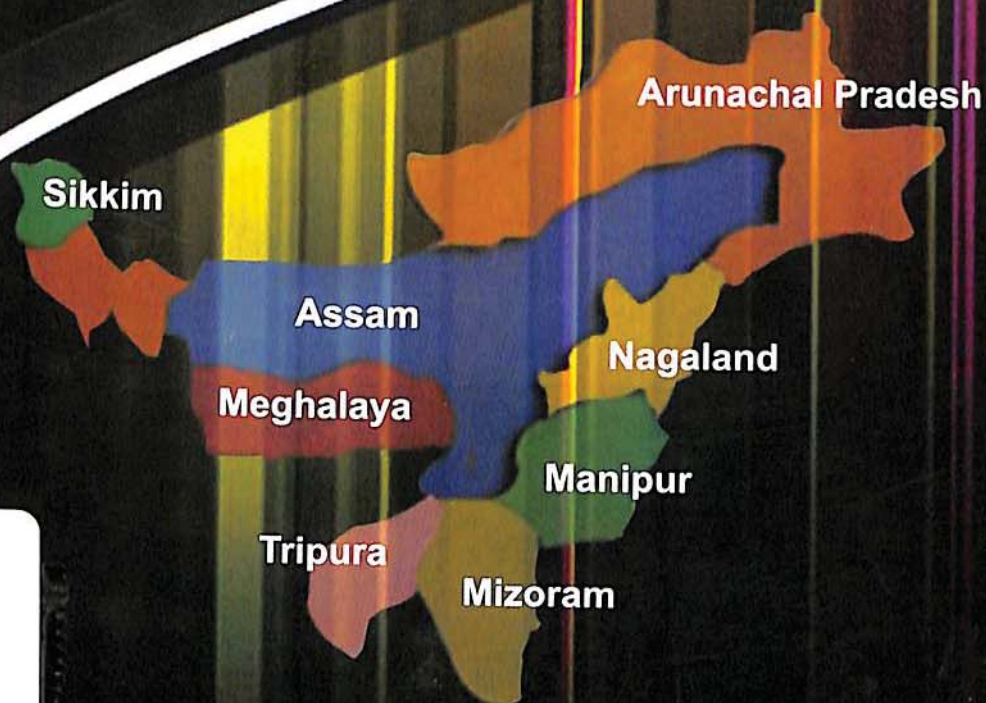


# Sustaining Development *in* North-East India

Emerging Issues, Challenges and Policy Measures

Edited by  
**Anupam Hazra**



In an era when countries across the globe are obsessed with development, the issue of ensuring sustainable growth is drawing prime attention of the development experts, academicians, researchers and policy-makers. The north-eastern region of India is recognized to be geographically isolated, densely administered, sparsely populated and least developed as compared to other states of this country. The unattended issues and problems as experienced by this region in recent past are being accumulated, multi-layered and have become multifarious. The kind of developmental dynamics prevailing in the region is very delicate which may explode anytime from now, if not tackled carefully. In this direction, this edited volume makes a concerted effort to explore some of the key areas of concern in the context of attaining the long cherished goal of ensuring sustainable growth in North-East India. This book is expected to be useful for development planners, researchers and social science scholars of North-East India.

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This book is dedicated  
to my  
Grandfather (LATE) SRI ABHILASH HAZRA

## Preface

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The agenda of sustainable development is complex and multidimensional. Addressing sustainable development in India is of vital importance since a large portion of the population is living below the poverty line, millions of people do not have access to basic health care and income inequalities are rising day by day and when the issue of sustainable development is discussed in the context of North-East India, it easily draws attention of the policy-makers and development experts. The North-East India comprising of eight States namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Sikkim which is recognized to be geographically isolated region, densely administered, sparsely populated, and least developed region as compared to other States of India. In the absence of major industrial establishment and other employment opportunities in the region unemployment rate, particularly urban educated youths, is not only high but also increasing rapidly. The percentage of population living below the poverty line in the region continued to remain high. Reports and statistics aptly reflect that the level of human development is significantly high in the States like Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland and comparatively low in States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura. An overall scenario of the region in the post-globalization period is not very impressive as in the case of other region of the Indian union. This may be attributed to the prevailing scenario of human development in the region and attitude of the Central Government in tackling the emerging issues and challenges in the sphere of human development of the North-Eastern States. The unattended issues and problems of the past are being accumulated, multi-layered and have become multifarious. Over and above, the mounting pressures of emerging challenges of rapid

transformation need to be countered. The clock is ticking fast and situation in the region is very delicate which may explode anytime from now if not tackled carefully. This edited volume, through its eighteen chapters makes a concerted effort to explore the grassroots dynamics of social sector development of North-Eastern States, with a major focus on the key social sector issues like education, health, women empowerment, etc., and explores some of the emerging issues and challenges in attaining the long cherished goal of ensuring a sustainable growth in North-Eastern region of this country.

Traditionally the process of displacement had been made otherwise acceptable to people with two justifications. The first one seemed to be partly rationale, which promised to create more employment opportunities for the displaced people. However, the second logic, that such displacement process would certainly provide an opportunity to integrate those tribal communities with the mainstream, hardly could transform their lives. Amidst lot of deprivations and continuous discriminations, there is a little ray of hope. The recently developed mechanisms and administrative processes, which include joint forest management, extension of Panchayati Raj to scheduled areas, Protection of Plant variety and Farmers' Rights Act, Biological Diversity Act, Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Rights over the forest) Act, may substantially protect the interests and rights of tribal communities for their own self-determination and 'Swaraj'. **Dr. Indrajit Goswami**, in the introductory chapter has highlighted the issue of land alienation and displacement of tribal communities of North-East India and its impact on their social, ethnic and cultural life with an ecological perspective.

Primary education has always been considered as one of the core component of human development. Since independence, the Government has made significant investment for promoting the access to primary education even in the remotest part of the country. But when we take into consideration the present scenario of primary education in the North-Eastern region, the progress seems to be a bit sluggish in comparison to the other parts of the country. Researches, reports and other available literature suggest that issues like high drop-outs at the primary level, lack of proper infrastructure in the primary schools, high absenteeism among school teachers, etc., are jeopardizing the efforts of the Government directed towards promoting the level of primary education in the North-Eastern States.



