

Tribal Development in North-East India

NC Saxena



It is no longer the availability of financial resources but the capacity of institutions and individuals in the North East to make effective use of available resources that is proving the critical constraint to growth. Institution-building calls for strengthening State departments and agencies, as well as promoting fruitful partnerships between civil society and State Governments. Strengthening of institutions of local self-government is particularly important

Of the total tribal population in India, only 12 per cent live in the eight North-Eastern states, but unlike central Indian states where they are in a minority in all the states, tribes constitute more than 80 per cent of the state's population in Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland, and hence receive better political attention. For the past several decades however, some states in the North-East have received a continuous flow of economic migrants from neighbouring states and Bangladesh, with the result that demographic balance has been tilting against indigenous population. Tribal population in Tripura declined from 56 per cent in 1951 to less than 30 per cent in 2001. In Arunachal Pradesh, the tribal population declined from 90 per cent in 1951 to less than 64 per cent in 1991. Bodos, a plains tribe of Assam, have become a minority in many districts of Bodo Autonomous Council and lost land to immigrant Muslims, leading often to large-scale violence.

An off-shoot of the population division is the unequal power relations between the tribals and the non-tribals (Ahoms in Assam, Meities in Manipur, and Bengalis in Tripura) who seem to dominate in political and economic

power. Even within the tribes, there is a great deal of diversity. North-East India has over 220 ethnic groups, they all have their own culture and tribal tradition and speak their own tribal languages. This culturally diversity of North-East India also leads to inter-tribal conflict in many states, affecting peace and development.

Sixth Schedule - The Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India was enacted so that the tribals, who were in a minority in the larger undivided Assam of the 1960s, could decide their own development models and also safeguard their customary practices and traditions which give them a unique identity. With the creation of tribal majority states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya, the context has changed. The Nagas did away with it once they attained statehood. The Mizos apply the Sixth Schedule only in respect of minority tribes within the State of Mizoram. However, Meghalaya has continued with Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) as another political institution that appears to be like a subordinate legislature. These Councils were relevant when Meghalaya was part of Assam, so that tribal areas could have a sense of self-rule and not get lost surrounded by a large non-tribal majority. Now that Meghalaya is a

The author was Secretary, Planning Commission as also Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development, and Secretary, Minorities Commission. On behalf of the Supreme Court of India, Dr Saxena monitors hunger based programmes in India. He has chaired several government committees, such as on 'Women's Land Rights', 'Identification of Poor Families', 'Implementation of Forest Rights Act', 'Joint Review Mission on Elementary Education' and 'Bauxite Mining in Orissa'. Author of several books and articles, he advises UNDP on development issues.

separate state with more than 85 per cent tribal concentration, tribal concerns are fully represented in the state power structure, and continuing with the autonomous district councils only creates confusion and duplication.

Another problem is that in the Sixth Schedule areas, there is no other elective body below the level of the Council. Absence of grassroots level elected bodies affects the development of the remote rural areas. Below Autonomous Councils, the traditional institutions at the village level do exist, but they are not democratic in nature, and are clan based represented by the headman such as Syiem, the hereditary Chief of Khasi in Meghalaya. There is a need to bring in elected grassroots level institutions at par with village panchayats of other states. However, a consensus in the matter is yet to emerge.

Economic Inequality - Tribal people mostly live and earn through the hills and forest areas. Along with agriculture, they also depend on weaving and rearing of woolly animals. Most hill communities in the north-east practised shifting cultivation and their socio-political life was regulated by customary laws and practices. However, over the decades due to market penetration, several hill communities have taken to settled cultivation, and community ownership over means of production was gradually replaced by individual ownership, leading to economic inequalities. Laws exist to protect the locals against outsiders, but they could not stop class differences growing within. Today, among the hill communities, some are millionaires while most others do not even have an acre of land to cultivate. Interestingly, the neo-rich tribal elite are vociferous in asserting indigenous rights, not so much to benefit the poorest within communities, but to promote their own interests and keep the exploited poor under control. Privatization of communal lands is often the result of persistent promotion of commercial horticultural and other crops, as well as due to rising land values near towns and along highways.

However, the emerging tribal elite has no entrepreneurial talent to establish industry, and much investment is only in real estate.

Adverse Impact on Women - Privatisation has started increasing the vulnerability of women. For instance, as per Naga customary law, women have no land, property, or inheritance rights. There are instances that if they try to assert possession over land, they are branded as witches and are accused of causing harm to communities. These women are physically and mentally tortured. There is evidence of some being buried and even burnt alive. Cases of witch-hunting have mainly been reported from the Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar, Nalbari and Dhubri districts. Control over resources, personal enmity with

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powerful members of the community and the prevalence of superstitions are some of the factors responsible for witch hunting.

Absence of Land Records - Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya, hill areas of Manipur and some tribal tracts of Assam have no written land records system, nor any payment of land revenue. Absence of land records has increased insecurity of tenure of the poor due to rising tenancy and landlessness, increasing concentration

of land ownership in the hands of a few, and declining output from shifting cultivation. The structural condition under which land is cultivated (open access or 'free for all') combined with the fact that the elite are able to corner most government funds, has intensified poverty and inequality in these states. Privatisation of land by the elite through enclosure of commons can hardly be viewed as a positive step because its impact on agrarian relations is retrograde. Cohesive social relations therefore co-exist with increasing economic disparities.

