

Rural Transformation and the Changing Ecology of Tribal Domain: A Study among the Tribes in Assam, India

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ABSTRACT Rural transformation (RT) has been a relatively new approach to rural development. It talks about the multidimensional development of the rural population in the desired direction. Being a welfare state, the Government of India has strategised the transformation of rural societies as a new development strategy. However, studies reveal that tribal societies exhibit reluctance and incompetency in accepting and coping with the change process. Pieces of evidence also reveal that the development projects and industrialisation, in most cases, do not result in the desired change in tribal societies. The paper examines the positive and negative impact of the Petrochemical Complex on the tribal people in the Dibrugarh district of Assam, India. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observation among the project affected tribes. The findings indicate that the tribal people have not benefited as expected from industrialisation. Rather, many have lost their means of survival, and substantial aspects of their traditional culture have been affected. No planned effort is visible toward rural transformation in the study area.

INTRODUCTION

In the social science domain, tribal societies are defined or described using various characteristics. While the nominalistic perspective sees tribes as a population group confined to a definite territorial area, having a distinct dialect, cultural homogeneity, and a unifying social organisation, they are also seen in the evolutionary perspective as a stage of a social system under transition, placed above the band organisations but below the chiefdomship. The structural perspective sees tribal societies as a distinct society parallel to other forms of society, independent of their surrounding societies culturally and materially. These inherent characteristics, though not static, manifest very often as a differential while uniform development activities or policies are implemented among them along with non-tribal societies. Greater attachment to the traditional life ways, more dependence on traditional resources and techno-culture, and differential articulation to their core social values make them resistant to change and reluctant to shift their ways of life even in search of a perceptually better situation. There have been many instances where popular development projects and programmes harm the tribal population worldwide by not considering the inherent characteristics of tribal societies. Extraction industries, dams and power projects, development of roads and railways, urbanisation and industrialisation in the tribal domain have

forced tribal people to be lacking resources and bound to live at the mercy of others.

Tribal development has been on the agenda of the Government of India, especially since the days of the Fifth Five-year Plan. There are also various constitutional provisions to protect the interests of the tribal people. Mention may be made of the 5th and 6th Schedules of the Constitution of India, where special provisions are formulated for tribal administration and development on a territorial identity basis. The idea of rural transformation is a relatively new perspective to look at and strategise tribal people who are mostly rural inhabitants. However, studies have shown that the outcome of rural transformation is not uniform, and in the process of transition, the tribal people have been losing one or the other important components of their social and cultural life.

The paper deals with the issue of the impact of industrialisation in tribal-dominated areas and tries to understand how far industrialisation and related infrastructure development and opportunities created due to industrialisation have helped tribal people. Further, the paper also deals with the loss tribal people incur in the process, and how, being tribes the people have been unable to eke out the benefits of industrialisation and infrastructure development in their locality. The paper has been divided into three parts. The first part of the paper deals with the various theoretical and conceptual perspectives of rural transformation, the second

part deals with literary accounts of the impact of industrialisation and development projects on tribal people across the country, and the third part deals with the findings based on the primary data collected from the field.

Part I: The Theoretical and Conceptual Perspectives of Rural Transformation

Defining Rural Transformation

While defining “rural”, the physical and the socio-cultural constructs are also taken care of. Van der Ploeg (1997) asserted that ‘rural’ is not just a physical or statistical category but is produced and constructed through discourses of various kinds like speeches, acts and figments of the imagination. Rural transformation talks about a process impacting development with or without interventions. Julio Berdegue et al. (2014) define rural transformation as a process of comprehensive societal change through which the rural societies diversify their economies and reduce their reliance on agriculture. It says that the rural societies also become dependent on distant places to trade and acquire goods, services, and ideas following the process.

Further, people in the rural societies move from dispersed villages to towns and small and medium cities and become culturally more similar to large urban agglomerations. Rauch et al. (2016) define rural transformation as a “long-term multidimensional change process of the key characteristics of rural populations’ economic and social life that considers their embeddedness into broader societal and global dynamics”. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (2016) sees inclusive rural transformation as a process that leads to rising agricultural productivity, increasing marketable surpluses, expanded off-farm employment opportunities, better access to services and infrastructure, and capacity to influence policy, resulting in improved rural livelihoods and inclusive growth.

The Changing Context and Paradigm Shift in Rural Transformation

There has been a periodical but constant change in the approaches taken towards rural development across the globe, especially in developing countries. The international rural develop-

ment paradigms have mainly influenced the national rural development approaches. International agencies like IFAD (2016) and OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2016) have developed some new paradigms for rural development in developing countries based on their country’s research. These new paradigm shifts have been seen due to the new perspectives on rural issues since new contexts have emerged. The perspectives, contexts and paradigms of rural transformation can be arranged in the following sequences.

If one looks at the principles of rural transformation, one can see that the inequalities between rural and urban have been widening. There has been drastic climate change affecting the rural economy and life ways, rapid population growth and a revolutionary change in accessing information. In consonance with these emerging contexts, it is necessary to change the paradigm of development where the inextricable link of the rural domain with the cities, regions and nation has to be considered. Further, encompassing women in the development process and the influence of and influencing the governance are some of the crucial issues.

