

Assimilation and Changes with Modernity: Land Relationship and Governance in Northeast India

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Change is inevitable yet changes should be in conformity with the people readiness. The course of Northeast history witnessed changes that are superimposed. These changes have affected asymmetrical community relationship with the land and governance. This paper looks into how changes have affected the course of recent history within the Kuki ethnic community in Manipur and Northeast as a region in general.

Introduction

Change is inevitable in every society which brings a new level of thinking affecting residence, occupation, social setting, traditional system, role and way of acting, demands and capabilities. It is one in which clusters of old social, economic and psychological commitments are eroded or broken and people become available for new pattern of practice, socialization and behavior. Cultural change, assimilation and interaction are compulsory in any society and no culture is ever complete and finish whole. However stable and rigid it may appear at a moment of time, its integrative capacity is never entirely lost as it has been built up by the assertion and assimilation of new elements, so it can continue to change.

Changes brought during the colonial and post-colonial period in North East India is understood to have brought negative impact on the community relationship with the land. Such superimposition by the colonialist results into creating various problems like land alienation, ethnic conflict, etc in the region. While change is a natural phenomenon such changes should be on tribal term and allow the community to prepare for such changes instead of a sudden superimposition on the community. Walter and Melville (2005) observed, "...the answer do not lies in going back to their past in its totality or absolution either the past or the present. Modernization has to be built on the past by updating their tradition. Change has to emerge from within their societies on their terms."

Community Property Resources

In North East India the system of tribal community management belonged to the informal system that is based on the concept of resources (livelihood controlled by the community), to be used according to its present needs and preserved for prosperity. Sharing and equity are its foundations. The principle behind this is that the resources belong to the community including the present, the past and the future members. In that case, it is renewable, for it is a livelihood that has come down from the ancestors to be used according to present need and preserved for prosperity to ecological imperatives. Such system existed around the land and resources in tribal society. The principal of such community base tribal natural resources management system was intergenerational and inter-generational equity or sustainable use. This relationship is more or the less a constructive dependence on resources.

Traditionally, the systems of community management of CPRs and forest land had existed in different forms in many parts of the country till the end of the 19th century. A very large part of the country's natural resources was common property, in the sense that a wide variety of necessary resources was freely available to the rural population. The process of extending state control over the common resources, which began with the declaration of "reserved" and "protected" forests in the closing years of the 19th century, has essentially been that of exclusion of villagers' access to common resources by law. As a result, the systems of community management gradually disintegrated and are now virtually extinct.

Today, in almost all parts of the country, the villagers have legal right of access only on some specific categories of land like 'pasture and grazing lands' and 'village forests', which are under the jurisdiction of the village or village panchayat. All other categories of land not under private ownership like barren and uncultivable land, cultivable waste, land put to non-agricultural uses and forests belong to State Revenue department or Forest department. Nevertheless, the rural population, particularly the poor, depends greatly on the goods and services available from these categories of land. Besides, though only those resources are treated as CPRs on which no individual has exclusive property rights, there are systems of customary rights which support traditional practices, which represent common rights on private property in certain situations.

Manipur

In Manipur like other tribal communities of North East India the tribal people have inseparable relationship with land, forest and natural resources. But such tribal land relationships have begun eroding since colonial rule in the state. The colonial administrative frame work has brought changes in tribal system through different set of institutions and administrations which affected their relationship with land.

Before the advent of British rule in the hill areas of Manipur, the tribal people possessed the land and live on it independently practicing their traditional pattern of land system. Second, the subsequent democratic governance in the post independence also further changed the community relationship with land to a larger extend. These changes have not recognized the traditional tribal system which is basic to their identity formation.

The existing law has to be updated instead of being replaced by another system that can weaken them as a community. Such modern input has adversely affected the tribal people custom and culture who depended on land. Such modern inputs become negative when they are superimposed on tribal tradition with no preparation for interface between the two systems.

It is seen that new land relations are not only economic measure but also the beginning of new power equation among tribes. The first is class formation in otherwise equally equalitarian societies and the second is strengthening of patriarchy because it usually transfers power over land from community to a few men, usually the elite.

