

on ageing or related issues.

References

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Ch. Priyoranjan Singh (ed.) 2009. *Tribalism and the Tragedy of the Commons – Land, Identity and Development: The Manipur Experience*. New Delhi: Akanksha Publishing House, 382p, Rs.1195, Hardbound.

Northeast India and particularly the tribes of this region have never ceased to draw the attention of the government and the people at large. The book is an exploration of the underlying causes for the unrest in Manipur — one of the seven states that together form the Northeastern region of the country. There has been no dearth of plans and programmes made for the development of the region and for the amelioration of its problems, yet these have mostly failed to bear fruits. The different articles in the book explore the root causes behind the failure of the developmental schemes.

The book contains three sections. The first deals with the politics of identity and contains six papers including the introduction. The second section comprises six articles grouped together to explain the intricate relation between history, politics and development. The third section includes eight articles on land systems of the tribes of Manipur and their quest for identity and change. Before embarking upon the description of the socio-political scenario of the state of unrest in Northeast India and the reasons behind that, Ch. Priyoranjan Singh introduces the reader to the view which the rest of India has for the region - as an area of movement for separate states, homelands and even cessation from the country. Dissatisfaction leads to disruption, dispute and

discord. The book explains how the issues of land and identity are the chief factors responsible for unrest in the region.

Samir Kumar Das writes at length about the demands for homeland from different pockets of the region which keep clashing with each other for want of power, in particular, political power. He compares this to the peeling of the onion that ends only with the end of the onion itself. He explains in detail the difference between territory and land against the backdrop of these conflicts and points out that territory is an object of ownership while land is not; land is shared among the members of a community but not the territory. This notion forms the plinth of conflict between 'we' and 'others'. Das further opines that civil societies in the Northeastern region play a pivotal role in addressing the issues of land, identity and developmental programmes in the area. Discussion on civil society goes a step further as Pradip Phanjoubam questions the role of civil society in Manipur, describes in detail how civil societies tend to become puppets or proxies of the parties in conflict rather than being the instrumental figures for drawing up and building agendas for peace and well being of all.

Prasenjit Biswas goes deeper into the land issue and reiterates that land for the community is just not a property. Rather it symbolizes the identity of the community and regulates social exchange, livelihood and power. Land-related conflicts among the Nagas and Kukis of Manipur is explained in the historical context by Bhabananda Takhellambam. S. Mangi locates the ongoing Kuki-Naga strife in electoral politics. The article by Gangumei Kamei brings to the fore yet another dimension of land-related conflict. A plethora of acts and regulations concerning the tribal land are made, but lacunae in their formulation, interpretation and their politicization have resulted in furthering land-related conflicts. He adds with an optimistic note that a change can be witnessed in the mindset of the intellectuals among the tribes. The emerging progressive leaders are questioning the existing land laws and are raising their voice for a suitable law for the tribal hill areas, a law that makes way for institutional finance and investments. E. Bijoy Kumar too explains in a rather simplistic manner that the hill regions of Manipur are well endowed with forest and land resources so the rampant poverty here cannot be attributed to the lack of resources. Rather the onus of the optimum utilization of these resources lies on good governance and motivating incentives. However the village chiefs and the elites of the area manipulate the property and land rights in their favour. As possessors of money power and muscle power they arrest the implementation of property/land rights in letter and spirit. As a result there is growing development disparity between the hills and the valley

in Manipur giving rise to the demand for territorial division. It is imperative to understand that to effectively tap the rich and vast resource of the hills complete revamping of the rigid norms of the tribes' social and economic structures is a must.

Further it is important to drive home to the people of the region that 'land' is all about natural resources, a potential source of income, employment and general welfare. A welcome step in this direction is the NERCORMP/IFAD project started in a few hill areas of Manipur. It is a project with a difference, in the sense that it aims to evolve a development model which prioritizes the notion of oneness of self and environment and thus seeks to protect the environment and simultaneously promote maximum use of resources. Vijaylakshmi Brara discusses the NERCORM/IFAD project and opines that the long run result of the project would be the much desired loosening of the institutional rigidities in tribal societies. She calls for an adaptive and a transparent system of land rights that can tackle the problems of *jhum*, discrimination and the dominance of the elite.

T. T. Haokip while critically assessing Kuki land system and D. L. Haokip in his paper on the customary laws regarding land ownership and resources management in the Thoubal dam area inhabited by the Kukis point out the ongoing phenomenon of the weakening of traditional land systems largely due to the corrupt practices of the village elites. Traditional leadership in the tribes in India emerged and grew for the maintenance of coherence and growth of the community as a whole. The Kuki being a migratory tribe in the past was prone to intra- or inter- tribal clashes necessitating the control of a strong and authoritarian chief. However the land system here was such where both the chiefs and the commoners had rights over the community land. With the passage of time the chiefs became tyrannical and exploitative. They are now mostly functioning as feudal lords or *zamindars* rather than as one among the equals. There are examples of absentee chiefs who are living in the cities but continue to hold the rein of political and economic power over the villages. S.K. Kipgen writes in his article that the institution of the Kuki Chief should change from within. The cultural aspect of the institution should be separated from the economic aspect of total control over land. For this to become a reality a new land law is required for the hills. However T. Misao's study shows that this is not as easy as it seems. He highlights the non-cooperation of the tribes towards any changes in their land system and common property rights largely due to their fear of loss of their land to the outsiders particularly the Nepalis who migrated into the

Sadar hills and displaced many tribals in the Senapati district. Conversion of the community land into private land by the elites has been well brought out by U.A. Shimray in his article on the Naga tribes. What makes matters worse is the lack of codification of the land system and tenure which is based upon oral traditions, which are interpreted by the powerful to suit their vested interests.

In their respective articles, S.R. Tohring, Samson Chiru and H. Phomrang, and D.H. Hangsha draw attention to the plight of the marginal tribes of Manipur who are struggling for economic and political survival and identity as the Nagas and Kukis are fighting to pull these towards their lot in the game of numbers. To say that the issues of land, ethnicity, identity, economy and polity are not water-tight compartments would be an understatement. In this context, K. Gyanendra Singh and N. Bhupendra Singh analyze the working of the agrarian sector to explore the reasons of the conflicts pertaining to the land.

The book gives a comprehensive account of the causes behind making Manipur a tragedy of the commons. It aims to sensitize the readers towards the felt needs and aspirations of the tribes in Manipur and emphasizes on the much heard but less followed fact that the problems of a people can be best understood only by stepping into their shoes or for that matter by taking an insider's view of the whole problem. It is a thought provoking work and a must read for all and particularly for the policy makers and planners.

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