When the perspective is to look at the key target sectors for a meaningful rural transformation in changing situation, one sees a changing context in a rural domain where agriculture is no longer able to provide sustainable livelihoods for growing populations, and the urban areas are not able to productively absorb large inflows of rural migrants. Thus, it becomes imperative to engage a multi-sector approach paradigm to develop agriculture, rural industry, services, tourism, ICT, and biofuels in such a context.

Further, when one looks through the perspectives of the main approach to be engaging in rural transformation, one comes across some new contexts emerging out of the Sustainable Development Goals, Multidimensional Poverty Assessment and Multidimensional Country Review, and community-driven development issues. Under such contexts, it necessitates a new paradigm tailored to the specific contexts (natural, economic, social, and institutional), either priority basis or on realistic assessment, sequenced properly to maximise synergies.

Finally, when one looks at rural transformation through the perspective of key actors, in the emerging new context, the key actors need to emphasise greater participation by non-state actors, including the private sector, rural communities, CSOs, and

foundations. Thus, the new paradigm needs to draw multi-agents aiming at the participation and collaboration of a broad set of stakeholders across public and private sectors and from national to local.

Role of Industries in Rural Transformation

The primary objective of rural transformation is to reduce the dependency of the rural population on agriculture and diversify their livelihood options. Industries open up primary, secondary and tertiary sectors for livelihood for people. Industrial complexes also involve related infrastructure development like roads, communication, and markets. Thus, industrialisation in and around rural areas can be a major pushing factor towards rural transformation. However, past experiences have revealed that the industries have not helped tribal societies achieve a desirable overall development goal. There has been the issue of maladjustment and incapability of tribal people to cope with the changing socio-economic scenario in the long run. The following part of the paper deals with such problems with the help of literature reviews.

Part II: The Interface Between Tribes and the Development Domain

Impact of Development Projects on Tribal People in India

The negative impact of development projects on the tribal population has been studied by several scholars and has also been reflected in government policy papers. The mineral-rich tribal belts have been the target places for various extraction industries. Further dams constructed for hydroelectric projects have also displaced numerous tribal populations. For instance, Mohanty (2005) has criticised the development pattern adopted between 1950 and 1990, revealing that this development model continues the powerlessness of the weaker sections due to displacement and without any benefits from these development projects. The state did not seriously consider the affected populations' enormous resettlement and rehabilitation problems. Behura and Panigrahi (2006) indicate that until 1999, at least 24,124 hectares of land have been deforested due to development projects in tribal areas, including dams, mines, roads, railways

and new industries. Mohanty and Mohanty (2009) have discussed the various shortcomings of displacement and rehabilitation of tribal people in detail. The authors argue that though compensation is provided to the affected people at the contemporary market price, various other aspects of tribal people are not addressed in such compensation packages.

Taking some cases from Andhra Pradesh, Rao et al. (2006) expressed their views that development projects in Andhra Pradesh are emerging as new sources of displacement in the scheduled areas. However, the authors have forwarded their views emphasising making tribal people resilient towards livelihood diversification instead of sticking to the land-based rehabilitation programme. For them, it is needed since the economic domain of the tribal people has also been constantly changing. Sharma and Singh (2009) have extensively studied the issues related to the displacement of tribal people that occurred extending five decades due to the Gobind Sagar Reservoir, the Rihand Dam, and the mega thermal power projects by the NTPC (formerly the National Thermal Power Corporation) and coal mining projects by the North-ern Coalfields Ltd (NCL). The authors have shown how the area's people suffered untold damage due to inadequate and improper resettlement and rehabilitation programmes. The authors also have documented the assertion of the project-affected people and subsequent entry of civil society activism to make people aware of their rights and get their due compensation properly.

There have also been administrative blunders negatively impacting the tribal domain. For instance, the state did not recognise the community or customary ownership of land. Therefore, the state took a huge area of tribal land under the community ownership as state property. Kumar et al. (2011) state that in the process, three-fourths of all land in these tribal-dominated districts became State property, contrary to the fact that most of the tribal people in these areas are either landless or marginal. The Odisha state has been the most exploited in the extraction industry. Adding to the numerous accounts of such issues, Ray and Saini (2011) have highlighted the flawed resettlement and rehabilitation programme for the affected people under Basundhara Coalfield Project. The programme denied the rights of tribal people to participate in the resettlement process and sustainably protect their

socio-economic entitlements. As the state failed to respect the local decision-making mechanism and control over resources by the tribes, the tribal people remained a dependent population on the state without bargain power.

Taking the cases from Jharkhand, Kumar (2013) reveals that land acquisition has destroyed people's livelihood and social setting and violated basic human rights. The denigration of tribal culture, customs and language by mainstream communities had been more damaging to the tribal ethos. The author found a lack of human touch in the resettlement and rehabilitation programmes. De (2015) opines that many MoUs have been signed between the government and the national and multinational companies. It reiterates that though the percentage of the tribal population in India is 8.8 percent, more than fifty percent of project-affected people are tribal people in India. The MoUs ignore the fifth schedule provision for protecting tribal people's interests. The author also reveals that the non-tribal people take away tribal land and capture the emerging economic opportunities in commerce and petty industry.