The first steps towards it were taken when the British with the enactment of individual ownership base land laws that turned CPRs into state property. Its first facet is that land without an individual patta is state property. The second is the state alone has right to define a public

property and deprived even individual owners of their assets. The colonialism objective was to turn colony into supplier of capital and raw materials for the British Industrial Revolution and a captive market for its finished products. The processes of turning land into a commodity began with the Permanent Settlement of 1793 and culminated in the Land Acquisition Act of 1894.

Attribute of Changes

The practice of traditional land system (land relations) as well as the general socio-political and economic system of the tribal people in Manipur has largely undergone changes with the following events:

Advent of British colonial rule in the 19th century which brought new administration in the hill areas.

1. Christian Missionaries that entered Manipur during the British period too have changed the tribal not only of their faith but also changed old practices and customs to a great extent, giving new outlooks and new lifestyles. It mainly changes the socio-cultural aspect of the tribal people.
2. Spread of democratic ideas and institutions in the post-Indian independence period in the hill areas of North East in general and Manipur in particular.
3. Transformations of technology from traditional to modern systems too have changed the nature of agricultural practices among the tribes.
4. Change in socio-economic transition, population pressure on land and internal transformation in the village system.

Pre Independence British Era

The British had first contact with Manipur in the year 1762 AD. After the Anglo-Manipur War 1891 the hill areas of Manipur were brought practically under the British rule. The Sanad issued by the British authority clearly shows the final authoritative control rested with the British. The content of the Sanad issued to Raja Churachand Singh, Maharaja of Manipur was not more than that of a vassal in a feudal state (Kumara, 1998). The articles of the Sanad are given below:

1. The Governor-General-in-Council has been pleased to select you, Churachand, Son of Choubi Yaima to be the Chief of the Manipur State and you are hereby granted the title of Raja of Manipur and a salute of eleven guns.
2. The Chiefship of Manipur State and the title and salute will be hereditary in your family and will descend in the direct line by primogeniture provided that in each case the succession is approved by the Government of India.
3. The annual tribute will be paid by you and our successors to the British Government.
4. Further, you are informed that the permanence of the grant conveyed by the Sanad will depend on the ready fulfillment by you and your successors of orders given by the British Government with regard to the administration of your territory, the control of the hill tribes dependent upon Manipur, the composition of armed forces of the state and any other matter in which the British Government may be pleased to interfere. Be assured that

so long as your house is loyal to the Crown and faithful to the conditions of the Sanad, you and your successors will enjoy the favor and protection of the British.

Manipur King remained head of the State of Manipur; the hill territory was separately administered by the British Political Agent. But the British administration at first believed in the policy of *laissez-faire* with regard to the tribal. It was adopted since the task of administration in remote and in assessable tribal areas was difficult and unrewarding. Another reason was the British desire to keep the tribal people away from political infection (Ghosh, 1987). Thus, the tribal communities had to remain fully isolated.

The Britishers were interested only in regulatory functions. This made Kukis continued to practice their traditional administration in the hill areas. One of the results to this was that it enacted Schedule Districts in 1874 and keep large tracts of tribal areas outside the jurisdiction of normal administration. Excluded and Partially Excluded areas was introduced in the year 1939 in order to make non-applicable the legislations of provincial government to tribal areas (Singh, 2006).

It resulted into tribal isolation and backward in socially, economically and politically. Communication in the tribal area was totally cut off from the main current of Indian civilization which led to exploitation by the non-tribal. In the 19th and 20th century policy adopted by the government favored *Zamindari*, landlords, moneylenders, contractors, petty forest official to exploit them in many ways. Thus, the tribal were reduced to a state of penury in Manipur in particular and the rest of India in general. Their land was encumbered and good portions of their land were passed to non tribals. The tribal losing their land continuously, they resorted to *jhum* cultivation on the slope of the mountain and hill side so that nobody takes them away.

