. The first dimension focused on political awareness, aiming to determine the extent to which the public recognised the Voice of the People Party’s broader platform. This involved evaluating the electorate’s understanding of the party’s core objectives—the fundamental social and political goals guiding its agenda. Measuring voter awareness of the party’s mission allowed the study to analyse the VPP’s transition from a nascent movement into a recognised political force.

Building on this initial awareness, the second section evaluated the party’s electoral momentum. This part of the study assessed public perceptions of the VPP’s growth compared to established regional parties, such as the United Democratic Party and the Hill State People’s Democratic Party. By examining how voters view the party’s rise, the survey aimed to determine whether the VPP is perceived as a temporary protest movement or a credible, long-term political contender. This comparison is vital for understanding the sustainability of the party’s appeal and its potential to challenge established patronage networks and traditional voting behaviours.

Alongside these assessments of awareness and momentum, the third dimension examined the depth and authenticity of the party’s core message. Specifically, this dimension measured how effectively the party’s “Clean Politics” and anti-corruption stance connected with the public. It aimed to determine whether voters viewed these appeals as sincere commitments or simply as standard election rhetoric used to gain short-term support. By assessing the perceived sincerity of the party’s agenda, the study could determine whether this “Governance Turn” reflected a significant shift in the political attitudes of the Khasi electorate, rather than a temporary reaction to administrative failure. After data collection, responses were coded and digitised to enable a quantitative analysis of the correlations between voting intentions and the socio-economic profiles of respondents.

#### *Qualitative Phase: Expert Elicitation and Stakeholder Engagement*

While quantitative data provide a broad overview, qualitative inquiry is essential to understand the underlying motivations and nuanced political dynamics. To deepen the findings of the survey, the study included semi-structured interviews with key political actors and academic experts. This phase utilised purposive sampling, selectively engaging individuals with extensive experience and deep insight into Meghalaya’s complex political history. To complement the quantitative findings with qualitative insights, the study included a series of formal consultations with prominent stakeholders, whose specialised expertise provided critical input for the empirical analysis. These qualitative engagements were essential for situating the ‘VPP phenomenon’ within the region’s broader sociopolitical evolution, offering a depth of interpretation that a purely statistical approach might overlook.

The study began its qualitative research by consulting Dr Jemino Mawthoh. His background as a distinguished academic and former senior leader within the United Democratic Party provided a valuable perspective. In these consultations, Dr Mawthoh

provided a detailed historical overview of how regional movements in Meghalaya have evolved, tracing their development from the post-statehood era to the present day. His analysis was instrumental in contextualising systemic shifts within the regional landscape, enabling the study to frame the current ‘governance turn’ not as an isolated event, but as part of the ongoing history of regional aspirations. Furthermore, his insights into the shortcomings of established political entities and the historical disappointment with transactional politics were essential for understanding the growing public demand for more principled and transparent political engagement.

Complementing this historical analysis, the study benefited from further consultations with Dr Batskhem Myrboh. Serving as both a scholar and the official spokesperson for the Voice of the People Party, Dr Myrboh provided an insider perspective that helped clarify the party’s internal ideology and core objectives. He explained the VPP’s strategic decision to remain independent of traditional political groups and pre-poll alliances—a choice made to maintain ideological clarity and policy independence. By outlining the movement’s departure from conventional transactional politics and ‘money power’, his contributions helped us understand how the VPP has sought to build a direct relationship with the youth and the broader Khasi electorate. Furthermore, the study incorporated the insights of Martle Mukhim, a veteran political leader and former President of the Meghalaya Democratic Party. His extensive experience in regional politics established a crucial historical baseline for evaluating how the VPP’s ‘Governance Turn’ differs from the clientelist models employed by traditional regional parties. These qualitative engagements were essential for examining what political sociologists’ term “hidden transcripts”—the underlying motivations, frustrations, and ethical aspirations often obscured in formal media reports or official party manifestos (d’Astros, 2020). This included investigating the VPP’s rejection of transactional “money power” and its attempt to reshape the electorate’s understanding of political leadership.

#### *Data Analysis, Temporal Framework, and Procedures*

Primary fieldwork was conducted in stages between 2024 and 2025. The research team opted for face-to-face interviews during the survey phase; although more resource-intensive than digital alternatives, this approach was considered essential to ensure participant understanding, allow for the clarification of complex queries, and build the trust required for honest responses. The subsequent analysis followed a two-part methodological approach. The qualitative interview transcripts were analysed thematically, involving recursive reading and systematic coding to identify recurring themes—such as “systemic disillusionment” and the “imperative for ethical governance.” Concurrently, the quantitative survey data were processed using descriptive statistics, enabling a comparative analysis between constituencies. This enabled the assessment of, for instance, the variance in the VPP’s resonance between the youth demographic in urban Mawlai and the semi-urban populace of Myllem.

#### *Ethical Safeguards and Procedural Integrity*

Adhering to international institutional review board standards, this study maintained the highest levels of ethical integrity and participant protection throughout the data collection process. The research was guided by three core ethical pillars, beginning with the rigorous application of informed consent. Before participating, all respondents received a briefing on the study’s objectives, its academic nature, and the voluntary

basis of their involvement. Furthermore, participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, ensuring their engagement remained an informed and autonomous choice.