Research Gaps in Tribal Domains on Rural Transformation

Very little has been deliberated on the transformation of tribal societies due to changes in economic and infrastructure domains. Social anthropologists see tribal people as reluctant to interact, absent of entrepreneurial mindset, resistant to change, and lack of interest in investing for profit making. Anthropologists see both the positive and the negative impact of unplanned and lack of socio-culturally audited development initiatives. One section of the intellectuals' opinion labels such development programmes as a negative phenomenon because they cause contrast destroying the cultural heritage of the tribal people and creating an identity crisis. Several social scientists have commented on the impact of development projects during the seventies and eighties on the negative impact of development initiatives on the tribal population. Mention may be made of Vidyarthi (1968), Dube (1968), Sachchidananda (1969), Sharma (1974), Dasgupta (1977), Srivastava (1979), Devi (1988), and Roy Burman (1989). These scholars explicitly stated the importance of considering the tribal philosophy, culture, environment, psychosocial bear-

ing, and local techno-culture while planning development in tribal areas to make the change process meaningful and sustainable. While dealing with the rural transformation encompassing the tribal people, understanding the abovementioned aspects becomes imperative. Because tribal societies are close-knit to their age-old tradition, they have developed an undeniable attachment to their cultural values, their worldviews and their psychosocial bearing on change is different from their non-tribal counterparts. Thus differential outcomes from uniform development initiatives are inevitable and crucial to be discussed.

Objectives

The primary objective of the paper is to examine the role, and the impact of industries in the transformation of rural tribal societies through the perspective of rural transformation paradigms discussed in Part I. Under this broad objective, the following aspects of transformation were inquired:

- i. Impact of the industry on the traditional resources and livelihood of the tribal people.
- ii. Opportunities and amenities provided by the industry.
- iii. Nature and extent of involvement of tribal people in the emerging economic domain.
- iv. Specific changes in the social, cultural, and interpersonal relations in tribal societies resulting from emerging situations.

Part III: The Field Situation

The Research Setting

The Source of the Information

This paper is the partial outcome of a study conducted in the tribal domains of Assam. The study was sponsored by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, under the IMPRESS programme. Three districts, namely Dibrugarh, Chirang and Karbi Anglong, were selected for the study. The tribal communities encompassed in the study were the Sonowal Kacharis from Dibrugarh District, Boros from Chirang District and the Karbi tribes from Karbi Anglong district. Though the study includes several components of rural transformation, for the paper, only

the impact of industrialisation and the infrastructure change and the subsequent transformation in the rural Sonowal Kachari domain has been discussed here. For this purpose, the impact of the Gas Cracker industry has been investigated here.

The Gas Cracker Industry

Brahmaputra Cracker and Polymer Limited (BCPL) have set up a Petrochemical Complex at Lepetkata, which is otherwise a rural place in Dibrugarh District, some 18 kilometres away from the district headquarters in Dibrugarh town. The complex is spread over 3000 Bighas of land. The plant was established following the MoU signed to end the Assam agitation on the foreigner issue in 1985. Dr Manmohan Singh, Honourable Prime Minister of India, laid this project's foundation stone on April 09 2007. The acquired lands were inhabited mainly by the Sonowal Kachari people. The plant was commissioned on January 02 2016.

The Tribe Under the Study

The Sonowal Kacharis are one of the earliest known populations inhabiting the state of Assam, especially in the upper Assam plains. Their population is around 2.6 Lakh as per the 2011 census. They are mostly found in the districts, namely, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Sibsagar.

Wet rice cultivation is the primary traditional occupation of the people. Traditionally, they use a plough and bullocks to till the land. Thus cattle become an integral part of their cultural economy. Further, the people also cultivate garden crops or cash crops, including betel nut and betel leaf, pulses like black gram, and various vegetables. People are seen as relatively shy, tradition-lovers, and not enthusiastic about profit-making entrepreneurial activities. They are, in general, not seen in business and entrepreneurial activities, though the educational levels of the people are relatively high compared to other tribal populations of the region. The younger generation is interested in moving to the urban domain, leaving traditional occupations and resorting to non-traditional non-farm activities.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

For the original research project, 25 Sonowal Kachari villages were selected to understand the

various issues related to rural transformation. However, for the paper, data collected from two project-affected Sonowal Kachari villages, namely, Kakoti village and Lepetkata Kachari village have been presented and analysed. Key informants were selected from amongst the older generation having good knowledge about the happenings in and around the village. The village head, schoolteacher, council members or village representatives were among them. Some young generation respondents were selected for in-depth interviews and household heads of affected families.

Further, an office-bearer of the land revenue department was also interviewed who was involved in the land acquisition process. The selection of these respondents was based on information gathered through discussion with villagers. The narratives of the interviews were analysed based on the contents arranged under certain themes centring on the issue of benefits, loss, and aspirations of the people from the industry and infrastructure development. Further, a series of observations were also made to gain ideas about the opportunities and engagement of local people in economic activities. Atlas-ti package was used to process and analyse data.

RESULTS

The following paragraphs recorded the results based on the interview and observation. The selective narratives of some respondents have been placed in this section, mentioning their names with prior permission. The findings are arranged under certain sub-headings meaningful to the topic of the paper as follows.

People's Expectations from the Gas Cracker Industry

It was learnt that people were very excited when they knew about the industry to be set there. It was a dream project for the entire population in upper Assam and was a product of a long six-year Assam agitation. People were mostly looking forward to getting employment here, besides expecting infrastructure development in their locality.

