

SOCIETY, DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT: A DIAGNOSIS AND PROGNOSIS ON NORTH EASTERN INDIA

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Introduction

Terms such as growth, progress, change and development are used commonly. There are different opinions on each term and debate is continuing. We are not entering into a terminological debate. For the purpose of this workshop we will refer to the term development. What is development? K.C. Alexander defines development as, "a process of change that involves the whole society - its economic, socio-cultural, political and physical structure as well as the value system and the way of life of the people."¹ The Human Development Report (1997) evaluate the objective and empirical meaning of development on the basis of three perspectives:

- (i) income perspective
- (ii) basic needs perspective- health, education, essential services, employment and participation; and
- (iii) capability perspective- the necessary skill and capacity to function to earn income.²

The search for solving the human wants and needs has been a dominant ideology for nation-states. Development became both an ideology and a strategy for initiating the process of change. According to Carolyn Merchant, that process to change had taken roots from:

- (i) The renaissance and reformation along with the later era of state capitalism had epitomized the ideology of modern world;
- (ii) The scientific knowledge and technology with a capitalist type of economic system & the factors to improve human conditions;
- (iii) Everything is quantified, calculated, exchanged for profit making; and
- (iv) Reason becomes the instrument of control on nature and human bodies³

By late 1960s, the crisis in the industrialized nations had exploded - "strikes, blackouts, breakdowns, crime, pollution, inflation, alienation, racism and consumerism"⁴ were some of the manifested symptoms. There was a general warning at the global context that current process of development followed by nation-states would turn the entire planet into an environmental disaster. In the analysis of Carolyn Merchant, "the revolt of nature is contained within the enlightened project."⁵

The crisis precipitated the realization on the enormity of the situation because of two important reasons: (i) to meet the needs and demands of a growing human population; and (ii) the protection of the environment. The Stockholm Conference (1992) and the Earth Summit of Rio-de-Janeiro (1992) is directly concerned with these two reasons. The Earth Summit took cognizance of the fact that the earth is facing air, water and land pollution, deforestation, wild life depletion, acid rain, ozone depletion, desertification, global warming, loss of biodiversity, greenhouse effect, etc. The outcome from the summit is a paradigm shift

of conceptual framework from 'development' to 'sustainable development'. This new concept is a symbiotic relation between the process of development of human and environment. G.K. Aurora explains the concept as "meeting the needs of the future."⁶ Another noted scholar on environment, Herman E. Daly analyzed the concept from the following premises:

- (i) Economy as a physical dimension is a unit of earth ecosystem. The ecosystem is a non-growing and finite as a whole;
- (ii) All forms and processes of life live of the environment and are dependent upon this non-growing and finite body. The physical life in the process produce waste (highly toxic in nature) as polluted returns; and
- (iii) There has been a continuous expansion of the economic sub-system leading to conversion of every available ecosystem into an economic space.⁷

Thus, according to him, the urgency to save the eco-system has led to the formulation of this concept of 'sustainable development'.

The paradigm shift is a manifestation of the defective strategy of the earlier processes of development. Therefore, the replication by adding 'sustainable' with 'development' as a new model for being environment-friendly. We prognose by mere addition, the 'new model' may lead to similar consequences. This is because the population is growing while land is finite. Human societies by nature seek the fulfillment of integral needs (like food, housing, clothing, health, education, and generative employment). To negate 'man' from his integral needs for survival will be non-sustainable.

Let us cite the example of *jhumming* as a method of cultivation practiced by the tribal societies. There are reports from officials of the government linking deforestation as a consequence of the above practice. Villagers explained that government officials like Halley's Comet visitation deliver lectures on the demerits of *jhumming* and left them by noon. A village headman said, "had we followed their teaching we would have starved because they do not provide any alternative methods to sustain us once we stop our earlier practices."

The concern and protection of the environment (e.g. Biodiversity conservation) is directly related to sustaining the integral needs of human societies.