The slothful progress of primary education in the region seems to be putting an adverse effect on the overall progress of human development across the North-Eastern States of India. **Ms. Subhashree Sanyal** explores the current scenario of primary education across the North-Eastern States of India and puts a major focus on the emerging issues and challenges in the context of educational progress at primary level across North-Eastern States. Keeping in view the current challenges, the chapter concludes with some suggestive measures which will ensure a smooth progress of primary education in the North-Eastern region of the country.

The idea of “tribes” is particularly complex in the Indian subcontinent, where indigenous/primitive inhabitants were neither eliminated, nor quite absorbed, by the rising civilization in the course of history. It is plain enough that the demography of tribal people cannot loom large in India’s overall demographic scene (the former’s relative size being only a little more than 8 per cent). The ‘practice’ of tribal development started with the British but they never concealed their motive in following the ‘tasks of mercy’. The gravity of situation was well realized at the dawn of independence. In the beginning itself, it was realized that tribals must be ‘integrated’ into the national mainstream—they should neither be assimilated, nor isolated. **Dr. Ajeet Jaiswal**, in his chapter discusses the current dynamics of tribal development in the North-Eastern part of our nation and has highlighted the emerging issues and constraints in the context of tribal development.

The North-Eastern region, under the shadow of conflict, has witnessed a resurgence of patriarchal values and norms, which have brought with them new restrictions on the movement of women, the dress they wear and more overtly physical violence such as rape, which is systematically used as a tactic against a particular community. All this is compounded by the long social, economic and psychological trauma of armed conflict. The chapter by **Dr. Molankal Gangabhushan and Ms. Baiakmen S. Hek** is based on the secondary source of information which attempts to bring forward the current status of women in North-Eastern region in view of the above indicators and analyse the factors giving rise to marginalisation of women.

**Prof. G. Ram** brings out the patterns of human deprivation in a multi-cultural society, revealing that in such society, basically, cultural groups, rather than regions and sub-regions, are deprived from human

development, however, it is generally perceived that a region or sub-region by its adverse nature deprives its population from human development. It urges to focus on the cultural dynamics of people and governance, stressing that the marginalized cultural groups are historically pushed to the regions and territories which are poor in economic resources and prone to natural calamities, on the one hand, and even in the developed regions or territories such groups generally remain deprived from the resources, on the other.

The chapter by **Dr. Sumarbin Umdor** reports on implementation of Mid-Day Meal Schemes (MDMS) for primary school children in Meghalaya. Based on survey carried out in 2008, it reveals how the implementation of the scheme in the State is being affected by irregular supply of funds and foodgrains to schools and the absence of basic facility such as kitchen shed in the schools where meals can be cooked. Further, well defined norms and guidelines of the scheme such as free delivery of foodgrains to schools are not being followed, with schools having to arrange and pay for the transporting foodgrains from the supplier. An important issue raised by the survey is also with regard to meal timing in morning shift schools which comprised many of primary schools particularly in the rural areas. The survey exposes the sloppy implementation of the schemes and the failure of the State to take advantage of the programme to improve primary education in the State.

There are two-way linkages between economic underdevelopment and insurgency. An underdeveloped material base provides little opportunities to people for gainful employment. Unemployed youths then hardly find any viable alternative for their livelihood. They perceive that the 'failed state' is the prime cause for their misery. This perception encourages them to join the non-State actors who vouch for revolutionary change. Thus economic underdevelopment helps in sharpening anti-State political discourse and strengthens the ideology of the so called revolutionary groups. Insurgent activities help in perpetuating economic underdevelopment. Militancy has created deep insecurity in the minds of the people in general and entrepreneurial class in particular. The chapter by **Dr. K. Gyanendra Singh** is an attempt to map the effect of insurgency on the economy of Manipur.

Rural Development in Mizoram was severely slowed down and affected due to two decades of insurgency (1966-86) and grouping of villages as counter insurgency strategy. The grouping of villages

has its permanent repercussions where post-grouping reconstruction measures were not initiated so as to suit the people and the area of the villages that grouped. Although various rural development initiatives were introduced and implemented during post-insurgency period, its impact on rural economy is minimal. The result is that approximately all villages and the State is not economically self-sufficient. The State still depends on almost all essential commodities from outside the State. **Dr. Harendra Sinha**, through his chapter focuses mainly on the impact of village grouping as counterinsurgency strategy and the post-independence rural development programmes initiated and its impact on rural Mizoram.

A comprehensive analysis by **Dr. Anindita Sengupta** shows that in Tripura during the past five years, while number of primary level educational institutions, especially the number of primary level government schools has increased phenomenally; gross enrolment ratio of the students in the primary classes has also increased incredibly in the districts of Tripura. It also explains to the explanatory factors of drop-out of students from the primary level educational institutions in the districts of Tripura over the period from 2005-06 to 2009-10 in terms of Panel Data Regression Model and also to see the nature of relative contribution of these explanatory factors during the period of study.

The developmental experience of Nagaland has been full of challenges. Apart from its late start, geographical remoteness and inaccessibility, hilly terrain, lack of infrastructure, population composition, and scarce resource base, the State also had to face continuous insurgency, spending much of its resources on administration and related costs at the expense of development. Under this backdrop, the chapter by **Prof. Ratna Roy Sanyal and Ms. Subhashree Sanyal**, adopts a comprehensive analytical approach to track the current situation of Nagaland's sustainable growth by putting the State's current growth scenario into Millennium Development Goal framework.

Development is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Some of its major dimensions include the level of economic growth, level of education, level of health services, degree of modernisation, status of women, level of nutrition, quality of housing, distribution of goods and services, and access to transportation and communication. In Arunachal Pradesh, the progress of socio-economic development among tribal population is not uniform. Development has both positive

and negative implications on society and people. Under this backdrop, **Mr. Tame Ramya** through his chapter examines the socio-economic development processes of Nyishis, numerically largest tribe, inhabiting in five districts of Arunachal Pradesh. It tries to look at the role of factionalism and faction politics in the implementation of development interventions in Nyishi tribal village, called Hiya. It also focuses on the type of change that they have experienced with the implementation of different schemes by both Governmental and Non-Governmental agencies.