Benefits Accrued by the Sonowal Kacharis from the Gas Cracker Industry

The narratives of people reveal industrialisation's brighter and darker side in the tribal domain.

People accept that opportunities for ancillary business ventures have emerged in the area due to the industry. Observation made in the area also proves it. Jaykanta Sonowal, a 27-year-old employee at Gas Cracker, hailing from Kakoti village, has indicated the emerging opportunity for locals in the ancillary economic activities. He pointed out that getting a good job in the Gas Cracker is not easy now. However, other opportunities like renting houses and establishing small shops for everyday needs have also emerged. He opines that the Sonowal Kachari youth do not have the compatibility to engage in these sectors. It can be found in some of the selective narratives from his interview as follows.

I have been working at Gas Cracker for the last four years. My educational qualification is BA, ITI and Computer Diploma. I am the only person from our village working in this position, whereas others work as gardeners and loaders. Initially, there were many vacancies for technicians; but the boys did not have the required technical qualifications then. Now there are not many posts available. Recruitment is done now through an online process. So, candidates must clear the recruitment test. There are only a few eligible candidates available in our village. Hence the majority of the jobs have gone to outsiders. About 40 boys from our village are working as cleaners, gardeners and loader indicating not progress, as it should be. Lots of people from the outside stay here for various works. Local people can build houses and give them for rent. Many trucks and other vehicles come here. A fast-growing market is coming up nearby where the local youth can establish their small shops.

Several respondents have acknowledged the importance of roads and better communication as the key factor in rural development. They opine that several roads have been constructed in and around the village after establishing the Gas Cracker. It increased the connectivity between the urban places with the villages. Further, a four-lane highway also came up near the village, which helped people easily travel to far off places and do business activities. The author of this paper has also visited this area prior to establishing the Gas Cracker. At that time, Kakoti and Duliya villages were not connected by better roads. These villages are situated near the Sessa River on one side and are far away from National Highway 37 on the other

side. Along with the Gas Cracker, two roads under the four-lane national highway scheme came up, passing near these villages and connecting them with the National Highway 37 and Dibrugarh town. Further, two bridges came upon the Sessa river, making communication easier. Better roads were constructed in Lepetkata Kachari village, easing road communication to National Highway 37. In support of the statement, the statement made by Piling Sonowal from Kakoti village, a 52-year-old person, can be highlighted as follows:

... Since the village roads have been developed, and our village is connected with the four-lane road through which one can reach far off places quickly, people can go to the market and do business. Even women can do it now...ladies in our village go to far-off places on scooty to sell "mod pitha" (locally made medicated rice cookie to prepare liquor from rice) after buying the cakes from others in the village. I have been selling "mod pitha" in the tea gardens for a few years.

While interviewing respondents in nearby Sonowal Kachari villages other than these two villages, people reported that lots of people used to work in Gas Cracker when its construction was going on. However, they were mostly unskilled labourers and used to work as a helper and menial labourers. Some local youths were also able to pose themselves as the leaders of the contract labourers and used to earn handsomely.

The Darker Side of the Industry

The Loss of Land by Tribal People

The information provided by the officer of the Land Revenue Office of Dibrugarh reveals the following.

Besides residing and cultivating in their land having permanent tenancy rights or *Myadi Patta*, many Sonowal Kacharis and other communities in that area used to settle and do cultivation and tea plantation on the land leased to the tea estates like Lepetkata Tea Estate and Bolaibari Tea Estate by the British Government on 99 years of the lease. However, they did not do plantation on the entire land they acquired. Many tea garden workers and local indigenous people, including the Sonowal Kacharis of these villages, cultivated those lands for years. They even established villages and oth-

er infrastructure there. The land area of such kind was more than 1500 Bigha under the acquisition of the Lepetkata Tea Estate.

However, a larger land under a similar lease was awarded to the Bolai Bari Tea Estate, where the Sonowal Kachari people of Duliya and Kakoti villages cultivated and settled down. A tea estate named Bihiating Tea Estate acquired the lease of these grants to extend its tea plantation there. For this purpose, the authority served notice to the people settled there. As per the land settlement rule of the state, "*Rayoti Khotiyan*" can be given to the people who are settled on such land by paying three times more land revenue than usual landholding for ten years. The land revenue department awarded the *Rayoti Khotiyan* to most people, with the condition that the awardee would pay the land revenue annually at the assessed rate. However, the people did not pay the revenue within the stipulated time set by the administration, due to which they lost their legal rights over the land where they used to settle and cultivate. Contrarily, they filed a case against the tea estate and continued to reside and cultivate there. A few people acquired such a lease deed in the land under the Lepetkata Tea Estate. However, the majority of the settlers did not have such documents.

When the Gas Cracker Company acquired the land, they came up with a lucrative compensation amount. However, as per rule, the money went to the owner of grant's land. In the case of the settlers of the Lepetkata Tea Estate, the grant's owner, the tea estate authority, shared the compensation with the settlers at some 60:40 ratios. However, in the case of the compensation received by the grant owner for the Bihiating Tea Estate, it did not give a single penny to its settlers, as they did not have any legal document to prove that they were the legal owner or had rights over the land. Thus, the total compensation money went to the tea estate owner, and the settlers did not get any except for the standing crops and the house building they built there. However, the civil administration paid some amount (INR 1.5 lakh per family) to reconstruct their houses. It provided one Bigha land to each family in the government grazing land near the village. Village roads and approaching roads were also constructed.