Building on these core safeguards, the second pillar involved guaranteeing respondent anonymity to encourage candid responses and protect the privacy of the participants. Given the sensitive nature of local political discourse, all survey data were anonymised to prevent any potential repercussions. Personal identifiers were systematically removed from individual responses to maintain confidentiality throughout the analysis. This approach was essential to foster a secure environment, allowing respondents to express their authentic views on the changing political landscape without reservation. In addition to these public measures, the study ensured transparency regarding expert involvement by obtaining explicit authorisation to attribute quotes and insights directly. Although Dr Mawthoh and Dr Myrboh were offered anonymity, both provided explicit consent to be identified. This strengthens the credibility and validity of the qualitative findings, establishing a clear connection to the expertise that informs the study's broader sociopolitical analysis.

### **The Rise of Programmatic Regionalism**

To understand the rapid rise of the Voice of the People Party, it is necessary to examine the history of regionalism in Meghalaya. Regionalism in the state has not been a fixed or uniform concept; rather, it has evolved significantly through three distinct phases: an early era of idealistic constitutional sub-nationalism, a long period of systemic fragmentation and coalition instability, and the recent emergence of programmatic disruption.

#### *The Idealistic Beginnings: The APHLC and Constitutional Regionalism*

The historical trajectory began in the 1960s with the Hill State Movement, led by the All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference (Iangngap, 2020). This movement sought the creation of a separate state for the hill tribes as a defensive measure against the perceived "Assamisation" policies of that period—specifically the linguistic and administrative impositions of the then-Assam government (Sarma, 2017). A distinguishing feature of Meghalaya's political development, particularly when contrasted with the insurgent paths taken by Nagaland or Mizoram, was that it was conducted entirely within a peaceful, constitutional framework (Borah & Veimy, 2025). The movement avoided armed rebellion, preferring instead to use petitions, legal discourse, and mass mobilisation to assert its claims for autonomy (Borah & Veimy, 2025).

During these formative years, regionalism served as a safeguard for identity, prioritising the protection of indigenous land tenure, linguistic rights, and cultural standing (Blah, 2020; Karlsson, 2013). Following the state's formal inauguration in 1972, the APHLC was institutionalised as the primary protector of this regional identity (Blah, 2020). However, the transition from a protest movement to a governing body within a complex, asymmetric federal system presented significant administrative challenges that the party's idealistic foundations were not initially equipped to address (O'Meally, 2016).

#### *The 1975 Emergency: An Institutional Systemic Shock*

A critical, yet under-researched, moment in this history occurred in June 1975, when

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a nationwide State of Emergency. This period of interrupted democracy, marked by the suspension of fundamental rights and media censorship, served as a major test for Meghalaya's emerging political institutions. For a new state, the Emergency was not merely an external event driven by New Delhi but a direct threat to its regional autonomy. Historical analysis suggests that the Emergency may have severely disrupted the region's political structures (Mangla, 2017). As the dominant governing body, the All Party Hill Leaders' Conference faced significant pressure from the Union government to centralise authority. By utilising the 42<sup>nd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, New Delhi extended the tenure of state assemblies and facilitated a significant consolidation of executive power, which undermined local decision-making processes (Mangla, 2017; Thiruvengadam, 2025).

### *Systemic Fragmentation and the Era of Partisan Volatility*

This fragmentation led to a long period of frequent coalition governments (Satapathy, 2014). In the absence of a single party capable of winning an absolute majority, the political landscape was defined by the constant creation and collapse of unstable alliances (Nargis, 2024). This environment entrenched the culture of "Aya Ram Gaya Ram"—a local term for chronic political volatility and party-switching (Sarkar & Mishra, 2018)—where legislative defection became a standard tool for political survival (Sarkar & Mishra, 2018). Politics moved away from its primary focus on public service towards the "Clientelist Trap," where the distribution of selective benefits and financial patronage effectively became the main method of holding onto power (Jati, 2022). As a result, administrative stability was often sacrificed, which likely led to a significant loss of public confidence in the traditional regionalist vision.

### *The "Representation Gap" and the Emergence of the VPP*

Regional entities increasingly form asymmetric alliances with national organisations—such as the National People's Party, the Indian National Congress, or the Bharatiya Janata Party—thereby diluting their distinct regional identity and resulting in their characterisation as 'subsidiary entities' (Bijukumar, 2023; Satapathy, 2014). This development created a "representation gap"—a political void where voters felt their regional aspirations were compromised for the sake of coalition survival. This dissatisfaction was widespread among the electorate, who were frustrated with the status quo, desired meaningful change, and felt alienated by perceived systemic corruption (Kharपुरi, 2025). The VPP, which emerged in November 2021, articulated a progressive agenda centred on clean governance, transparency, and development. Although traditional regionalist concerns, such as the constitutional status of the Khasi language, remain relevant in Meghalaya (Blah, 2020), the VPP simultaneously prioritised clean governance, anti-corruption measures, and transparency (Kharपुरi, 2025). The importance placed on these principles likely explains the party's appeal to a disillusioned electorate. History suggests that the VPP is not a temporary phenomenon, but a direct response to a fragmented and delegitimised political system.

## **Empirical Analysis: The VPP Phenomenon through Quantitative and Qualitative Lenses**

Having outlined the history of regionalism in Meghalaya, this section assesses the data collected during fieldwork. By combining findings from the 400-person survey with qualitative insights from experts, this analysis examines how the VPP has performed

in practice. The aim is to evaluate the party's appeal across four distinct areas: Mawlai, North Shillong, Pynthorumkhrah, and Myllem.

#### *Rapid Political Penetration and Informational Asymmetry*

A key finding from the quantitative survey highlights the speed at which the VPP has gained public recognition. While establishing recognition for a new party is typically a lengthy process in conventional electoral cycles, the time required can vary significantly (Haughton & Deegan Krause, 2015). Consequently, over 85% of respondents demonstrated a detailed understanding of the VPP's platform, indicating rapid awareness of the organisation since its establishment in November 2021 (Kharpuri, 2025).