Manipur, one of the eight sisters of North-Eastern Region of India is situated in the strategic corner of the country. But, it is worthwhile to mention that information regarding the total land utilization of the entire State cannot be obtained since land records are available only for the valley and a small part of the hill areas. Due to the rapid growth population in the State, acute pressure is on the valley area where all the people belonging to different ethnic groups use to settle and concentrate with high density, thereby leading to urbanisation. On the other hand, the region accounting for 90.00 per cent of the total land area of the State is only meant for the Scheduled Tribes and is sparsely populated. Through his chapter, **Dr. Elangbam Nixon Singh** has made an attempt to analyse the growth of population in Manipur during 1951 and 2011, keeping urbanisation in view for sustainable development of the State. In fact, the chapter is purely based on various secondary data/reports published by the State government and the census data, being prepared by Census of India, from time to time.

**Mr. Amitabha Ray** through his chapter has put an in-depth focus on the emerging developmental issues and concerns of Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. His chapter has not only highlighted the unnoticed beauty of Jaintia Hills but also made a comprehensive effort to explore its developmental potentiality, which in near future would be putting a significant impact on the overall sustainable growth of Meghalaya as well as on the overall progress of the North-Eastern region.

The idea of using mass media for disseminating health messages and for curing the gaps in health sector has a history of nearly six decades in the developed world. In Indian context there has been sporadic efforts but with little success. Recently in Assam, there has been a significant improvement in Assam although still poorer than national average but a significant change nonetheless observed. On scrutiny, it has been found that an assiduous intervention of

conventional media has been able to reach out to the people to a significant extent despite the stumbling blocks of illiteracy and incapability to access conventional media on the part of rural poor. It has happened largely due to the intensive approach adopted by the development planners assuming that it is their responsibility to reach the rural as well as informational poor. The chapter by **Dr. Silajit Guha and Mr. Biraj Kanti Shome** shows that this intensive approach has taken care of the basic needs, but it goes without saying that additional efforts are required to push the borderline even further; the sector now badly requires a grass root level communication approach taking the culture specificity and complexities of the region into midscape. Unless the development planners start designing the messages with the dictum in the mind that communication is nothing but the social interaction of the messages, there is a little chance that the intervention of the mass media would be able to remedy the pathetic situation that exists in the health sector of Assam as well as the region.

The sexual and reproductive health of pregnant woman living with HIV/AIDS is fundamental to their well-being, Gender plays an important role in determining a woman's vulnerability to HIV infection and her ability to access treatment, care and support. All women have the same rights concerning their production and sexuality but women living with HIV/AIDS require additional care and counselling during their reproductive life. **Dr. Grace Hmar's** chapter addresses the specific sexual and reproductive health needs of women living with HIV/AIDS and contains recommendations for counselling, care and other interventions. Where sexual and reproductive health services tailored to the needs and circumstances of people living with HIV are in place, not only do the lives of the people with HIV stand to benefit but Global HIV prevention efforts will benefit as well.

The contribution of women in running a house has been considered as the most important role of women in a traditional society. The effect of work and contribution of women in making a home is intrinsically related to the development of the entire economy of a particular society. Often this fact is overlooked and women's work both in the household and outside remains uncredited. This kind of work is also many a time unpaid. However, this contribution of women's work and its significance is clearly evident in case of the tribal and matrilineal societies. **Dr. Jyoti Prasad Saikia and Ms. Anannya Gogoi** through their chapter provides a description of

the nature and consequences of the role played by Karbi women in development of their society in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam of the North-Eastern part of India. An attempt has also been made to observe the indigenous knowledge of the Karbi people which is visible in agriculture and its allied activities.

The study-based reflections by **Dr. P.C. Sikligar** focuses on the various aspects of handloom cottage industry in terms of problems, importance of special project (under SGSY: Swarna Jayanti Grameen Swarozgar Yojana), and strategy for further development of handloom cottage industry in Manipur. This study was carried out in Imphal districts both east and west to understand the problems and scope of the handloom cottage industry in the State where women are working under the shadow of self-help groups which also covers focus group discussion with the members of different 20 self help groups and are engaged in weaving.

In the last chapter, **Mr. Anupam Hazra** addresses one of the emerging crucial developmental agenda, which is gaining global attention in the context of sustainable development, i.e., the issue of sanitation. In the beginning, his chapter makes an attempt to explore the importance of sanitation in the context of attainment of Millennium Development Goals. Later the chapter presents the country's overall sanitation situation and highlights the current dynamic scenario of rural sanitation and the emerging issues and challenges that Assam is facing in the sphere of promoting rural sanitation across the State. The chapter concludes with some suggestive measures, which the author thinks, would be instrumental in promoting sanitation across the rural parts of the State.

*Anupam Hazra*

## Acknowledgements

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I would like to express my deepest sense of gratitude to my parents, Smt. Manju Hazra and Shri Debnath Hazra and to my sweet 'Didibhai', Smt. Annapurna Mondal for their blessings. I duly acknowledge the support and encouragement provided by my loving brother, Mr. Nirupam Hazra, I am grateful to all my critics who have always inspired me to put more sincere and intense efforts towards my every academic endeavour with their 'valuable' criticism.

*Anupam Hazra*

## A Message for the Readers

Partition of Modern India: A View from 'North-East Lens'

Nirupam Hazra

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There is something ominously unsettling about India's 65<sup>th</sup> Independence Day, especially when taken into account the events preceded and followed it. It creates a sense of *déjà vu*. When India got independence in 1947, it was preceded and followed by riots, bloodshed and displacement. It may sound hyperbolic or disproportionately exaggerated. Human tragedy like Partition has no historical parallel in independent India. Partition resulted in death of thousands of people and displacement of millions. Riots followed by more riots, death followed by more deaths. The fanaticism and collective madness of Partition are poignantly portrayed in the works of contemporary writers. In the works of Manto we find vivid description of the horror of partition, beyond the mere drab official statistics of death and displacement. There is a host of other literary narratives of the event of partition which comes under the rubric of 'partition literature'.