The revenue officer also informed that many people in these villages used to occupy and cultivate lands having no permanent title. Those were

land awarded with yearly titles. However, people did not get them renewed or paid land revenue. As per rule, that land becomes government land. When the issue of land acquisition appeared, to save the interest of these people, the revenue department made those titles permanent on the payment of ten years land revenue premium. Thus, people could receive compensation. However, many Sonowal Kachari people are still unaware of these official procedures and hurdles. They are still looking forward to getting compensation for the land leased to the tea estates on which they have been cultivating and residing for generations. Some of them also accuse the land revenue officer of fault play.

Gunadhar Sonowal, an 87-year-old respondent, hardly believes that the Gas Cracker has any significant benefit. He reveals:

Nobody has got a good job...doing grade IV jobs only. As the case (land acquisition) continues, we have yet to get the balance amount of compensation for the land. We lost around 14 bighas of land amongst our five brothers. I also had five bighas of land in another place where I had tea plantations; I lost all those. I got some value only for the trees, betel nut and leaves. Even I got value for the tea but have not yet received money for the land. It has been many years now, and the case is not settled yet. The advocates get changed.

It shows the ignorance of tribal people about official procedures and the importance of documents and contracts. It also clarifies why tribal people everywhere in the country have been the system's victims.

The Unmet Expectation of Local Villagers

The villagers who lost their land reveal that the company assured them of providing jobs in the Gas Cracker for the loss they incurred, besides the due compensation paid. However, several respondents of these villages have reported that they or their children did not get any permanent jobs. Some of them revealed that the company offered those job positions for which no one in these villages was qualified enough. Later on, several youths from these villages came up with the ITI and Diploma Engineer Certificate qualification. However, most of them were offered contractual jobs under sub-contractors or paid far lesser than their expectations. Most of them chose to leave such jobs

and work somewhere else instead. It has also been clear from the narratives that the project affected people cannot influence the employment policy of the Gas Cracker authority. They are also devoid of political representation. Their opinions and views seem to be based on speculation and mere perception. They hardly have any documentary evidence or fact sheets in this regard. It shows the powerlessness of the tribal people in the project-affected areas. The narratives of the respondents from the two villages are full of such accounts.

Babatu Sonowal, a 27-year-old respondent from Kakoti village, reveals, "...Some boys have got jobs in the Gas Cracker. Other than that, there has been no development as it was supposed to be. Only a few are managing their lives."

Jaykanta Sonowal, the 27-year-old employee in Gas Cracker, says, "...There are only a few eligible candidates available in our village. Hence the majority of the jobs have gone to outsiders. About 40 boys from our village work as cleaners, gardeners, and loaders. From that point of view, there has not been much progress as it should be."

The 52-year-old respondent from Kakoti gaon says, "...they (Gas Cracker authority) assured job opportunities to the technically qualified candidates from the affected areas, but there is none like that here. Now, boys are working as house help, mechanics, and labourers..."

Piling Sonowal of the same village says, "... About two-fourths of the boys in our village work in the Gas Cracker. They are engaged as gardeners, helpers and the like under contractors... Our Kachari boys did not get the chance (in Gas Cracker). It was declared that land losers would get a job, but that was not given. However, afterwards, it was seen that many Gogoi (Ahom) community persons had got a job by bribing them."

In a similar tune, Raheswar from Kakoti village reveals, "... Few people have got jobs, and some have not, as there are many irregularities. Those who have got jobs are doing well. To my understanding, Ahom community people have got more jobs than our Kachari community people... A few had done contract jobs at Gas Cracker initially; now, they have hardly anything. My three sons are also working at Gas Cracker but under a contractor. One of them works as a gardener; two are engaged in machine works."

Thaneswar Sonowal also has a similar story to tell when he reveals, *"Initially, they had said that every project affected household would be provided with a job in the Gas Cracker... We were denied even petty jobs. How many days can you live with that small compensation? The money got exhausted in building a house and daily expenses. I could not even make a house."*

The narrative of unmet expectations thus goes on and on. The simple and ignorant Sonowal Kachari people, who were unaware of official procedures and requirement for getting a job, were shattered by the reality and lamented for handing over their land resources.

Tribal People Proved to be Lack of Resilience

The tribal people in the affected villages have been unable to eke out the collateral benefits that emerged due to the establishment of the industrial complex. From the interview conducted and the observation made, it becomes evident that various kinds of entrepreneurial opportunities have emerged in the area. Shops of various kinds, service ventures, hospitality businesses, transport and communications are some of the ever-increasing areas the local tribal people could have been involved in. As per the information provided by the key informants from the villages, it is evident that the people had working capital for such activities since most of them were paid compensation for their lost land and standing crops. Being the local people, they had the opportunity to buy or capture some plots of land for such purposes on the roadsides. Contrarily, it has been revealed that the majority of the families opted to construct pucca houses, buy luxury vehicles, bikes and consumer durables instead of investing the money for profit and future sustenance. The respondents reveal that outsiders own almost all the shops and enterprises in and around the industrial complex. The local tribal people are hardly interested in buying plots of land near the roads to do business. The lack of enthusiasm of Sonowal Kachari people towards entrepreneurial activities and lack of resilience in a changing situation has been revealed in their narratives as follows.