The data also reveals a clear generational divide in how the party's message is received. While older voters tend to be more loyal to established regional parties, young people are the main force behind the VPP's political mobilisation. Notably, respondents under the age of thirty-five were twice as likely to report a strong understanding of the VPP's policies, suggesting that the party has successfully connected with the aspirations of the state's growing youth electorate.

#### *Urban Political Sociology: Mawlai and North Shillong*

The Voice of the People Party's commitment to clean governance and anti-corruption appears to have resonated with the electorate through strategic local mobilisation and digital outreach (Lamare, 2024; Kharpuri, 2025). This level of support suggests that the party's focus on governance is especially effective in areas where political awareness is high, and voters are more inclined to assess candidates based on policy outcomes rather than traditional patronage or ethnic loyalties. Mawlai arguably constitutes a salient exemplification of this trend. The VPP has leveraged its 'digitally mediated presence' to facilitate the accretion of momentum and the cultivation of collective purpose, thereby reinforcing voter engagement (Kharpuri, 2025).

Within Shillong, the urban transport system demonstrates fragmented public accessibility and an erosion of trust in its infrastructure (Mittal, 2026). This situation may contribute to a perceived lack of transparency and an increased demand for infrastructure improvement, suggesting that while the urban electorate shares a common desire for change, their specific priorities differ. For instance, the intellectual demands for reform in Mawlai contrast with the more practical, service-oriented needs observed in North Shillong's established residential areas. Furthermore, urban areas throughout the Northeast, including Shillong, often act as centres for complex identity politics and related urban developments that have the potential to worsen social exclusions, suggesting a dynamic interplay between government performance and issues of identity.

In these urban settings, political communication has shifted significantly towards social media platforms, particularly Facebook and YouTube (Rodgers, 2021). This marks a notable departure from the traditional 'physical rallies' of the post-statehood era, which were frequently limited by time and location (Meiserli, 2021). Conversely, VPP discourse is now constantly accessible via mobile technology, creating a direct link between party leadership and urban voters (Hermanns, 2008; Martin, 2015). By maintaining a constant digital presence, the party has effectively bypassed traditional

political gatekeepers and the expense of conventional mobilisation. This has fostered a more direct form of political participation that resonates with the digitally literate youth (Kamau, 2017; Xenos et al., 2014).

#### *The Semi-Urban Transition: Myllem and Pynthorumkhrah*

The data indicates a more diverse political landscape within the semi-urban constituencies of Myllem and Pynthorumkhrah, reflecting the complex social and political changes occurring in the state's peri-urban areas. In these settings, the findings suggest that political awareness and engagement do not rely on a single channel; rather, they stem from a mix of modern digital technology and traditional interpersonal communication. This indicates that as voters move away from the urban centre, reliance on established social structures remains a vital component of political participation, necessitating a multi-channel approach to mobilisation.

The study suggests that in Myllem—a constituency with more pronounced rural characteristics—"word-of-mouth" communication remains a fundamental political tool. Voters in these areas continue to rely on informal channels, such as market interactions, community gatherings (durbars), and established kinship ties, to form their political opinions and evaluate candidates. This dependence on oral tradition and face-to-face discussion suggests that, in these settings, the credibility of a political message is often confirmed through local social interaction rather than through digital media alone.

In parallel, the Pynthorumkhrah constituency, which has a diverse and cosmopolitan population, demonstrated the effectiveness of combining different mobilisation strategies. In this setting, the Voice of the People Party's grassroots efforts—including door-to-door canvassing and street-corner meetings—proved as effective as its digital campaigns. This suggests that even in diverse urban areas, the physical presence of political representatives and direct engagement remain persuasive, particularly among voters who may feel disconnected from purely online political discourse.

Ultimately, this evidence suggests that while the VPP functions as a primarily digital political entity, it has maintained a necessary commitment to direct, interpersonal engagement. By combining sophisticated social media outreach with traditional grassroots involvement, the party has extended its influence beyond the intellectual urban centre into peri-urban and rural areas. This approach bridges communication gaps by ensuring the party's message is conveyed through the most appropriate medium, ranging from digital content for urban youth to deliberative face-to-face discussions in village markets for rural voters.

#### *The 'Social Media Multiplier Effect' and Competitive Imbalance*

This study identifies a key phenomenon: the "Social Media Multiplier Effect." In political terms, a "multiplier" is a strategic asset that allows a smaller, less-resourced group to have an impact far greater than its size would suggest. Consequently, social media has acted as a "technological leveller," enabling more balanced competition between unequal political actors. The ability to share high-quality digital content quickly and affordably helps create a distinct ideological brand, allowing the party to bypass traditional political gatekeepers. This enables the VPP to craft a compelling narrative, framing the party as a "moral underdog" challenging established interest.

The empirical data suggest that the VPP has successfully turned its lack of traditional “money power” into a point of pride, describing its movement as one “financed by the citizenry rather than industrial contractors.”

The concept of the ‘Social Media Multiplier Effect’ is well-supported by the empirical data. For a resource-constrained party like the VPP, digital platforms served as the main source of information, effectively bypassing traditional gatekeepers. This is evidenced in Table 1, where 62% of the four hundred respondents in the urban intellectual centre of Mawlai identified social media as their primary source of political information, compared with only 22% for traditional public rallies. A similar trend was observed in North Shillong, where 54% of participants prioritised digital content over ‘word-of-mouth’ or rallies. These statistics suggest that the VPP did not merely use social media as an additional tool; rather, it established these platforms as the primary channel for competing against better-funded rivals.