Within the boundaries of the above discussion we will try to analyse the Northeast India developmental trends. The process of development in the seven states of the region is carried out through the planned objectives of the nation-state. We are in the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002) and its objectives are:

- (i) Priority agriculture and rural development for generating adequate productive employment and eradication of poverty;
- (ii) Accelerating the growth rate of the economy with stable prices;
- (iii) Ensuring food and nutritional security for all, particularly the vulnerable sections of the society;
- (iv) Providing the basic minimum services of safe drinking water, primary health care facilities, universal primary education, shelter, and connectivity to all in time bound manner;

- (v) Containing growth rate of population;
- (vi) Ensuring environmental sustainability of the development process through social mobilization and participation of people at all levels;
- (vii) Empowerment of women and socially disadvantaged groups; and
- (viii) Promoting and developing people's participatory institutions like Panchayati raj institutions, cooperatives and self help groups.

Within the objectives of planned development, Northeast India has been given special focus in certain sectors:

- (i) Creation of employment opportunities;
- (ii) Basic minimum services;
- (iii) Land, water management and flood control;
- (iv) Communications;
- (v) Credit availability;
- (vi) Industrialization;
- (vii) Tourism;
- (viii) Exports;
- (ix) Transport;
- (x) Power;
- (xi) Border Area development.⁸

The ninth plan has taken into consideration the importance of human-nature balance relationship. While the special focus sectors on Northeast India has focused more on human development. Therefore, Northeast India development has to be analyzed in both sense objectives and empirical. The empirical development of North East India is being examined from the Basic Statistic of North Eastern India (1995)⁹:

1. The total area of the region is 2,55,083 sq. km. This is the finite and non-growing space. Within this finite area the population is 31,547,314 persons (1991). The decadal growth rate is 32% (1991). With this pattern of population growth the human-nature relationship is already a critical problem in many sectors.
2. There are 34,878 villages resided by 80% of the total population. These total number of villages are totally dependent on agriculture for subsistence production. Even though 80% are agriculturists, food grains production and requirement in the region is in the ratio of (5525.5 : 7562.8) thousand tonnes (1997-98). The region is yet to reach the stage of food security.
3. The area under annual shifting cultivation is 3869 sq. km. involving 4,43,336 families. While the minimum area under shifting cultivation one time or other is 14,660 sq. km. The population in the region depends solely on the method of shifting cultivation for agricultural production. This method disturbs the ecological balance but the non-availability of alternatives to assist and support the farmer leaves them (cultivators) with no options but to follow the traditional method of jhumming.
4. Forest cover area is 25,505 (000' hectares) In 1985-87 the actual; forest cover is 16,627 (000'hectares) which shows that out of the total area the actual forest cover is 50.9%. In

the 1991 forest assessment the region has suffered a net loss of forest cover equal to 635 sq. km. What would be the loss of bio-diversity, soil, water-source, etc. from the loss of forest cover? There has been no scientific evaluation till date.

5. Social sector development progress can be understood from the followings: (i) the level of literacy in the region is 58.11% and the level of dropouts between class I to class X (1997-98) state specific is as follows: Tripura-83.63%; Arunachal Pradesh-80.96%; Assam-80.96%; Manipur-75.80%; Nagaland-75.02%; Meghalaya-73.08%; and Mizoram-52.60%; (ii) the average per capita income (1996) is Rs.3764 per year while the All India average is Rs. 6929; (iii) As per October 1993 the number of villages electrified is 32071 numbers; (iv) the total road length is 116551 km. Out of the total road length 27.08% is surfaced; (v) and the average population served per doctor is 1:4000.
6. As per 1st January 1998, the employment opportunities and absorption in the region is dominantly the public sectors with 731.4 (thousand) being employed while 509 (thousand) are employed in the private sectors. These private sectors of which 90% are located in the state of Assam. The rest of the northeastern states are negligible in private sectors.
7. The central funding for the development of the region, between the period of 1990-91 and 1997-98 is the total of Rs. 50.299 crores. Each state received the share in crores as below:

Arunachal Pradesh	Rs. 4.600 crores
Assam	Rs. 21.163 crores
Manipur	Rs. 4.663 crores
Meghalaya	Rs. 4.205 crores
Mizoram	Rs. 4.071 crores
Nagaland	Rs. 5.448 crores
Tripura	Rs. 6.149 crores.

(Shillong Times, February 15, 1999).