Poor Capacity to Spend Funds - Though, the ADCs have constitutional status with certain amount of autonomy in dealing with subjects, they are not backed by adequate funding arrangement. This has made these Councils ineffective in dealing with the allocated subjects resulting in discontentment. The Central Government has been trying to address these issues by providing *ad-hoc* grants to the Councils under special packages or by earmarking funds in the Plan allocations of the State. However, due to poor spending capacity of the Councils, as well as of the state governments, overall expenditure remains poor. For instance, at least 10 per cent of the Central Ministries Budget is earmarked for the development of North Eastern States, and unspent balance is transferred to a non-lapsable pool. However, in actual practice, releases against the total available funds in the pool are not satisfactory. The states are not able to send good proposals to the administrative Ministry, or are not able to spend well with the result that outcomes are not satisfactory.

Similarly, many external projects are languishing for want of completion of various formalities (land acquisition, environmental clearance, etc), leading to poor overall expenditure in those projects. Non-submission of Utilisation Certificates, non-submission of project details/action plan, delay in holding State level sanctioning committee meetings, etc. are the general reasons for low release of funds. Utilisation

of funds requires not only timely releases to the field officials, but needs taking a large number of steps simultaneously: posts have to be sanctioned, material needs to be procured and transported, for which the procurement and tendering process needs to be completed on time. One of the major reasons for low release of NREGA funds in states like Manipur and Nagaland is difficulty in online submission of data at the district level due to poor network.

Activate Planning Departments-

Such delays can be avoided and procedures completed expeditiously if the state governments strengthen their Planning Departments. The hard reality is that state planning departments have poor capacity to prepare good proposals for external aid or even for getting more funds from GOI, and thus lose out on external or central assistance.

An energised Planning Department would keep in view, the needs and aspirations of the tribals and within the broad framework of the long term development strategies and priorities envisaged for the State, the Department would formulate Annual and Five Year Plans, undertake regular monitoring and review of the implementation of Plan Programmes, and effect necessary adjustments in the Plans both in terms of physical content and resource

allocation so as to ensure optimum realization of the Plan Objectives.

Other Systemic Issues – Not only tribal regions, but the entire North-East Region with the exception of Sikkim is characterized by low per-capita income, lack of private investment, low capital formation, inadequate infrastructure facilities, geographical isolation and communication bottlenecks. The region is primarily disadvantaged on account of connectivity, viz., road, rail and air connectivity. Power is a big constraint; micro-hydel power and other resources of renewable energy need to be explored in the region. Its own tax collection and internal resources are quite meagre rendering the region totally dependent on central devolution. Local tribal elite prefer to invest in landed property and shy from risky ventures.

In addition to stepping up overall investment by GOI, states must also improve governance and delivery. For instance, Assam's per capita plan outlay for 2014-15 was Rs 5,775, whereas with similar poor population Chhattisgarh's per capita plan outlay was Rs 12,807.

Besides, these states must improve monitoring of outcomes and hold government staff accountable for results. Thus, according to the state

governments, the percentage of severely malnourished children in the north-eastern states is much less than 1 per cent, whereas a survey done by UNICEF has reported a much higher figure varying from 3.5 per cent in Manipur to almost 16 per cent in Meghalaya and Tripura. There is an urgent need to reconcile the two sets of figures. Process reforms are needed so that field data is authentic, reliable and tallies with the evaluated data.

To significantly reduce, let alone eliminate within the next decade or so, the growing gap between growth rates in the country and the tribal pockets of North East India calls for a massive improvement in delivery and governance, and not only increase in the flow of financial resources to the region. It is no longer the availability of financial resources, but the capacity of institutions and individuals in the North East to make effective use of available resources that is proving the critical constraint to growth. Institution-building calls for strengthening State departments and agencies, as well as promoting fruitful partnerships between civil society and State Governments. Strengthening of institutions of local self-government is particularly important. □

(E-mail:navesh.saxena@gmail.com)

Clean Street Food Project

Project 'Clean Street Food' was launched to raise the safety standards of foods sold on streets across the capital city of New Delhi by training 20,000 roadside vendors on aspects of health and hygiene, in the first phase. The project was launched by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in partnership with the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship to train street food vendors at more than 40 centres across Delhi under the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) category of the Government's flagship skills training scheme- Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY).

Under the Delhi Project, 20,000 food street vendors would be trained, assessed and certified by seven training partners over the next four weeks at 40 training centres set up for the purpose across Delhi. Delhi Food Safety Commissioner and the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) are engaged in mobilization of street vendors across Delhi. The Tourism and Hospitality Sector Skill Council (THSC), an affiliate of the National Skill Development Corporation, Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship will be the training provider under the Project. Food vendors will receive Smart Skill-cum-Registration cards on completion of the training.

This project involves the partnership among the regulating body of the government, corporate and NGOs who have all come together to upgrade the skills of the street food vendors which shall help them enhance their livelihood options also. "Project – Clean Street Food" will change the lives of millions of Indians at the bottom of the pyramid, boost the country's economic development and lead to the rediscovery of India's rich tradition of street food. Skill India and FSSAI along with State Governments will replicate this initiative in other parts of India, based on the experience of the Delhi project.