#### *Challenging the Traditional Reliance on Financial Power and Transactional Politics*

For several decades, political success in Meghalaya has been widely viewed as the preserve of the wealthy. This study examines the VPP’s challenge to this established reliance on money in politics. Insights from interviews with influential figures indicate that the 2023 and 2024 elections marked a significant change in how political worth is judged. Historically, a candidate’s viability was often judged by their ability to provide personal benefits and patronage (Guenauer, 2017). The VPP, however, endeavours to dismantle this unequal system. By prioritising consistent policies and a clear, transparent message, the party encourages voters to move away from ‘transactional’ voting—exchanging votes for immediate personal favours—towards a ‘programmatic’ model focused on long-term public policy goals. While it is too early to claim that the old patronage system has been entirely replaced, survey results from constituencies like Mawlai suggest that the electorate’s underlying values are changing significantly. The fact that 85% of respondents recognise the party’s platform, despite the lack of expensive advertising, suggests a notable shift in the state’s democratic culture.

#### **The Concept of ‘Clean Politics’: Moral Framing and Ethical Governance**

A core element of this study is the VPP’s branding strategy, centred on the concept of ‘Clean Politics’—or *synshar khadar kaba khuid ba suba* in the Khasi language. For some time, political discourse in Meghalaya has been dominated by traditional issues: irregular migration, the preservation of tribal hegemony, and the management of natural resources (Guenauer, 2016; Sarma & Yadav, 2013). As Dr Jemino Mawthoh highlighted during stakeholder discussions, the VPP demonstrated strategic skill by reframing historical territorial grievances as a modern “moral movement.” By shifting the focus from specific border disputes to the ethical integrity needed to resolve them, the party successfully mobilised voters by appealing to a deep, systemic sense of public disillusionment. The findings suggest that citizens are dissatisfied not just with specific policy results, but are increasingly alienated by the perceived “moral bankruptcy” of the political system.

#### *Challenging Clientelism and Transactional Politics*

Qualitative findings indicate that the VPP’s internal rhetoric reflects what James C. Scott defines as ‘hidden transcripts’—unofficial discussions that challenge the public narrative of the political establishment (Scott, 2017). In Meghalaya, the widely held

belief is that money is essential for electoral success. Conversely, interviews with party members reveal a clear rejection of these traditional practices. Dr Batskhem Myrboh expressed this rejection during consultations, stating: ‘For our party, avoiding the transactional system is not just a tactic; it is a fundamental requirement. We tell the voter explicitly: we will not buy your vote, because a purchased mandate is a compromised mandate.’ This quote illustrates the ‘hidden transcript’ in action—a deliberate attempt to reshape the moral framework of the state by establishing financial independence as essential for genuine representation.

### *Challenging the “Alignment with the Centre” and Asymmetric Federalism*

The VPP’s refusal to align with the federal centre extends beyond mere strategy; it represents a constitutional stance against the narrative of subservient federalism. Dr Myrboh framed this as a struggle for the state’s ‘independent voice’, observing: ‘If we condition our development on the whims of a national high command, we cease to be a regional voice and become an administrative echo.’ The study’s data highlights the resonance of this approach. In Mawlai, 88% of respondents identified the VPP as a ‘stable alternative’, suggesting that the urban electorate increasingly values this independence over the traditional ‘double-engine’ alignment with the central government. This synthesis of qualitative sentiment and quantitative evidence indicates that the demand for autonomy is no longer a fringe ideology but a central driver of the VPP’s institutional legitimacy.

A common belief in Meghalaya politics suggests that regional parties must rely on the federal government in New Delhi to secure development funding. Dr Myrboh identifies this as a “political strategy of dependence” that undermines fiscal federalism and democratic autonomy. This narrative has significant implications for local political independence. If the electorate believes that infrastructure projects—such as roads and schools—are contingent upon being politically close to the Union government, the state effectively loses its autonomous agency. Dr Myrboh asserts that this “alignment narrative” is frequently utilised to justify systemic corruption. By refusing to join traditional political coalitions, the VPP has adopted a “constitutionalist stance”, arguing that development should be based on constitutional rights and administrative integrity rather than on political closeness to the federal executive.

### *Urban Political Sociology and the Governance Mandate*

This study suggests that this ideological shift is most pronounced among urban voters in the surveyed constituencies. The Voice of the People Party’s platform resonated most strongly with these populations, who are increasingly concerned with effective governance. This prioritisation of policy over personality marks a significant shift for the regional electorate, as voters move away from traditional ethnic anxieties towards a more rigorous assessment of state performance and institutional integrity. Central to this shift is a growing demand for merit-based employment, with urban voters prioritising transparent recruitment processes that move away from traditional patronage and clientelist networks. Alongside this, there is a heightened concern for fiscal transparency, involving greater public oversight of how state resources are spent to ensure they support the public good rather than private gain. Furthermore, this reform agenda includes a demand for stronger institutional accountability, as voters seek mechanisms to ensure that elected representatives fulfil their policy commitments and remain accountable to the public throughout their term.

This trend of ideological maturity is most evident in the Mawlai constituency, where awareness levels were the highest in this study. In this urban hub, the electorate did not view the VPP's 2023 electoral success as a temporary "protest vote" or a reaction against the incumbent administration. Instead, the findings suggest the results indicated "ideological consolidation," signifying a deeper and more permanent shift in political alignment. Consequently, urban voters increasingly perceive the VPP not as a fleeting political disruptor, but as a viable, long-term contender built on systemic moral reform and policy stability.