In the views of Montu Sonowal of Kakoti gaon, *"...No doubt the Gas Cracker has given us value*

for the land, but most people could not utilise the money properly... They wasted their money on lavish eating habits. Now they take loans in the name of the "Bandhan Goot" and waste the money and struggle to pay back the loan. Look at the road coming from Barbaruah, both sides are filled with Biharis and Muslim people from places like Sivasagar, Jorhat. Our people are not far-sighted..."

Piling Sonowal says, "...Every household has become a pucca house. However, many village people could not complete the house with the compensation money; some had completed it. However, many people could not understand how to utilise the money and wasted their whole money."

Raheswar says, "...Even though we received compensation, situations have become worse since the boys did not know the proper use of money. We have lost our source of income, and money has become scarce. We have lost our garden plots and the fishing ponds to the Gas Cracker. There is nothing left to do for a living. Few people have got jobs, and some have not, as there are many irregularities. Many villagers used their compensation money to build their houses, which remained incomplete. On the other hand, many people have completed their houses but do not have means of livelihood. Most of the people in our village are facing this situation."

Thaneswar Sonowal also reveals a similar situation by saying, "How many days can you live with that small compensation. It was exhausted in building a house and daily expenses. I could not even make a house. One cannot survive long without a source of income and limited cash. There are only a few betel nut trees and a few banana trees in my backyard. We can grow a few vegetables for us, which is insufficient to sell in the market."

Lakheswar Das from Lepetkata reveals, "Only labour like jobs has been given...no permanent jobs...better job holders are outsiders. After completing JE, many of our boys want to work there. However, they do not continue, as they are paid like 4th-grade workers. JE are also under contractors. One of my nephews had received the money, but now he is compelled to beg. Few from Kakoti Gaon have also become beggars. One Big-ha of land and house were provided to all the people who had lost land to the Gas Cracker."

Anata Hazarika from the same village also speaks the same, "There are many engineers and doctors; quite a few JE are also there. They are

doing nothing, not even getting a job now. They left their jobs at the Gas Cracker citing low salaries. Only one JE is working there. Many good engineers work as supervisors, not as engineers; they work just for their livelihood. No girl is working in the Gas Cracker."

Other Inherent Issues of Industrialisation in the Tribal Domain

While business, job opportunities, and improved road and communications are some of the positive impacts of the industrial expansion in and around the tribal domain in Dibrugarh, there are also darker sides to it. The primary among them is the loss of the permanent source of livelihood, loss of natural resources, changing nature of value systems, and social and interpersonal interaction. Tribal people are not seen as involved in newer economic activities even after the opportunities come in. Another crucial issue is that since the jobholders remain unmarried, they support the entire family, as the job is acquired for lost family land. However, over the years, after getting married, the person forms his own nuclear family, and in search of better amenities and prospect, he leaves the village and family and moves to town. Thus, the primary family becomes support less. The respondents rapidly narrate these situations in the interviews.

Hemchandra Hazarika, a 76-year-old respondent from Lepetkata Kachari gaon, says, "Setting up of Gas Cracker has made the situation worse. There is no land available even for grazing the cows; trees bear fewer fruits; rice production has also reduced, but insects have increased. The soil was very fertile, and rice production was good enough, which has become less fertile now. Betel nut trees also bear fewer nuts than earlier. We are living through such inconveniences. People have converted the available land near their houses to tea gardens; no land is left to grow vegetables."

Regarding the changing nature of social and interpersonal interaction and values, the respondent says, "Nowadays, marriages are celebrated lavishly by putting up decorated pandal. Earlier, the village people erected shades rendering service to the host family. Nowadays, there are more show-offs. The celebration of girls' attaining puberty has become a grand celebration like marriages. Attending such celebrations has become

a challenging affair since you need a good dress and costly gifts to show. In the past, village people used to help the host family and started the preparation months before. Preparations were carried out long before the wedding; people from the village took part. Now you need to engage daily labourers. Nowadays, you go there as a guest and have the food."

Ananta Hazariks opines about the changing behaviour of people over the years as follows, "Earlier, there was a lot of love and affection amongst people. If someone prepares rice cake or something, they would call all the neighbours. Even if someone prepared fish or meat, they would send it to the neighbours in a bowl. Nowadays, no such love and affections are there. Even in case of any tragedy, they hardly visit to offer help."

Babatu Sonowal says, "Many people, including me, do not have land for cultivation, not even possess backyards to grow something for survival. So there is no scope for doing business either."

Piling Sonowal also reveals, "There is no more space available for fishing, though around 15 to 20 lakes were once available. Gas Cracker has taken over all the lakes. Now edible ferns and elephant apples have become scarce. The local items have vanished after the Gas Cracker has come up."

Another respondent says, "Even though we received compensation, situations have become worse since the boys did not know the proper use of money. We have lost our source of income, and money has become scarce. We have lost our garden plots and the fishing ponds to the Gas Cracker. There is nothing left to do for a living."

People have resorted to unethical businesses like selling traditional liquor and related things due to a lack of other options, as they lost their land resources. It has been depicted in the following narrative of the same respondent, wherein he says, "I have been selling 'mod pitha' in the tea gardens for a few years. Earlier I had gardens of betel leaves on the land that Gas Cracker had taken over. In our village, around 10 to 12 persons sell liquor. Earlier they used to sell 'Chulai', however, after the excise department caught them, they are selling rice beer only."

