SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS: A STUDY OF THE TRIBAL AREAS IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

 Submitted by

 Dr. Vanthangpui Khobung

 DESSH

Regional Institute of Education

 Bhopal

 E-mail: vkhobung@gmail.com

**Introduction**

India lives in its villages (Gandhiji). The real identity of India is found in its rural character as majority of the population i.e. 67.63 percent[[1]](#endnote-2) according to the World Bank still resides in the rural areas as recently as in 2011. Majority of the tribal population also lives in rural areas. A large part of the rural areas in the North-eastern[[2]](#endnote-3) part of India is a home to the numerous tribal populations from time immemorial. The area inhabited by the tribal population is rich in natural resources and biodiversity. However, the region remains isolated from the rest of the country and has not been able to attract investors or produce skilled labour and entrepreneurial resources. It has failed to transform even the primitive agricultural practices of the region into modern commercial agriculture. In addition, the region has not succeeded in building the required essential infrastructure for progress. In this context, it is important to examine how people of this region have (or have not) used these resources to survive through the ages? How Government interventions have change the way resources are managed and used? What has been its implication for sustainable livelihood? These broad questions offer possibilities of exhaustive research.

**Management and utilization of natural resources**

*Pre-independence scenario*: Before the British came, the tribal in the north-eastern part of India lives in small groups with great autonomy and independence. Tribes were organized into villages with a defined territory. These territories are exclusively under the jurisdiction of the respective villages. Inter-tribe clash or raids were common phenomena. This mode of living gave rise to a strong administrative system such as the institution of Chieftainship, Village Council etc. among many tribes.[[3]](#endnote-4) Though, the functioning of this institution differs from tribe to tribe, its role in the management of land and its resources are prominent in most of the tribes. It is found to be embedded in its executive, legislative and judicial powers.

Among many tribes in north-east India, the institution of Chieftainship was common. In this system, the decisions of the Chief are final in all matters. He is the traditional village head having authority to enact laws and at the same time executed these laws at his discretion. The chief appointed members of the council of elders to assist him in village administration. Council of elders is chosen from among the subject who possessed tact and wisdom and who is well versed with customary laws and usages of the people. On the other hand, there were tribes with a relatively democratic village administration where the chiefs are either selected or elected for a definite period or for lifetime. He is assisted by a council consisting of most senior male heads of the clans of the village. The council of elders occupies an important position in village administration and their function is to aid and advise the chief in the village administration.

The management of forests, land and its resources was in the hands of the people. Forests were grouped into different categories based on its utility such as reserved forest, clan forest, jhum forest etc. Forest in the vicinity of the village (around one to two kilometers) is known as reserved forests. Though collecting and using dry barks and trees for firewood is allowed, this part of the forest is kept untouched. It acts mainly as a buffer for the villages when jhum lands are burn for cultivation. This practice also helps in sustaining the source of water for the village as villagers depend on the streams and water sources found in and around the village and also helps in maintaining the ideal temperature for inhabitants. It also serves as a place of recreation on leisure times for both young and old. In some village a portion of forest may be distributed among different clans for their own use. Other areas are reserved for jhum cultivation. The site of the jhum is changed every year. Land once used for cultivation is considered fit for re-use as jhum land after a gap of five years. Allocation for Jhum land is done by the traditional institutions (Chief and his Council or Village Council). Land is also allotted to individuals for a more permanent cultivation. Land allotted for this purpose automatically reverts back to the community when it is no longer maintained and cultivated.

The British colonial administration formally recognized the traditional authority in villages as an effective means of administration at the grassroots level. A policy of minimal political interference was followed. Hardly any political reform introduced was extended to the tribal areas of North-east India. As such, the system of traditional governance including the practice related to natural resource management continued.

*Post independence scenario and its complexity:* After independence, three-tier democratic system of governance was introduced, at the same time due provisions were given in the constitution of India to protect and promote the existing traditional institutions among the tribal in north-east India. However, all the financial as well as political power lies with the central and the state governments, only limited power was given to the local governments (district councils). The traditional institutions like village councils and chiefs were rather completely ignored in practice, they were often used as a tool or agency for implementing state or central government development policy programmes framed and planned by so-called experts without understanding the intricate situations and problems of the targeted groups. Such practices have slowly eroded the responsibility and accountability that exist in the traditional institutions. It also observed that through Central and state government initiatives many NGOs without any accountability to rural people have got involved in the rural development process undermining local government and traditional institutions. The government (centre and state) while trying to help in the development of the rural areas with various development policies and schemes through different channels often create responsibility and accountability problem at the implementation level. At the same time, many unified interest groups or pressure groups are also formed to influence development programmes in the rural areas. Mere implementation of development programs and schemes at the ground level to generate employment and income is not enough, sustainable development requires judicious utilization of nature resources (land, forest, flora-fauna, water, and other natural resources).

The Indian constitution allows the tribal to preserve and promote their traditional-customary laws and practices. This was done to preserve their cultural identities, interests and allay their fears of exploitation at the hands of the non-tribal. Therefore, a variety of institutions dominated by the traditional tribal culture with semi-autonomous and self-managing indigenous local institutions at different level exist. Changes have been introduced from time to time. In most cases, these changes have been introduced in response to the administrative needs for the various developmental policies of the state which are often in conflict with the traditional institutions. The tribal villagers claimed exclusive right over their land and forest. The management and utilization of natural resources are defined and regulated by their aged-old traditional customs and practices. Therefore, traditional institutions play a critical role not only in the implementation of government development policy programs but management and exploitation of natural resources in their respective jurisdiction.

The top-down development approach followed by central as well as state government is mostly responsible for the failure to develop the tribal people. Such approach has undermined the criticality of traditional institutions in preserving natural resources and excluded the people who are directly related to nature from learning the importance of preserving and protecting the natural environment. The failure to trickle down the fruit of development process to the grass-root level even after 60 or so years has left the tribal to live on by exploiting already depleting natural resources. Ever increasing population also further compounded the pressure to natural resources. Therefore, with changing time the once self-sufficient society, owing to the onslaught of modernity stands at a crossroad. Traditional means of livelihood, culture and even customs are either annihilated or fighting for survival. Only few seem to survive this onslaught. In the midst of this transformation, novel survival and livelihood strategies have also emerged in response to new challenges. Balancing all this aspect and find a path for sustainable means of livelihood and method management of resources is a challenging task lying before the tribal community as well as the Government and other stakeholders alike.

1. Data taken from [www.tradingeconomics.com](http://www.tradingeconomics.com). Accessed on 4.10.2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. North-East India comprises of eight States namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Sikkim and Tripura. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Chieftainship is an institution where the supreme authority in a particular political community is vested in the Chief. At his discretion, the Council of Elders are appointed or selected. The method of selection differ from tribe to tribe.

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