#### *Addressing "Ideological Thinning" and "Populist Institutionalisation"*

Scholarly discussions suggest that political organisations often struggle to maintain a consistent platform when transitioning from protest movements into governing bodies (Tiwari, 2026). This process, often referred to as "ideological thinning," requires a difficult balance between maintaining radical ideals and meeting the practical demands of institutional survival. For the VPP, this transition involves reconciling their initial anti-establishment rhetoric with the complexities of legislative governance (Neha, 2026).

#### *"Ethno-Linguistic Advocacy" and the "Eighth Schedule Movement"*

The findings of this study suggest that this linguistic advocacy acts as a crucial link. It effectively combines the VPP's modern governance agenda with the identity-based politics that have characterised the state since 1972. By elevating the status of the local language, the VPP ensures that its regional policies retain cultural resonance, potentially avoiding the loss of ideological clarity that often occurs when parties shift their focus purely to administrative reform.

#### *The Structural-Functionalist Perspective: Language as Social Cohesion*

Stakeholder consultations revealed that veteran political leader Martle Mukhim presented a clear framework for understanding the significance of language. Using a structural-functionalist perspective, Mukhim conceptualises the community as a cohesive "social unit" similar to a household. In this view, language is not merely a preference for communication but the essential "glue" required for structural stability and communal integrity. For Mukhim, language serves as the primary indicator of identity, thereby defining the boundaries of belonging within the federal structure. Mukhim frames this as a long-standing struggle, noting that the demand for constitutional recognition dates back to 1989. This effort was pioneered by the Meghalaya Federation—a coalition comprising the Hill State People's Democratic Party, the Hill Union Party, and the People's Democratic Front for the Indian Constituent Assembly—which first formally petitioned the Union Government. This history suggests that the Voice of the People Party is not inventing a new grievance, but is instead acting as steward of an "unfinished constitutional project." Furthermore, Mukhim identifies a recurring lack of strategic cohesion as a historical obstacle to success. He critiques the "fragmentation of regional parties," asserting that previous efforts were often undermined by individual partisan interests, leaving non-political groups, such as the Khasi Authors' Society, to navigate bureaucratic complexities in isolation. The VPP has addressed this gap by positioning itself as the "unified vanguard," promising to consolidate separate efforts into a single, effective political force capable of securing federal recognition.

*The Synthesis: Rational Choice and the Youth Demographic*

One of the study's most compelling findings is the strong support for the Eighth Schedule movement among the younger generation. Despite their focus on digital technology and modern employment, this group demonstrates a deep commitment to linguistic rights. The VPP has arguably encouraged this by framing linguistic advocacy in practical terms, demonstrating how cultural rights can lead to tangible socio-economic benefits. Such recognition would permit local candidates to undertake major national assessments, most notably those conducted by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), in their mother tongue (Singh, 2021).

Beyond these administrative and economic benefits, promoting linguistic rights provides the younger generation with a vital sense of “modernised indigenous identity.” This approach allows young people to navigate a rapidly globalised environment with a strong sense of “cultural security,” rooted in the understanding that their heritage is institutionally validated and legally protected. By presenting linguistic identity as a tool for progress rather than a relic of the past, the Voice of the People Party offers a vision where the Khasi community can participate in global discourse without forfeiting its unique cultural essence, thereby bridging the gap between traditional roots and modern aspirations. This synthesis helps explain the significant resonance of the VPP in urban centres like Mawlai. Young people do not view linguistic recognition as a mere “legacy concern” from the post-1972 era; rather, they see it as a prerequisite for administrative inclusivity and future professional success. By framing the Eighth Schedule as a matter of “constitutional rights and structural reform” rather than simply “ethnic sentiment,” the VPP has effectively revitalised a traditional regionalist cause for a modern, performance-oriented era.

*Demographic Drivers: Generation Z (hereinafter, Gen Z) and the Educational Hub*

A key finding of this study relates to the demographic profile of the ‘Governance Turn’, which is primarily driven by the ‘Gen Z’ cohort—voters aged between 18 and 25. Survey data indicate that this age group resonates most strongly with the party’s agenda; an overwhelming 92 per cent of respondents in this bracket identified ‘Youth Empowerment’ and ‘Meritocratic Employment’ as their primary political priorities. This trend suggests that the Voice of the People Party is fostering a political culture that prioritises policy outcomes over the traditional ethnic appeals of the past. For these young voters, university campuses and digital platforms appear to have replaced traditional community structures as the primary settings for political engagement. By addressing the aspirations of this emerging electorate, the party has tapped into a significant desire for systemic modernisation, positioning young people as active advocates, rather than passive recipients, of a new form of regional politics.

**Discussion: Situating the VPP within the Indian Regionalist Discourse**

The rise and rapid electoral success of the Voice of the People Party offer significant insight into the changing nature of sub-national politics in North East India. Historically, regionalism within the highland areas of Meghalaya was viewed as a defensive mechanism. Its primary purpose was to act as a communal shield against external pressures, such as irregular migration, demographic shifts, and the perceived alienation of indigenous land rights. However, the VPP represents a significant shift in the nature of sub-nationalism. This study suggests that this transition marks a change from

traditional “Identity-Based Regionalism” to a more focused framework of “Programmatic Regionalism.”

*The Instrumental Utility of ‘Clean Politics’ and the Emerging Voter Mandate*

This study suggests that the “Clean Politics” brand acts as more than just rhetoric; it is a calculated response to the electorate’s demand for practical results. Historically, voters in Meghalaya aligned with regional parties based primarily on promises of ethno-linguistic preservation. While these concerns remain significant, the modern electorate—particularly urban and peri-urban youth—is increasingly calling for a “performance-based mandate.” There is a clear shift from simply seeking representation based on shared identity to demanding ethical performance. This aligns with the framework of valence-based mobilisation. Unlike “positional” politics, which involves conflict over policy goals, valence issues concern objectives with broad agreement, such as administrative integrity, financial responsibility, and institutional efficiency (Clarke et al., 2004). The VPP has moved the political discourse away from divisive debates towards this domain of shared normative agreement. By branding itself as “clean,” the party encourages voters to assess its platform based on the candidate’s character and capacity for systemic reform. For the modern Khasi voter, the criteria for leadership have shifted: a representative must offer more than just a shared cultural identity; they must also demonstrate an ability to deliver tangible results.