It was a story of infant India. It was a story of that India which was yet to become world's largest secular democracy, which was yet to get tag of 'next superpower.' Then it had many villains to be blamed for the disaster.

But now, let us focus on the events that surround India's 65<sup>th</sup> Independence Day. Communal violence broke out in Assam in early July. Gradually, it took the shape of one of the worst man-made disaster of modern India. Hundreds (officially not even hundred) of people got killed, four lakhs are displaced. Perhaps, first time in



independent India, four lakhs people are living in relief camp because of a communal strife. This communal violence is followed by another episode of violence. Though this time the violence is not as explicit as what took place in Assam. But it is more shameful, more outrageous and most unfortunate. No sooner the physical violence subsided, the ripple effect of it was felt in other parts of the country. It led to the exodus of North-Eastern people from so-called cosmopolitan cities like Pune, Bangalore and Vadodra. Thousands of North-Easterns are running for their life, leaving behind livelihood, jobs and career. The image of thousands of panic-stricken people, precariously hanging in overcrowded trains, inevitably brings back the image of Partition. That time, it was formation of a new nation or a colonial conspiracy or a rightful demand. But this time it is a fragmentation of a nation, not literal, but psychological, not political, but emotional, not geographical, but demographical. And what makes these events more shameful, is the fact it is happening in world's largest democracy. It is happening in a country where guests are compared with God, but fellow-citizens are confused with foreigners. Such events put a question mark on the pluralistic credential of our country. It threatens the very notion of *swikriti* that Dr. Amartya Sen talked about in his *The Argumentative Indian*. A nuanced and critical examination of the events that are taking place in our cosmopolitan cities exposes the shameful attempt of cultural homogenization. It is true that as soon as things start to get 'normal' all of us will forget. There won't be any grand narrative of this epic suffering which eventually may bring a moment of national catharsis. In the age of 140 character narrative it will soon fade into oblivion. It will find an eternal place only in the psyche of those who were bruised and brutalized.

Had such events taken place in a Muslim country under a dictator, it would have been termed as a humanitarian crisis by UN. Or in a worst scenario, America would have intervened (read invaded) to prevent such 'racial persecution'. But, remember India is world's largest democracy and emerging superpower. And don't forget that in world's largest democracy state can indiscriminately kill the tribal, army can rape and murder the women and police can routinely eliminate the citizens with impunity. It is Incredible INDEPENDENT India!

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## **Development and Displacement: The Eco-system of Tribal Dwellings in North-East India**

*Indrajit Goswami*

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Indigenous technology, indigenous methods and indigenous knowledge might have evolved as popular jargons to familiarize the contemporary approaches of sustainable development. But 'inclusive growth and development of indigenous populations'—an implied and inseparable principle of sustainable development process holds almost little importance in India. The hidden agenda, behind argument of 'mainstreaming of those communities' had been the expropriation of their resources in the name of their development. It is an undisputed truth that where the nature is rich, the local people are still living below poverty line. Since 1980, almost 12-13 per cent of the total forest area in the entire country, including North-East regions, diverted for mining and related industrial activities. The people, mostly the indigenous tribal populations, were relocated and displaced without adequate compensation and rehabilitation. That consistent and sustainable exploitation might have been one of the factors responsible for the social and political destabilizations and ethnic violence in several parts of North-East regions.

Traditionally the process of displacement had been made otherwise acceptable to people with two justifications. The first one seemed to be partly rationale, which promised to create more employment opportunities for the displaced people. However, the

second logic, that such displacement process would certainly provide an opportunity to integrate those tribal communities with the mainstream, hardly could transform their lives.

Amidst lot of deprivations and continuous discriminations, there is a little ray of hope. The recently developed mechanisms and administrative processes, which include joint forest management, extension of *Panchayati Raj* to scheduled areas, Protection of Plant variety and Farmers' Rights Act, Biological Diversity Act, Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Rights over the forest) Act, may substantially protect the interests and rights of tribal communities for their own self-determination and *Swaraj*.

North-East India is predominantly inhabited by many indigenous tribes who have been inheriting their ancient customs and traditions. Those tribes have had a direct association with their natural surroundings. Traditionally they have been living by sustaining the health and bio-diversity of their own local ecosystems. It is they who nurture and guard these ecosystems most effectively. Right from their values and customs, lifestyle and food habits are greatly defined and shaped by their surrounding environment, especially by forest, land and water resources. Each State is the home of a number of tribes, who have their own distinctive culture, language and traditions. There are more than hundred types of tribal communities in the seven North-East (N-E) States. Some of the prominent tribal communities of the region include Nagas, Khasis, Jaintias, Mizos, Boros, and Cacharis. A non-exhaustive list of distribution of tribes in seven North-Eastern States is given below:

<i>India State</i>	<i>Dominant Tribal Communities in the particular State</i>
Arunachal Pradesh	Aka, Apatani, Deori, Khamti, Khamba, Memba, Mishing, Miri, Khowa, Mishmi, Lisu, Miji, Monpa, Sulung, Tangsa, etc.
Assam	Boro, Kachari, Dimasa, Karbi, Mising, Koch, Rajbonshi, Garo, Gangte, Hajong, Khansi-pnars, Paite, etc.
Manipur	Himol, Anal, Angami, Chisu, Chota, Gangte, Kabui, Khoirao, Kom, Lumjong, Monsang, Maram, Marim, Mao, Mayong, Paite, Pusum, Ralte, Sema, Simti, Sukte, Thangkui, Thadao, Vaiphei, Zou, etc.
Meghalaya	Khasi-jayantia, Garo, Karbi, Lalung, Hajong, Biate, Koch, etc.
Mizoram	Lushai, Hmar, Pawi, Paite, Riwang, etc.
Nagaland	Ao, Sema, Konyak, Lotha, Angami, Chang, Rengma, Phom, Pouchari, Chakesang, Zeliangrong, etc.
Tripura	Chakma, Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Lushai, Kuki, etc.