Several respondents narrated that before establishing the industry, the place was pleasant to live in, as people used to get fish while fishing in the nearby Sessa River and other lakes. The Gas

Cracker has taken over the riversides and 12-15 lakes and reclaimed them for construction purposes. So the natural source of fishes, wild vegetables like the *Ou-Tenga* (elephant apple), *Nal-Tenga* (Indian Chestnut Vine), *Dhekiya* (Fiddlehead fern) and many other species have been on the verge of extinction.

Government Agencies Take Welfare and Development Initiatives

The Sonowal Kacharis have an autonomous council that looks after the people's welfare and development, besides other government agencies. Several respondents in these villages have revealed that they have received some housing materials and toilet materials from the council. However, they have hardly got any assistance for livelihood development. People also accuse nepotism and favouritism in distributing these things. Some respondents accuse the office bearers and their favourite relatives of pocketing grants for developing fisheries in the villages by some beneficiaries without developing such infrastructure. People also narrate the misappropriation and mismanagement of MGMNREGA grants without developing infrastructure facilities in the villages. People are hardly aware of any skill development training and employment of youth under such schemes.

Changing Aspects of Celebrating Traditional Festivals

A close look at the Sonowal Kachari society reveals that there has been a significant change in the nature and extent of celebrating the traditional festivals at the family and village levels. Comparing the activities related to the spring festival *Bohag Bihu* (celebrated by Assamese people in April) three decades back with the observation-based present situation, the author has delineated the changes. Among the Sonowal Kacharis, the festival directly relates to the well-being of cattle, as people use them in cultivation. People celebrate the preceding day of the *Bohag Bihu* for the cattle as *Goru Bihu* (*Goru* means cattle). In the past, the young boys spent much time preparing for *Goru Bihu* by making ropes from the bark of the *Tora* plant (*Alpinia nigra*) well in advance, collecting it from the marshy jungle. The previous day of the *Goru Bihu*, one of the young boys of the family

would get up at dawn before crows caw and collect the leaves and branches of shrubs, namely, *Dighloti* (*Litsea salicifolia*) and *Makhiloti* (*Flemingia*), from such a distance where the noise of the *Dheki* (a wooden instrument used to de-husk paddy) should not reach. They also collected the flower of *Tongloti* (*Eupatorium cannabinum*) wherever it was available.

Further, people also make some bamboo forks (*chak*) where they fix the slices of some fruits like bottle guard, brinjal, turmeric and *theke* (*Garcinia pedunculata*). In the morning, the entire villagers take their cattle to a place where water is available and bathe them. In the evening, they tie the cattle with the new ropes made of the *Tora* plant and decorate it with the flower of *Tongloti* and besmeared with the paste of black gram and turmeric.

These activities showed an inseparable attachment between their economic activities and celebrating festivals. Preparing for the *Bihu* with various rice-based eatables well before the festival at the family and community levels was a tradition in the tribal villages because these festivals held importance for the entire village community. Most of these practices have now been reduced to symbolic acts only. The use of tractors reduced to a requirement of keeping cattle. Since the tribal people hardly use milk products for their family and ritual needs, they do not need to rear cows. Thus, the zeal for celebrating *Goru Bihu* has become a symbol of past days.

Moreover, the herbs described above have disappeared by reclaiming the marshy land by the Gas Cracker industry. Rather, people would do it symbolically or buy available required items from the market. A similar case of cultural loss can be cited for another occasion of *Magh Bihu* or *Bhogali Bihu*, celebrated on 13-14 January. It is a festival marking and enjoying the completion of harvesting the primary crops like paddy. However, since people now use some non-traditional HYV paddy that matures faster and harvests them months before January, the festival's significance no longer remains the same. It also has influenced the magnitude and ways of celebrating it compared to the past years. There are many other examples of culture loss or culture change due to changes in human ecology.

DISCUSSION

Tribal people have a tradition of clearing forests or unused land for cultivation in new places.

However, along with the imposition of forest protection acts, they were restricted from opening new plots of land. The colonial government awarded land on lease to the tea planters without considering the local communities' non-official holding of these lands. The tribal people were either unaware of these rights transfers over land or were not serious about the land title since such was the tradition of land use. Social scientists had repeatedly established that the tribal people have been indifferent to documentation and land records, and they had paid the price for this ignorance and indifference when they were displaced for development projects and extraction industries. Anthropological studies conducted by Vidyarthi (1968), Dube (1968), Sachchidananda (1969), Sharma (1974), Dasgupta (1977), Srivastava (1979), Devi (1988), and Roy Burman (1989) reveal such facts. These studies also emphatically expressed that in the event of a lack of human resource development initiatives industrialisation in the tribal domain will make the tribal people into merely unskilled labourers. This study also reveals a similar condition even after several decades. The human resources required for the Gas Cracker have been mostly absent in the villages because people have lost their traditional resources, including land. The narratives explicitly indicate that the tribal people of these villages are mostly engaged in Gas Cracker as daily waged unskilled labourers. The skilled persons are also not well paid since they do not have bargain power.