What is presented above is a quantitative developmental position of the Northeast. This is one side of the picture, the other side is the qualitative analysis using both the quantitative data and the people's perception for understanding the reality of development in the region. What we are considering in the preceding analysis is not the ultimate conclusion but a limited scientific evaluation:

- (i) The employment opportunities in the region is largely depended on public sectors for the educated section of the population while the villagers are seasonally employed as agriculturists or agricultural labourers. Private sector is yet to take off. The annual requirement of each state in the region to create jobs is in the average approximation of (20,000 - 50,000) jobs;
- (ii) 80 % of the population are depending on agriculture. The region's requirement of food grains is far more than what it produces. Overall agriculture has not been revolutionized because of various reasons like lack of scientific knowledge; farm management skills, transport storage system, capacity-building skills, credit financing and marketing facilities. The constraints and problems in agricultural development have led the people to convert their land into mine or quarry as an alternative that provide

immediate source of income. There is no concern whether methods used in mining or quarrying is scientific or unscientific. Secondly, till the Supreme Court's banning of timber business, the entire region was involved in the commercialization of forest.

Forests in the region though are protected today by the laws of Supreme Court of India on one hand, and protected by community on the other, yet they still face the threat and are highly vulnerable. This is because wood is used as domestic fuel. We have 34,878 villages in the region. Let's say per day, a village with 30 houses uses at least 15 pieces of wood. The annual consumption of wood in the region is approximately:

$$\begin{aligned} 34,878 \text{ villages} \times 30 \text{ houses} \times 30 \text{ days} \times 12 \text{ months} \\ \times 15 \text{ pieces of wood per day} &= 376682400 \\ &= 38 \text{ crore numbers of chopped firewood.} \end{aligned}$$

Will there be enough forest to support the region's requirements of domestic fuel in the next 20 years? Besides, trees in the forest are also being cut for community programmes. How many trees are annually cut-off for the sake of Christmas celebrations?

- (iii) Majority of the land in the region is either controlled by the village or domestic group or clan. Therefore people feel that it is their absolute right of ownership which they enjoyed. This absolute right has led to the commercialization of land for maximum monetary benefit;
- (iv) The region is faced with continuous political conflict on the control of land. Boundary disputes between states, ethnic groups conflict, inter-tribal rivalry of the emerging land-related problems. There are various institutions belonging to the traditional and modern political systems, which are in contrast to each other in decision making process. The example of judiciary versus the District Council, or the State versus the Supreme Court etc. This has increased and intensified the problems in the region; and
- (v) There is a gap of developmental understanding between the state and the grassroots. There seems to be no relationship between development and environment. The developmental trends in the region are non-sustainable which is equally reflected in people's perception. The rights of ownership of land, the exploitation of land, forests, etc. for meeting the integral needs of growing population are critically issues of human-nature survival.

The concern for protection of the environment in general and Bio-diversity conservation in particular requires an integrated action. To implement the action the following is required:

- (i) Every state in the region must have a vision and mission for socio-economic development of the people. It becomes the working economic policy for at least two decades. It prepares the method of intervention and identifies vital sectors for generation of social growth and meeting the integral needs of the state. As we had discussed earlier there is a growing population on a finite land. This will create a human-human and human-nature crisis in the future unless responded by a working policy as an anticipation and management of crisis. Without a directed vision and efforts by the state and its people, land, forest, water and soil are going to face the extreme threat and the human race naturally will face the final impact. The necessity

of determining a balanced future for both human and nature is imperative for the Northeastern States of India;

- (ii) Since land is controlled and managed directly by the community in many cases. A direct linkage with the community based organizations (CBOs) is important for creating social awareness and consciousness, training of people and training of trainers from the CBOs as a method to collaborate the efforts in Biodiversity conservation and the participation of the community in nature's conservation
- (iii) There should be a Community Conservation Centre (CCC). This centre must be able to cater to the villages clustered not more than 50 in numbers. The CCC must be managed by a person from the community. The CCC functions to document the biodiversity, provide deeper understanding on the benefits from conservation, organizes programmes and initiate alternative methods to enhance people's capabilities to meet their integral needs; and CCC is a network agency with other related departments like Forests, Agriculture, Soil etc.
- (iv) The community through the CCC must be able to acquire a balanced knowledge and understanding between human-nature relationship. Similarly, the relationship between indigenous medicinal practices and modern science.

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