Once, the British described the Indian sub-continent as an 'ocean of trees'. People of India, especially the indigenous tribal communities had played a vital role in nurturing these tree wealth, and Dietrich Brandis, specially brought in from Germany as India's first Inspector General of Forests admired the contribution and insisted that a substantial part of forest land be left in charge of people as 'village forests' when the forest laws were formulated. However, interference by successive governments, since British period, in the customary rights of the tribals over their land and minor forest produce; economic, industrial and urban development programmes and unchecked entry of non-tribal traders and money lenders into socio-economic life of the tribals, have all contributed a great deal in gradually weaning away the tribals from their lands. This had the unfortunate consequences of destroying people's motivation in safeguarding forests and other natural resources. At Mahatma Gandhi's insistence, the Congress had promised to change the anti-people forest policy after independence. But this did not happen. The dominant economic and political elite in the country are aggressively pursuing policies to promote industrialization and commoditization of basic services and natural resources like land, water and forests. The State institutions, structures and policies are being drastically altered, often beyond recognition, to provide a conducive environment for the large scale displacement of indigenous people (Invally, 2008).

### **Traditional Land Holding and Management**

Immediately after independence, the ruling politicians had promised people greater access to forest land and resources. But the forest policy (1952) asserted the primacy of 'national' interests and stated that people were to have no special rights just because of the fact that they were born and had been living in the vicinity of the forests. The policy further stated that it would be improper to concede any rights on the forest lands or forest produce to the people. That had been used all along to exploit the people, either to force them into bribing the officials or transfer their natural possessions to the others. After 36 years, the new forest policy of 1988 recognized the importance and role of forest dwellers, mostly the tribals, and emphasized the need to protect the remaining natural forest lands. Later, the Forest Rights Act 2006 was adopted in December 2006, but it hardly could bring qualitative changes in the existing practices. The Relief and



Rehabilitation Policy had been revised twice since 2003; the latest one was made public in November 2007. But those efforts neither could address the customary laws of tribes in N-E, nor could integrate them.

It is relevant to mention here that the ownership pattern and land management system among different tribal communities are markedly different from each other. While the Angami of Nagaland (D'Souza, 2001) and the Dimasa of Assam (Bordoloi, 1986) had a combined tradition of individual and community ownership, others like the Aka of Arunachal Pradesh had no customary practice of individual ownership (Fernandes and Pereira, 2005). However, very interestingly there was a common tradition among all tribes, where the community had the authority even to govern individual ownership. During the post-independence period, the imposition of individual-based land laws brought into the practice of privatization, which facilitated the land alienation process. As viewed by Shimray (2009), the attempts of governments in the States of Manipur, Tripura and Assam to change the laws in favour of individual ownership, have not only facilitated transfer of tribal land to non-tribals, but also lead the way of tribal exploitation in those States. According to D'Souza (1999) land is basic to the ethnic and traditional tribal identity as well as to their modern economy because more than 70 per cent of the people depend on it for their sustenance. The immigrants, mostly from Bangladesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Nepal had been in low paid jobs such as on construction sites, as rickshaw pullers and others, occupied the common property resources (CPR) that were tribal livelihood and the centre of their economy, culture and identity. Most of those immigrants were landless agricultural labourers before their arrival in the North-East. They used to live in a feudal system of lack of land reforms, low wages and poverty. That was the push factor and the fertile land in the Brahmaputra Valley appeared as a pull factor (Majumdar, 1987). The push and pull factor dynamics was further fuelled by the new legal system in the post-independent India, which made encroachment easy and consequently most of the immigrants occupied CPRs belonged to the tribes. The conflict between community-based customary laws and State land laws was never resolved and thus recognized only individual ownership and treated land without *pattas* as State property. Such conflicts and ambiguity made it easy for the immigrants to encroach on tribal and other CPRs. Further, the process of privatization had a smooth passage through

the mechanisms of indebtedness, sale, mortgage, sub-tenancy, exchange, displacement and *benami* transactions, which continued unabated. There are certain constitutions, legislative and executive measures for the prevention of such process but because of lack of awareness among tribal people and political unwillingness the situation never changed nor improved. Most importantly, since most of such transactions take place through informal agreements, there are no accurate and complete records to safeguard the alienated and displaced tribals. It has been observed that the ambiguity in the existing legal systems has promoted the privatization process mostly in all N-E States. These laws not only facilitated the alienation of CPR to non-tribals but also made it easy for the State to transfer such CPR to development projects. The similar instances have been found in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Manipur, etc. It has been observed that the Tripura Land Reforms and Land Revenue Act 1960 (TLR&LR) recognized only individual ownership. As a result, most of the community owned lands were not recognized and registered (Bhowmik, 2003). The CPR system had a more equitable and gender-friendly distribution of labour and resources. Over the period of time, the State run machineries, instead of protecting and safeguarding such systems, widened the gender gap by recognizing the men of tribal households as head of families. In Assam and Meghalaya, the Coffee and Tea Board offered loan and subsidies to individuals alone. Unfortunately, the men, especially from elite groups from within the tribal communities, enjoyed the benefits. They manipulated the system and transferred CPR into their names (Fernandez and Bharali, 2002).

Traditionally tribals have developed their own system of land classification and clearly demarcated community and private lands. Such lands were easily identifiable. Such practices were followed and preserved for generations. But North-Eastern Council (NEC) on land use classification ignored the age-old system and imposed another classification based on its own convenience and political manipulation. NEC brought into the terms in practice, such as 'area of non-agricultural uses', 'barren and uncultivable land', 'permanent pastures and other grazing land', 'cultivable waste land' and 'others' (Nongkynrih, 2008). The Constitution of India has provided special safeguards to the customary beliefs and practices of tribes of N-E. But the States and political systems have failed to protect the interests of tribes and the traditional classification of lands. The gap between Constitutional safeguards and current practices have sustained the

discrimination, alienation and displacement of tribes from mainstream of life and otherwise derecognized the model of beneficial community living for a better balance between development and eco-system.