Later, the revolt in 1891 against the British led to a complete takeover of the administration by the British (Sinha, 2008). This also makes the British government tighter control over the hill areas. Manipur was thus, divided into four sub-divisions, one in the valley and another three in the hill areas which the hill areas were under the control of British officer William Shaw, B.C Gasper and L.L Peter (Guite, 1999). Since then the hill areas administration was directly under the British control. This, hamper the age old freedom enjoy by the Kuki in the hill of Manipur. The British became the final authoritative ruler of not only the hill areas but the valley as well (Horam, 2000). Changes began with control over tribal territory by the Britishers. The Kukis were subject to pay hill house tax and force to work as *Pothang* or force labour on their very own land. We shall discuss below:

Hill House Tax

Maxwell, the Political Agent of Manipur in 1892 introduced the hill Hose tax of Rs 2 per home stead in the valley and Rs 3 per house per annum in the hill areas. The hill house tax was collected by Lamsbadars, Lambus and village headman. For the purpose of collection of the tax hill area was divided into five Lams of which Lamsbadars was in charge. He was again assisted by a number of Lambus who were further assisted by the village headman. They were given one anna out of every rupee that was deducted from the house tax which was paid to them for the service rendered for the government.

The house tax and force labour were enforced so strictly that the hill villager found it hard to pay the tax and most of the time argued with the collectors that many of the houses were vacant or unused. The British authority thus, adopted more stringent strategies as follow (Kamei, 2004):

- i) Prohibition on the setting up of new village with less than twenty houses,
- ii) Threat of withdrawing gun license,
- iii) Burning down of villages for not clearing the arrears of house tax,
- iv) Imprisonment of Goan Buras, and
- v) Engagement of villagers as coolies in the construction of bridle path.

Such coercive measure by the British authority leads to the hill agricultural subjected to serious crisis creating famines. Consequently, the local poor people suffered serious socio-economic problems with the coming of the British administration in Manipur.

The British considering small villages as inconvenient especially in the collection of hill house tax, had order the Kuki and Naga villages having less than 20 houses to join with the larger villages from the year 1913-14. Villagers who failed to do so were fine a house tax of Rs 6/- instead of Rs 3/- failing to pay this amount were broken up. The British Government used coercive measure to meet their imperial interest. A Buongmuoal Kuki village under the colonial taxation policy was instructed to increase the number of houses and in case of failure to reach the house number at minimum twenty houses by 15th January 1923 a warning was issued to them that Lambu would be sent to burn down the village. Another instance in a measure to discourage small village was that a small Monsang Naga village which paid tax through bigger village called Chingsang in Tengnoupal was burnt down for not willing to join with the latter. G.P Stewart, the Political Agent of Manipur in 1938 reported in his Tour Diary that even he contemplated to burn down Illong Naga village for not clearing the arrear amounting to Rs. 587/- for the year 1936 -37 and 1937-38.

Traditionally, the Kuki custom has permitted establishing a new village with no fix in house number. As such, there were instance of many Kuki villages having just few household. But due to colonial manipulation the small villages unable to bear such heavy taxation then joined the larger ones. Later the tax rate was reduced to Rs. 3/- for administrative conveniences. This resulted into the collection coming down to Rs 72,299/-. Another measure taken up in this regard by the British to realise house tax was that they supplied guns to those village having above 30 houses.

Force labour *Pothang* or Coolie:

Another attribute of British rule in Manipur was the introduction of Pothang or force labour in the hill areas. Any hill village that could not afford to pay their house tax was encouraged to work as coolies to pay their house taxes. The President of Manipur State Durbar in 1918 advised the villagers to earn money working as coolies. This administrative measure was so effective that the amount of house tax collected increased manifold. The recruitment for coolies was done through Goan Buras of the village. Such policy was also applied to Thangjing Kuki village which failed to pay the house tax. The British authorities had recruited many villagers as coolies and their wages were adjusted against the house tax in arrears.

Prohibition of Jhuming

The British prohibited jhum cultivation on roadside within thirty feet of the road. The tribal people as a result lost many of their land in the construction of roads through their forest and fields by the British government which results into the shortage of land for the tribal. This ban on cultivation on the roadside badly affected the socio-economic life of the hill tribe as they were not compensated.