*Subverting the “Money Power” Orthodoxy through Digital Branding*

The dominance of “money power” remains a significant barrier within the Indian electoral landscape. In many regional contexts, the standard electoral model is transactional, where candidates with substantial financial resources offer specific benefits or local patronage to secure support. This is often described as the “contractor-politician” relationship, where wealthy interests exert a disproportionate influence over the democratic process. However, the VPP’s performance in urban hubs such as Mawlai and North Shillong indicates that this established model is facing a significant shift. Due to the party’s limited financial resources and its rejection of traditional patronage networks, the VPP was compelled to develop an alternative mobilisation strategy based on “ideological branding” via digital platforms. Evidence suggests that achieving an 85% awareness level was primarily facilitated through the direct reach of platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, rather than via expensive traditional media.

This suggests that a clear, ethical message can effectively overcome the financial advantages of well-funded campaigns. When young voters engage with and share VPP content via mobile technology, they are participating in a digital public sphere (Habermas et al., 1989). This digital mobilisation allows an emerging, grassroots movement to bypass the expensive, controlled election machinery of established parties. While the influence of patronage has not been entirely eradicated, the VPP has shown that a movement driven by ideological clarity and youth-led digital engagement has the potential to disrupt the traditional “business as usual” model of regional politics.

*Federal Resilience and the Assertive Stance for Sub-national Autonomy*

A third dominant theme emerging from this analysis is ‘Federal Resilience’. This refers to a sub-national state’s institutional capacity to maintain its autonomy and distinct

political voice within the complex architecture of the Indian Union. During our consultations, Dr Batskhem Myrboh identified a regressive construct: the belief that a regional party must align with the federal executive in New Delhi to ensure its survival or secure developmental funding. The VPP has taken a different approach. By focusing on its own agenda and grassroots mobilisation, the party is attempting to re-establish a model of ‘Independent Regionalism’ (Lamare, 2024; Kharpuri, 2025). This represents a significant development; it suggests that the VPP prioritises the state’s constitutional mandate and federal autonomy over short-term political expediency. This independent stance reflects a “constitutionalist approach.” It asserts that, in a functioning democracy, a state government should not be reduced to a subordinate agent of the Centre simply to secure funds to which it is constitutionally entitled. This institutional strength is a key pillar of the VPP’s appeal; it provides the electorate with a sense of firm regional agency, assuring voters that their representatives will advocate for critical issues—such as the Eighth Schedule—without being bound by the “high command” culture or the partisan constraints of a national political party.

*Maturing Democratic Polity: The Synthesis of Identity and Substantive Governance*

The integration of identity and governance defines this maturing democracy. Reflecting a broader shift in regional politics, the VPP demonstrates a proactive, performance-focused approach (Das, 2025). As veteran leader Martle Mukhim noted in our interviews: ‘Language and identity are our household, but governance is the structure that keeps the house standing. You cannot have one without the other.’ By anchoring these sentiments to the 92% resonance figure, the VPP appears to have successfully transformed regionalism from a purely cultural concept into a comprehensive programmatic platform. The evidence suggests that regionalism in Meghalaya is undergoing a period of significant developmental maturation. In the early years of Meghalaya’s statehood, regional organisations focused on ethnic identity and language as the basis for state formation (Blah, 2020, p. 4). In the contemporary era, regional politics have shifted towards performance-driven welfare and a focus on clean governance (Das S., 2025). The VPP has facilitated this transition by synthesising traditional ethno-linguistic concerns with a modern demand for administrative integrity. This combination of social and cultural factors may explain the party’s strong appeal among the urban, educated population and younger voters. These constituents are no longer willing to accept an artificial divide between cultural preservation and socioeconomic progress; rather, they demand a political party capable of respecting their Khasi heritage whilst providing a modern, transparent, and meritocratic administration. By strategically addressing the “representation gap” caused by the lack of clear ideology within legacy parties, the VPP has demonstrated that regionalism can serve as a powerful force for both cultural security and institutional reform. This model of “programmatic regionalism” could serve as a template for other sub-national movements across North-East India, offering a viable strategy for maintaining regional relevance within a modernised, digital democracy.

*The Garo Hills Exception: An Examination of Regionality in Programmatic Shifts*

A key question for the future of Meghalaya’s democracy is whether the VPP’s model of programmatic regionalism can gain state-wide influence. At present, the VPP appears to be a regionalist party defined largely by ethnic interests, as shown by the composition

of its support base. In the Garo Hills, political competition continues to follow traditional ‘catch-all’ party structures or established patronage-based models. This suggests that the shift in political outlook identified in this study may be driven by specific socioeconomic conditions unique to the Khasi Hills—such as higher urbanisation rates and a more concentrated educated demographic in the capital, Shillong. For programmatic regionalism to become a state-wide reality, the VPP will likely need to overcome the historical and linguistic barriers that have traditionally divided the state’s politics into Khasi and Garo camps.