### **Over-exploitation of NTFPs**

The loss of forest lands translates directly to losses in livelihoods, especially of tribes, who depend largely on forest regions for their day-to-day survival. It was a time when more than 50 per cent of their household incomes had been from off-farm activities. Commercialization of forest fauna and flora was not a new phenomenon to tribal economics, but it was followed and maintained through a customary system, where maintaining equilibrium in nature was the part of tribal way of life or culture. That commercialization culture of tribal helped to develop a link between forest products, poverty reduction and sustainable forests. Moreover, sustainable forests naturally regenerated resources in order to improve the quality of life of tribes as well as it protected and nurtured the biodiversity of the regions. Over the years, due to unabated land alienation and displacement, the tribal households tend to invest very little effort in cultivation and rely on non-timber forest products (NTFPs). In the mean time, due to price rise, the commoditization of NTFPs was initiated by traders, mostly non-tribals and outsiders. As a result the local tribes and resources were overexploited. Due to this overexploitation, the NTFPs species had been facing greater deficit because regeneration is affected by collection of seeds and fruits from existing forest species. Lack of government support, declining ratio of community land holding and sole dependency on NTFPs might have otherwise endangered the ecology and environment of the region. The long-term sustainability of forests is no longer a preferred way of life to the tribes, because they have been induced to survive on short-term benefits. Pachauri (1990) has rightly observed that survival of forests would be impossible under State ownership and the conditions of forests would be constantly deteriorating unless the forest dwellers, the tribals, are given management and conservation rights.

### **The *Jhum* Cycle**

Agriculture has been the main livelihood among the hill and plain

tribes. In addition to paddy cultivation, *jhum* (shifting cultivation) is carried out by many tribal groups. *Jhuming* is one of the most ancient systems of farming and it is uniquely linked with the ethos and the social and cultural values of the tribal communities (Borthakur, 1992). There has been a general understanding among policy makers and planners that *jhuming* have adverse effects on ecology and conservation, including destruction of soil fertility, soil erosion in the upper catchments resulting in sedimentation of waterbodies, destruction of wildlife and natural habitat, and flooding. They believed that *jhum* cultivation was bad and thus should be eradicated. However, the fact is that the *jhum* cultivation cycle is favourable for viable land use and for conservation of natural resources. Currently the *jhum* cultivation has been grossly affected and reduced due to alienation of land dwellers and expansion of urban areas and commercial encroachments. The restoration of *jhum* cycles had been difficult because of unresolved conflict and dilemma among the policy makers and planners. While a group of them recognizes the practice as 'agriculture in forest land', the other group holds the views of the territory as 'forests on agricultural land'.

### **Ecological Imperatives**

Encroachment onto forestland is a serious threat to forests and their conservation. The situation is alarming in some States and needs strong political will to address the problem, which has caused loss of forest area and created a tool for perpetual degradation of forest resources (Kumar, 2002). In addition, the adopted model of conservation has shattered the traditional harmonious relationship among tribals, nature and wildlife. In the name of conservation of wildlife, it has barred participation of forest communities in forest management. The adopted models have forcibly reduced the dependency of forest dwellers on forest resources by denying them access to forests and breaking the chain of inter-dependence that existed for centuries. At the same time, the concept of extracting profit from forest resources opened up the forests to other forces of destruction. The displacement of forest dwellers thus had a remarkable impact on the biodiversity and wildlife conservation programmes.

High biological diversity is often related to the forest cover of a region. Most of the North-Eastern States have more than 60 per cent of their geographic area under forest cover, a minimum suggested

coverage for the hill States in the country. North-East India has 64 per cent of its total geographic area under forest cover and it is rapidly disappearing. There was a decrease of about 1,800 square kilometres in the forest cover between 1991 and 1999 (FSI, 2001). More worrisome is the fact that the quality of the forest is also deteriorating, with the dense forests (canopy closure of 40 per cent or more) becoming degraded into open forest or scrub. Though there is a succession of several edaphic formations, a vast area of land has already been transformed into barren and unproductive wasteland.

### **Issues and Challenges**

The land alienation and displacement is not a new phenomenon. The process had been in practice even before British initiated the process of land grabbing from communities. That might be one of the important reasons, which later manifested in the conflicts and anti-colonial struggle led by indigenous tribal communities during period of East India Company's rule. Example of some major tribal movements in North-East India for land and forest rights during British period, includes, (i) *Khasi* rebellion (1829-33) and (ii) revolt by *Kacha* Nagas of Cachar district, Assam, led by Shambhudan (1882). Unfortunately, we have denied to take lessons from those movements and consistently refused to acknowledge the natural rights of tribal and other indigenous people on the forest and other cultivable lands. British failed to resolve the issue and had worsened the conditions by institutionalizing The Forest Acts of 1878 and 1927. Even after independence, we have failed to come out completely from the obsession of British legacy. Neither we could adequately check the alienation, displacement and deprivations of those people, nor could we create an integrity and synergy among political, administrative and legal systems towards ensuring their traditional wisdom and choice of living. In the name of social justice, empowerment and sustainable development, we have only widened the gap between tribal and other indigenous communities and so-called civilized and urbanized societies.

During the post-British era, the philosophy and thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru had been believed to have led the development of the nation and its polity. However, in reality Gandhi's indigenous model of building a nation of village republics and making a self-reliant society by recognizing the uniqueness and

wisdom of indigenous people were not taken seriously. Instead we followed the West and imported all possible models and modes of industrialization and urbanization. In the pursuit of democracy and socialistic republic, we have only achieved social and economic inequality and disparity. Behind the development veil, we have otherwise facilitated alienating of tribal and other indigenous people from the lands and natural resources.

The first Prime Minister, late Jawaharlal Nehru laid certain fundamental principles for the welfare and development of tribal communities (*Orissa Review*, February-March, 2005). Those principles have been as follows:

1. Tribal people should develop along the lines of their own genus and we should avoid imposing anything on them. We should try to encourage in every way their traditional way of living;
2. Tribal people's rights in land and forest should be respected.
3. We should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work of administration and development. Some technical personnel from outside will no doubt be needed especially in the beginning. But we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory; and
4. We should not over administer these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through and not in rivalry to their social and cultural institutions.

The Constitution of India has also made definite provisions for the welfare and safeguard of tribal people throughout the country. Articles 15 (4) 46, 244 (1) and 339 of the Constitution of India speak of special provisions meant for the administration and control of scheduled areas and tribals therein, for their welfare and protection. The policy of respective State governments towards scheduled tribes is governed by the broad directives laid down in the Constitution of India. It expects that "The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interest of the people and in particular of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and shall protect them from social injustices and all forms of exploitation".