These scholars explicitly stated the importance of considering the tribal philosophy, culture, environment, psychosocial bearing, and local technoculture while planning development in tribal areas to make the change process meaningful and sustainable. As stated elsewhere in this paper, several Sonowal Kachari families did not get compensation for their lost land since they did not have legal ownership rights. However, most of them did not understand why that happened, as they were holding the land and cultivating it for generations. People thus affected reveal that they received compensation for the standing crops on their land. They did not get compensation for the land they lost. A similar case is evident in other parts of the country for tribal people.

The findings reveal that the tribal people of the state are yet not well adept in utilisation and management of money, for which most of the people

remain unable to sustain and build assets from the compensatory money for their lost land and standing crops. Studies dealing with the resettlement and rehabilitation of project-affected tribal people in India have mentioned this as a chronic problem. Tribal people, in general, are not adept with sustainable use of money. Due to a lack of entrepreneurial zeal and investment ideas, they fail to multiply this volatile resource, and in a short period, they end up with their resource. The same thing happened to the tribal people of the studied villages. The work of Mohanty (2005), Mohanty and Mohanty (2009), Sharma and Singh (2009), Ray and Saini (2011), and many others have clearly expressed such concerns.

Similarly, the lack of resilience of tribal people who are resistant or reluctant to accept change has made the victim of such situations. It has been found in these villages that while the people have spent their monetary resources in an unplanned way, they are also now lacking resources. They cannot enter the emerging economic opportunities and diversify their livelihood meaningfully. They have exhibited their incompetency to a great extent. Some of them are still grasping the traditional ways of livelihood. De (2015) and several other scholars' studies reveal tribal people's lack of compatibility to deal with changing situations easily. The author also reveals that the non-tribal people take away tribal land and capture the emerging economic opportunities in commerce and petty industry. The findings also support the inferences made by Rao et al. (2006). They have expressed that development projects have necessitated a new approach to making tribal people resilient towards livelihood diversification instead of sticking to the land-based rehabilitation programme since the economic domain of the tribal people has also been constantly changing.

Changing social and economic environments also influence tribal people's social and moral fabric, impacting their cultural and basic tribal ethos. Social scientists have vehemently criticised the establishment of industries and development projects in rural and tribal areas without prior planning for the all-around protection of tribal people regarding their social, economic, cultural and environmental well being. The government has come up with certain guidelines to protect the interest of tribal people in case of land loss and displacement by providing adequate compensation. The present

study also reveals no stone has been left unturned to compensate the tribal people for their due compensation. However, the tribal people were not smart enough to take the opportunity. There is something more beyond financial issues. Kumar (2013) reveals that mainstream communities' denigration of tribal culture, customs, and language had been more damaging to the tribal ethos. The situation also supports the finding of Ray and Saini (2011), where the authors have highlighted the denied rights of tribal people to participate in the resettlement process and sustainably protect their socio-economic entitlements. As the state failed to respect the local decision-making mechanism and control over resources by the tribes, the tribal people remained a dependent population on the state without bargain power.

Now, looking at the definition of rural transformation, the transformation exhibited in the selected villages does not conform to the set definition. Since rural transformation talks of a process of comprehensive societal change and healthy diversification of economies (Julio Berdegue et al. 2014), the situation in these tribal villages does not match it. Since several changes occurred, most of which are not desirable for the people themselves (contrary to the definition of Rauch et al. (2016)), the transformation cannot be termed rural transformation here. Further, the change process and its manifestation resulting from the Gas Cracker industry mostly contrast with the definition forwarded by the IFAD (2016). It sees inclusive rural transformation as a process that leads to rising agricultural productivity, increasing marketable surpluses, expanded off-farm employment opportunities, better access to services and infrastructure, and capacity to influence policy, resulting in improved rural livelihoods and inclusive growth. The tribal people in the studied villages hardly stand near these characteristics and capabilities. One can also see a very unorganised and half-hearted initiative towards rural transformation in the tribal domain, mainly by the government agencies. More than focusing on transformation, the government initiatives are directed toward creating beneficiaries of welfare measures and keeping them dependent on the mercy of the donors.

CONCLUSION

The study clearly shows that establishing an industry in the tribal domain cannot lead to rural transformation. Distancing the tribal people from

their traditional resources and putting them in a new economy domain brings in risk and vulnerability of various kinds. The social scientists have explicitly pointed out that in the absence of required orientation to emerging challenges in the social, economic and demographic domain, the tribal people are sure to land in trouble leading to socio-cultural disintegration and loss of tribal ethos. Though culture and society are dynamic, the moving equilibrium is necessary for a stable society, especially in rural and tribal settings. Since the tribal societies are intimately related to their economic process and resources, cultural practices and geographical conditions, any unhealthy or unprepared change in one component makes a drastic disturbance in another or the whole social structure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the issues discussed, the following recommendation may be forwarded.

There is a need to conduct an instant land survey of tribal land, and subsequently, land titles should be provided to the tribal families. The tribal people should also be made aware of land rights and value for the land for other than non-agricultural purposes. Without devaluating the traditional occupations, skill development must be initiated in tribal villages. Such skill development must be suitable for emerging needs and opportunities. It is very important to note that in the case of transfer of monetary compensation to tribal families, some mechanism must be in place to make people capable of managing finance to be replicated through investment and business. In rural transformation, the local level mechanism may be developed so that the new generation takes or finds interest in their inherent culture and tradition while accepting the modern life ways.

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