### *Challenges of Inclusivity and Federal Relations*

While the VPP has been highly successful in mobilising the Khasi–Jaintia electorate, the study highlights challenges regarding the party’s ability to appeal to a wider demographic and balance its regional focus with a diverse constituency. This is particularly clear in the diverse districts of North Shillong and Pynthorumkhrah, where the presence of sizeable non-tribal communities requires a more nuanced approach to regionalism. Survey data regarding the party’s inclusivity showed mixed results; while many respondents in urban centres viewed the VPP as ‘moderately’ to ‘completely inclusive’, this perception was less common in areas with a higher number of non-tribal residents. Consequently, a key challenge for the party is to maintain its commitment to Khasi–Jaintia cultural security while simultaneously building a platform that resonates with the varied socioeconomic realities of a modern urban setting. Successfully navigating the balance between protecting ethnic interests and promoting universal governance may be crucial in determining whether the party can sustain its momentum beyond its current heartlands.

Qualitative findings from focus group discussions in mixed-population areas, such as North Shillong and Pynthorumkhrah, reveal a pragmatic shift among non-tribal residents. While tribal voters often see the VPP’s anti-corruption stance as a matter of ethnic survival, non-tribal respondents—primarily from professional and business backgrounds—view the party’s policy-driven approach as a prerequisite for stable governance. For these groups, the VPP is not perceived as exclusionary; rather, it is viewed as a force for the rule of law, which they believe could reduce the arbitrary local harassment and instability that have historically disrupted life in the capital. However, this support is marked by cautious optimism. A recurring concern among non-tribal minorities is the potential for a return to ‘sons of the soil’ rhetoric if the party secures a legislative majority. Respondents feared that the party’s focus on Hynniewtrep rights, though currently presented as a governance issue, might lead to their further marginalisation in government and private sector employment. By prioritising clean governance, the VPP has temporarily bridged the ethnic divide, though the long-term success of this coalition depends on the party’s ability to maintain a merit-based, rather than an ethnically biased, approach to administration.

Alongside these internal challenges regarding inclusivity, this article examines the VPP’s relationship with national political entities and the Union government. Data regarding the party’s stance towards the central government indicates a strategic shift away from automatic opposition towards a more deliberative and balanced approach. A significant segment of the electorate, particularly younger voters, perceives the VPP not merely as a regional shield against external interference, but as a stable and principled alternative capable of negotiating with New Delhi from a position of strength. As highlighted in discussions with Dr Jemino Mawthoh, there is a growing

public demand for regional representatives who can secure federal resources without becoming subservient to national political groups. By positioning itself as independent yet administratively capable, the VPP seeks to demonstrate that modern regionalism can be both culturally assertive and federally cooperative, provided it is anchored in the foundational principles of institutional integrity and Clean Politics.

### **Quantitative Evidence: Patterns of Awareness and Perception**

The following data, derived from a survey of 400 respondents, provides a comparative analysis of the Voice of the People Party. These figures illustrate the party's shift toward a rule-of-law focused political trajectory, mapping its evolution from an emerging group into a significant force. The findings support the central thesis that the VPP's growth is rooted in its policy-focused platform, which appears to resonate strongly with urban and peri-urban voters.

#### *Informational Diffusion and the Digital Paradigmatic Shift*

The primary metric for evaluation concerns the mechanisms of informational diffusion, as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Awareness Levels and Primary Information Sources (n=400)

Constituency	Aware of VPP (%)	Social media (%)	Public Rallies (%)	Word of Mouth (%)
<b>Mawlai</b>	94%	62%	22%	16%
<b>North Shillong</b>	82%	54%	18%	28%
<b>Pynthorumkhrakh</b>	88%	48%	25%	27%
<b>Myllem</b>	76%	38%	20%	42%

The most significant figure in Table 1 is the 94% awareness level recorded in Mawlai. This suggests that in areas with a high concentration of students and high internet access, the VPP has achieved high levels of recognition. Furthermore, the 62% reliance on social media in Mawlai highlights a digital strategy that has proven highly effective for a new organisation. This approach has allowed the VPP to bypass the control of information traditionally held by established parties, which often rely on patronage networks. In semi-urban or rural constituencies, however, political preferences remain deeply rooted in local discussions and personal trust. The strategic challenge for the VPP, therefore, is to convert its digital presence into broader political support within these more traditional, community-oriented environments.

#### *Growth Perception and Institutional Sustainability*

In political sociology, a clear distinction must be drawn between brand recognition and institutional legitimacy. Table 2 assesses the electorate's perception of the VPP's long-term sustainability, determining whether the party is viewed as a durable, systematic alternative or merely a fleeting, reactive phenomenon.

The data show a clear difference in confidence across the constituencies. In Mawlai, a substantial 88% of respondents categorise the VPP as a "Stable Alternative". This suggests that the party has moved beyond its "protest phase", with voters now seeing it as a professionalised organisation with the administrative capacity for effective governance. In contrast, the "Static" or "No Growth" perception is significantly higher in North Shillong at 20%. This may be due to deep-rooted loyalties to traditional

Table 2: Perceived Rate of Growth and Potential Sustainability

Constituency	Rapid Growth (%)	Moderate Growth (%)	Static (%)	Stable Alternative (%)
<b>Mawlai</b>	72%	20%	8%	88%
<b>North Shillong</b>	45%	35%	20%	62%
<b>Pynthorumkhrah</b>	64%	24%	12%	74%
<b>Mylliem</b>	38%	42%	20%	54%

parties, where established voters are more cautious about new political entrants. Similarly, the 54% sustainability figure in Mylliem indicates that while most of the electorate is open to policy-based change, a significant segment remains in a “wait-and-see” mode, withholding final judgement until the VPP demonstrates substantive policy delivery beyond its initial electoral success.