Later, we have got several commissions, committees, policies, legislations and mechanisms to address the issues and problems related

to tribal communities, their life, existence and development. Except adequately in first years' plan, all other five years' plans have kept financial provisions and schemes for the welfare and development of those sections of society. However, we have miserably failed in ensuring their rights and bringing in a robust system and mechanism for their economic and social development as envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. It has been very clear that we have repeatedly failed to understand the actual issues and problems of those people. In political, social, cultural and administrative forums, we (the externals to their communities) have identified illiteracy, health, poverty and unemployment as four major problems of tribal and indigenous people. Instead of understanding the perennial issues of those communities, our policy makers and planners have always tried to find out a budget-linked problem-solving or development models. Before we could actually understand our limitations and deficiencies, we surrendered to globalization and its compulsive and intoxicated drive towards cultural diffusions. Tribals in India have had their own significant degree of cultural and ethnic diversity. Their age old existence, way of life and futuristic ambitions has always been well-defined and well-integrated with the naturally viable and sustainable modes practices and customs. Their very basic socio-cultural, economic and ethnic existence had been well balanced with the surrounding ecosystem and biodiversity reserves. Such a system existed hundreds of years because 'community living' and 'community landholding' were two fundamental reasons. The new economic regime has led to privatization and marketization of economy and thus it has been treated as powerful threat not only to the survival of tribal communities but also to the conservation and preservation of forests, natural resources and biodiversity. One of the main issues, which has been evolved and intensified inherently, might be 'identity crisis' of the tribal and indigenous people in North-Eastern regions, not merely their 'poverty' and 'unemployment' issues *per se*. Such an inherent powerful force, may be referred as 'ethno-nationalism', might have led people to raise new claims to territory and political control over local governance and resources. Such issues may require some thoughtful insights and conscientious efforts of concerned stakeholders, rather than some budget-oriented developmental schemes and ornamental opportunity for their participation in planning and execution of development processes.

Immediately after independence, land reforms were considered

as an important prerequisite for nation building. Accordingly, India's initial Five-Year Plans allocated substantial budgetary amounts for the implementation of land reforms. It could substantially abolish large landholdings in several States but it could not curb the encroachment of community lands by individuals in tribal dominated areas. Even after sixty-four years of achieving political independence, we couldn't safeguard and protect the traditional and natural rights of tribal people on their land and we couldn't ensure their economic independence by giving them rightful access to NTFRs.

In order to establish peace, harmony, integrity and socio-economic development in the North-Eastern regions in the country in general and for restoration and recognition of tribal way of life and culture, we have following few challenges to be accepted and acted on.

*Challenge-1: Self-determination of tribal and indigenous people (TIP)*

The extension of provisions of Panchayat Raj to Scheduled V areas has conferred full rights on local communities over minor forest produce (MFP). However, two MFPs, such as *bamboo* and *tendu* were excluded from their accessibility rights. It was unjustified. First tribal self-rule and their full right over MFPs to be restored and protected and then as envisaged, the Joint Forest Management programmes would be effective.

*Challenge-2: Legal sanction to community landholdings by tribal and indigenous communities, their mutual co-existence with forest areas, and their economic and livelihood dependence on MFPs*

The restoration and protection of CPRs is very essential to make such communities self-reliant and to facilitate them to live as per their own wisdom and interests. Along with such restoration efforts, the economic freedom is to be given to TIP for harvesting, collection and selling of MFPs without any intervention of middlemen or brokers.

*Challenge-3: Prohibition of transfer of tribal and forest lands and its conversion into commercial and industrial areas*

The key question, of course, is how to regulate encroachment on forests. The rights of forest have not been properly recorded. The



land under cultivation for many generations had not been assigned to them. Such prohibition has never been possible because of influential nexus between political elites and administrative mechanisms. In case such transfer or conversion is unavoidable and very essential for larger social and economic interests, the TIP must be properly rehabilitated and compensated.

*Challenge-4: Preservation, promotion and development of indigenous knowledge of TIP in agriculture, cultivation of forest produce, art and culture, and entrepreneurial endeavours*

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Rights over the Forests) Act of 2006 (TFRA) has ensured TIP, along with other rights, their full right of access to biodiversity and community right to intellectual property and traditional knowledge related to biodiversity and cultural diversity. However this right has not been fully exercised by TIP because of inadequate coordination between TFRA and the Biological Diversity Act (BDA). Instead of having separate 'Biodiversity Management Committees' (BMCs) under BDA, the *Gram Sabhas* under TFRA should have been given the assigned functions of BMCs.

*Challenge-5: Maintaining cultural diversity, integrity and mutual co-existence of TIP with other communities*

Instead of solving the 'identity crisis' and 'ethno-nationalism' issues, the political parties might have used those for narrow political gain. As a consequence we have witnessed ethnic conflicts in N-E regions. It has become a perennial problem and threat to national security and integrity of the region.

The following few action implications are suggested for stabilizing the issues, for meeting the challenges and for adequately solving the existential as well as developmental problems of TIP.

### **Action Implications**

#### ***Restoration and Management of Tribal Land***

Considering the absence of accurate record of land under possession and use of tribals, as also several cases of succession, new allotment

of land, acquisition and transfer of land, most of which remained non-used unrecorded. A comprehensive survey needs to be undertaken to record accurate possession of lands by tribals. Tribals need to be properly educated about the importance of proper record of their lands and registration of land transfer taking place as a result of sale, mortgage, partition, etc. This will help in preventing their exploitation and land transfer, therefore need to be compulsorily recorded within a specified time frame and the parties acquiring possession of tribal land should be made accountable for the same. Also the land records may be updated to have an accurate data regarding actual possession and transfer of tribal lands. The local level committee comprising of president of the Gram Panchayat, other relevant government officials, representation of NGOs or social worker be constituted and made accountable to detect cases of land transfers and reporting thereof to the competent authority.