The Chief Commissioner of Assam, Sir Nicolas Beatron Bell on 16th October 1919 open Durbar meeting in Imphal to make new rules for the administration of the hill areas of Manipur. For a better administration in the hill areas, the areas were divided into four sub-division at Imphal (Sadar), Churachandpur, Tamenglong and Ukhrul. The administration of hill areas was again reorganised in the year 1933 which was effected from 1st May 1933. Three sub-division was constituted with their head quarter at Sadar, Tamenglong and Ukhrul.

Christian Missionary

Christian missionaries came to Manipur via three gates. Rev. William Pettigrew came through the Silchar Gate and arrived Manipur on February 6th 1894 as a Missionary of the Arthington Mission. He joined the Baptist Mission in 1895. Missionary Watkin Robert a Welsh Presbyterian Missionary came through the Aizawl Gate. He was responsible for the Kuki Christian living in the southern Manipur. He founded the 'Indo-Burma Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission' (IBPM) in 1910 for the purpose of reaching the southern Kukis with the gospel. But short lived IBPM was replaced by North East India General Mission (NEIGM). His tireless works and concerned brought a paradigm changes in the southern Manipur. The first recorded contact with the gospel in Manipur was in 1844. But due to certain political obligations and opposition from the Protestant Missionaries, the Catholic Church could be established in late forties among the Kukis of Tengnoupal and Churachandpur. The Christian missionaries had brought tremendous changes in the tribal society.

The Christian missionaries took the advantage of the simplicity of the tribal and did all that was possible to win their heart. They even gave allowance to the Nagas for changing their customs and habits. The tribal worship religion founded by their ancestors and among the Nagas the clan group was govern by ancestor worship. It takes several years for the British to convert the tribal people to Christianity, that too in a very painful manner. The missionaries had to even learn the tribal customs to enable to convince them become Christian.

This new religion introduced changes in secular outlook among the tribal people. These changes came in the form of some mundane affairs which were within the purview of the customary laws. Our investigations have revealed that most of the changes in social customs and life style are changed by the impact of Christianity. Prof Roy wrote on how Christianity has brought changes in the lives of Manipur tribals.

The coming of Christianity has played a significant role in the overall changed in culture, spiritual, physical, education and economic spheres of the tribal people. The importance of clan's relationship began declining in Naga society. Despite of belonging to different clan they found a common place to settle and live together. In that case, they did not have separate clans land areas or fix portion of land but they live as a common citizens of the new found village. They pool

their resources in a common tithing fund to the church. The church became the head of their new Christian village. Such changes include changes in the socio-economic life of the tribal people of their domestic life, religious life, social customs, moral life, literacy, self-help.

Modernity and Christianity brought the primary agency in formation of a new culture synthesis, preventing de-tribalization, though certain modernizations are acceptable in the society. Practices like imposition of fine or enforcement of punishment on the murderer, adulterer, etc. was discouraged by the teaching of mutual forgiveness. In other words, justice was not dispensed with in dealing with certain crimes, but admonition to our formal corrections against the criminal for his/her misdeeds was advocated.

Many traditional practices were dropped after their conversion to Christianity. The services of priest and priestess are no longer required, which are being replaced by the pastors and Health Workers. The feast of merit like chon was celebrated to honor the ancestors and whose blessings when sought necessitated the killing of seven Mithun and sacrifice of domestic animals like pig, goat, hen and other animals, are stopped/dropped which are performed for the good of the village, as in time of war, or planting or harvesting calamity etc. were dropped. Anything which were related to primitive animism such as keeping of house deity were dropped. Traditional concept of differences between male and female banished among the tribal societies to a large extent. In other word, men and women are equal in all works of life following conversion to Christianity. Traditional social organization like *Sawm*, *Lawm* etc. came to be banished. The institution of dormitory which was once the center of learning social activities disappeared among the tribal societies. School and other institutions like the church, Christian youth organization, village youth club etc. becomes the center of learning social activities.

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