*Programmatic Resonance: Evaluative Metrics of the ‘Clean Politics’ Mandate*

The final analytical dimension examines the appeal of the party’s core platform by identifying the specific policy drivers that motivate voters. Table 3 measures the level of support for the Voice of the People Party’s main policy areas, providing evidence to explain the party’s ideological appeal.

Table 3: Resonance with “Clean Politics” and Governance Metrics

Policy Priority	High Resonance(%)	Moderate(%)	Low Resonance(%)
<b>Anti-Corruption/ (Clean Politics)</b>	86%	10%	4%
<b>Youth Empowerment/ Employment</b>	92%	6%	2%
<b>Linguistic Rights/ (8th Schedule)</b>	78%	15%	7%
<b>Transparency in Governance</b>	84%	12%	4%

The most prominent metric in this dataset is the 92% resonance for Youth Empowerment and Employment. This observation supports the study’s earlier argument regarding demographic cohorts: the VPP acts as a political vehicle for the aspirations of the growing youth electorate. The 86% resonance for anti-corruption measures is a clear sign of a systemic shift in thinking within the Khasi polity. It appears that voters are moving beyond focusing solely on identity-based issues, increasingly demanding institutional integrity and administrative honesty as essential requirements for political support. The finding that linguistic rights received a slightly lower ‘high resonance’ percentage compared to anti-corruption and transparency is significant. This does not necessarily suggest a decline in the importance of ethno-linguistic identity; rather, it highlights a clear hierarchy of electoral priorities. For the contemporary, modernising voter, ‘Clean Politics’ acts as the main driver for political engagement, whilst ethno-linguistic identity serves as the underlying ideological foundation.

The findings suggest that voters want to preserve their cultural heritage, but increasingly insist that this must be supported by a governance structure free from systemic corruption. This combination of cultural identity and modern administrative

reform forms the core of the VPP's rapid growth. By aligning these two distinct areas, the party has developed a 'programmatically regionalism' that addresses both the cultural concerns and the governance frustrations of the 21st-century citizen.

### **Conclusion: The VPP and the Future of Regionalism in Meghalaya**

The rise of the Voice of the People Party marks a significant turning point in the evolution of sub-national politics in Meghalaya. This study shows that the party's rapid electoral success is not just a temporary reaction to the previous government, but a deeper structural shift towards what can be termed 'Programmatic Regionalism'. By deliberately avoiding the established ethno-clientelist systems that have historically dominated the state's politics, the VPP has effectively tapped into a growing demand for administrative integrity, fiscal transparency, and ethical leadership. Evidence shows a widening 'representation gap' facing established regional parties, particularly among urban, educated young people—a critical group given that approximately 74% of the state's population is under the age of 35. The VPP's sophisticated use of digital mobilisation and its commitment to 'Clean Politics' have enabled the party to overcome traditional barriers to entry, most notably the influence of transactional 'money power' (Lamare, 2024; Kharपुरi, 2025). Furthermore, the party's ability to combine modern governance goals with traditional cultural aspirations—specifically through its advocacy for the constitutional recognition of the Khasi language—shows a maturation of regionalism. This new approach aims to achieve two goals: the preservation of cultural identity and the implementation of comprehensive institutional reform.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the VPP phenomenon challenges traditional views on North East Indian regionalism, which has historically been seen as a form of defensive, identity-focused politics. Instead, this phenomenon appears to offer a model for how sub-national movements in tribal-dominated areas can transition into policy-focused, programmatic organisations. Although challenges regarding long-term sustainability and reaching rural areas remain, the VPP has clearly introduced a new 'moral grammar' to Meghalaya's democratic discourse. Consequently, for scholars, stakeholders, and practitioners of Indian federalism, the party's development serves as an important case study for the consolidation of regional political systems within an increasingly globalised and digitally interconnected federal framework.

On the basis of the empirical findings and qualitative insights garnered from this study, the following strategic recommendations are hereby proposed for political actors, state administrators, and civil society stakeholders.

*Strengthening Administrative Integrity:* The 86% level of support for anti-corruption measures signals a clear demand for the government to prioritise the strengthening of anti-corruption bodies. This requires empowering the Lokayukta and implementing strict, merit-based procedures within the Meghalaya Public Service Commission to protect recruitment from political favouritism and corruption.

*Addressing the Digital Divide:* While social media has been effective in reaching urban youth, there is a risk that a digital divide may alienate rural voters. It is necessary for political organisations and state agencies to develop diverse communication strategies to bridge this gap. This ensures that information about governance is accessible to populations in constituencies such as Myllem, where local networks and word-of-mouth communication remain the primary means of information exchange.

*Linguistic Recognition as a Driver of Socio-economic Mobility:* Advocating for the

Eighth Schedule could be framed as a strategic economic and educational objective. Policymakers should examine the link between official linguistic recognition and improved career prospects for young people, specifically by allowing national examinations to be taken in the mother tongue, thereby reducing barriers to entry into senior administrative roles.

*Empowering Youth-Led Policy Incubators:* Given that youth empowerment is a key policy priority, political organisations could consider establishing ‘shadow policy labs’ or incubators. These platforms would encourage public participation, allowing students, researchers, and young professionals to contribute directly to drafting state policies on education, public health, and entrepreneurial infrastructure.

Finally, whilst this study positions the VPP within the broader discourse of Indian regionalism, it acknowledges that this shift towards policy-focused politics is currently limited to specific areas within the state. The resilience of traditional political systems in the Garo Hills suggests that the political values of the electorate are not evolving at the same pace across the region. The VPP’s primary challenge is to translate its success in Khasi-inhabited areas into a platform that resonates with the Garo population, thereby bridging the geographical divide that has historically fragmented Meghalaya’s political aspirations.

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