All the land transfers made in favour of non-tribals may be derecognized and land may be restored to the concerned tribals pending the legal course. Restrictions may be imposed on all suits against restoration of possession of lands to the tribals by the courts criminal proceedings may be initiated in all cases of illegal transfer of lands from tribal to non-tribals. Formal registration may be made compulsory in all cases of land transfers permitted under the existing rules. A general prohibition may be imposed on all transfers of tribal lands by way of sale, mortgage, gift, lease, subletting or exchange, unless otherwise permitted by the district collector. Provision of free legal aid may be made with a view to restore tribals the possession of their lands. In order to save the tribals from money lenders, alternative sources of credit may be made available and for this purpose network of cooperative societies and rural banks may be established in all tribal areas.

Considering the uneconomic holdings, concentrated efforts need to be made to enhance the productivity of tribal lands through the provision of production credit and supply inputs. Numerous welfare and development programmes have been initiated for the benefit of tribals but about which they have neither knowledge nor access. The information about these needed to be disseminated and tribals may be helped to participate in such endeavours. The officials need to be more serious about cases of land alienation submitted for consideration of restoration of land. The dynamic and enterprising tribals may be identified and encouraged to participate actively in the efficient

utilization of forest and land resources and diversification of tribal economy. The dislocation and displacement of tribals due to infrastructure, industrial and development projects, need to be compensated by way of rehabilitation subsidy, development premium or share in the returns of the projects located in tribal areas till such tribes become more or less self-sufficient.

### ***Restoration of Community Forest Land and Resources***

The implied challenges in the Tribal Forest Right Act 2006 (TFRA) may be turned into empowering opportunities for forest dwelling communities, especially tribes, by engaging them in conservation of biodiversity and thus protecting the forest eco-systems. The implementation and execution of provisions in the Act requires a robust management system, which would involve people living close to nature, through the agency of *Gram Sabhas* (village committee). The *Gram Panchayats* (village councils) must constitute a village level Biodiversity Management Committee (BMC) (under jurisdiction of the Biological Diversity Act 2002) and must work in collaboration for the cause of environment, livelihood and eco-friendly community living. Since *Gram Sabhas* are fully empowered to execute the plan of works under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, it can effectively link the NREGA plans to Village Biodiversity Committees. It requires a political willingness to ensure rights granted under TFRA, where local communities would have right over lands and access to all forest lands, including reserved forests, protected forests and protected areas such as sanctuaries and national parks. If TFRA is implemented properly, it can effectively check further deforestation or takeover of forest land by outsiders.

The above aspirations are neither unachievable nor impossible. However the current disparity in administrative mechanisms (Table 1.1) could have been the major obstacle in achieving the desired aspirations. What could be the justification behind different patterns of administration for tribes in North-East? Empirically, politically or otherwise there might be different reasons but it had been transparent that the very basic biological and anthropological attributes of tribes were never given due importance. Hardly there is any comparative study, which can throw light on comparative advantages and disadvantages of different pattern of administrations. In Assam the threat of loss of tribal land is greater than any other tribal areas

**Table 1.1:** Types of Administrative Structures for the Tribes of N-E India

State	Special Constitutional Provisions	Administrative Structure
Arunachal Pradesh	Art. 371H	No Autonomous Council. The State has adopted Panchayati Raj
Assam	Sixth Schedule read with Art.371H (for scheduled areas only)	Three Autonomous Councils: (i) Karbi-Anglong (ii) North Cachar Hills (iii) Bodo Territorial Council
Manipur	Art .371C	The Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act 1956
Meghalaya	Sixth Schedule	Three Autonomous Councils: (i) Khasi Hills (ii) Jaintia Hills (iii) Garo Hills
Mizoram	Sixth Schedule to read with Art. 371G	Three Autonomous Councils of Pawi, Lakher and Chakma, and other areas without autonomous councils.
Nagaland	Art. 371A	No Autonomous district councils
Tripura	Sixth Schedule	Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council, Khumulwang.

Source: Nongkynrih (2008).

(Nongkynrih, 2008). Despite the existence of three autonomous councils, the situation had yet not been improved. Hence, neither autonomy nor any special constitutional provision or safeguard would be effective in fulfilling our aspirations. Rather it requires mass empowerment and strong CPR protection mechanisms. Tribal self-determination must be respected and to be incorporated in the administrative machineries as a guiding principle for determining tribal affairs and development. The case of Ri Bhoi district in Khasi hills must be followed as a model to be replicated or adapted in different tribal areas in North-East (Jamir and Nongkynrih, 2002:95). This may be found effective to counter timber mafias, wildlife poachers and other exploiters of forest resources. If so happened, displacement of tribes and encroachment on forest and tribal lands will be prohibited. Where land under cultivation for many generations should be returned to local communities and should be preserved from sale or transfer of any kind. It is possible to create a synergy between legal, political, social and administrative mechanisms for protecting the interests of indigenous communities and to ensure their own 'self-determination' and *Swaraj*. This synergy is very much needed and solicited for the survival of indigenous people and for

restoration and protection of eco-system and biodiversity in the North-Eastern regions.

### Conclusion

Throughout North-East India, encroachment of forest and community lands by migrants, local elites and governments have resulted large scale alienation and displacement of indigenous communities. Several promises have been made and bunch of policies and legislations have been brought into existence, but there is hardly any remarkable improvement in restoring local cultivation practices including *jhum* and in ensuring freedom to tribal communities to access NTFR. The low-income families are pushed to live under increased economic pressure and as a result the unabated poverty has become inseparable component of ethnic and cultural life of tribal communities. It has been observed that the political, bureaucratic and judicial systems have failed to understand the traditional bond between ethnic and cultural life of indigenous communities and their local eco-system and biodiversity reserve. Instead of making efforts to adapt and incorporate customary laws of those communities, the Central and State governments have tried to impose their policies and laws to justify, define and execute developmental projects and commoditization and commercialization of forest resources. The turnaround of situations is possible. It requires a strong political and bureaucratic determination to undertake certain concrete actions, such as (i) restoration of community landholdings and prohibition of privatization of community and forest lands, (ii) recognizing community forestry and drafting local forest policy, instead of having uniform forest policy for entire country and its regions, (iii) strengthening local community institutions and empowering them in joint forest management mechanisms, (iv) protecting the rights of indigenous people on local forest resources, especially NTFRs, since they heavily depend on forest for livelihood and income, and (v) restoration and promotion of *jhum* cultivation among local communities.

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