

BIODIVERSITY IN NORTH EAST INDIA



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Indigenous Knowledge System with Special Reference to the Khasis of Meghalaya

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INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Knowledge is unique to a given culture or society and contrast from the modern knowledge system generated by professional and academic institution (Warren 1990, 1991,1992; Warren, *et al.*, 1995)). In rural and tribal communities, IK forms the basis for local level decision making in many fields which affects and influence the socio economic welfare of the people. The social fabric of tribal communities is strongly interwoven to the IKS. Warren, *et.al* (1995) describes IK as the information base for a society which facilitates communication and decision making. IK systems are dynamic and are continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation as well as by contact with external systems.

The basic component of any country's knowledge system is its IK. It encompasses the skills, experiences and insights of people and is applied to sustain, improve their livelihood (Anon, 1997). It is a social capital of the poor, their life depend on it and it is their main asset in the struggle for survival. Significant contributions to global knowledge have originated from IK. Indigenous peoples' intimate understanding of their environment have developed IK and is continually enriched and passed down from generation to generation. In the emerging global knowledge economy, a country's ability to build and mobilize knowledge capital is equally essential for sustainable development as is the availability of physical and financial capital. Today, many IKS are at risks, because of rapidly changing environments and fast pacing economic, political and cultural changes. Many practices disappear because of intrusion of foreign technologies or development concepts that promise short-term gains or solutions to problems without being capable of sustaining them (Linden,1991).

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INDIGENOUS ADMINISTRATIVE BODIES OF THE KHASIS

The Khasis Indigenous Administrative practice or governance provides a good example of such practice. The administrative set up comprised of the following traditional pillars:

1. *Durbar Hima* - The highest body of administrative set up of the Khasis
2. *Durbar Synshar Hima* – The State Council presided over by the Administrative heads known variously as *Syiem*, *Lyngdoh*, *Sirdar*, *Wahadadar*, with the *Myntris* and the *Bakhraws*, representing the respective Clans as Members. It exercises legislative, executive and judicial functions
3. *Durbar Synshar Raij* – Commune councils preside over by the *Syiem Raij*, *Lyngdoh* or *Bongthai Raij*
4. *Durbar Synshar Shnong* – Village Council presided by the Headman locally called *Tymmenshnong*
5. *Ki Khun Ki Hajar* – All the natural citizens of the *Hima*

This hierarchy of functioning ensures transparency, accessibility, accountability and most significantly, structured to represent the grass roots.

According to the tradition, the institution of *Rangbah Kur* (Clan Elders) has been maintained as the oldest institution. With time Khasis clans conglomerated to form a village, which resulted in the emergence of the institution of *Tymmenshnong*. This has been held as an elective institution with the male members forming the Electoral College. The progressive nature of the Khasi civil organization led to the unification of villages under one administrative unit called the *Raij*, with the institution of the *Syiem Raij* as the administrative head. In the ultimate stage of this administrative formation, the *Hima* was formed comprising of the *Khasi Raij*. With the formation of the *Hima* the institution of the *Syiem* was constituted. This institution was and is till now an elective system held in great respect by the Khasi people.

INDIGENOUS LAND TENURE SYSTEM OF THE KHASIS

The Land Tenure System of the Khasis is uniquely structured to cater to the needs of the people. The land holding and usufructuary of the Khasis are as follows.

1. **Ri- Kynti** (Private or Clan Land): Here lands are being earmarked for those founding clans and are endowed with the rights of ownership, hereditary rights to own, possess or sell.

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- 2. Ri-Raid:** These are lands earmarked specifically for the general use by the people where any member of the *Raid* can claim ownership through utilization. This utilization rights can revert back to the *Ri-Raid* if left unutilized for a period of three continuous years. This category also encompasses the well known Sacred Groove which has strong element of conservation.

This basic concept was founded on the philosophy of fairness, transparency and equity ensuring that no bonafide citizen is deprived of land and consequently of livelihood. The adoption of the modern system of ownership has seriously affected the wisdom of traditional usage of land. British contact with the Khasis started in 1826 and since then these traditional institutions have been undermined and their powers abrogated.

Similarly, health care which is of primary importance to any individual is in this age unfortunately, out of reach to the majority of rural folk in general and particularly to indigenious tribes. It is the herbal practitioners who have through their wisdom serve the community and have provided an available, sustainable and cheaper form of health care.

DISCUSSION

Both components, i.e. administrative and land holding practices, reflects the wisdom and more importantly humane consideration that sadly is lacking in the present day capitalistic system. It is now being realized that local level knowledge and organization provides the foundation for participatory approach to development that is effective. Conventional approach implies that development processes always require technology or policy adoption from countries that are perceived as more advanced. This has led to overlooking the potential in local experiences and practices. It is only now that developmental programmes and projects with a contextualised approach by taking into confidence the local IKS which is expected to yield better results. The nineteenth century colonial approach has ignored IKS and sometimes maligned it. Studies that depicted local communities and their knowledge as primitive, simple and static are now countered by rapidly expanding perception by both biological and social scientist that described the complexity and sophistication of many indigenous knowledge systems, including governance and natural resource management.

There is a need for greater scientific respect for and more effective collaboration with

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those who possessed the wisdom of generations (Haugerud & Collinson, 1991) for it is the IKS that has stood us in good stead for centuries.

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