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COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCES AND RURAL LIVELIHOOD AMONG THE KHASI OF MEGHALAYA

In ordinary parlance, the phrase 'Common Property Resource' implies the natural resources collectively held, managed and utilized by a community or society. It conceptualizes a system in which the natural resources such as land, forest and waters belong to a community, which has exclusive rights to use them for their own welfare. According to N. S Jodha, "Common Property Resources are the resources accessible to the whole community of a village and to which no individual has exclusive property right". (Jodha 2001: 150) Thus, in the context of surface ecology it includes village pastures, community forests, waste lands, common threshing grounds, waste dumping places, village ponds, tanks, rivers/rivulets, irrigation canals etc.

While it is true that CPRs are basically identified by common access, common use and communal purpose one cannot deny the fact that the 'commonality' content that is inherent in these definitions is fast losing ground thereby making way for an inequitable (privatized) share in the use of common resources. If we look at the situation in India, it is alarming to find that at least the poorer half depends for its subsistence needs on common lands. Till the end of the last century and in all historical periods before that at least 80 percent of India's natural resources were common property. For the rural community, it appeared as though most of their energy needs, food and housing resources were acquired through this extensive common property which was primarily based on a non-cash, non-market economy. However this dependence on freely accessible common property resources suddenly came to a jolt when a host of feudal masters started acquiring lands at their own disposal thus leading to mass privatization of CPR lands. This had much to do with the Colonial Forest Policy, which tended to be more 'revenue oriented' rather than having a 'conservationist' approach. Correspondingly, forests in India came to be governed by a set of rules and regulations that imposed the system of state control and management of land and forest resources thereby restricting access to Common Property Resources. The situation has not changed in the Post-Independence era. It has often been noted that one of the failures of development policies and programmes in India is the role of Common Property

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Resources in the economy of the rural people. Rural Development Programmes such as CDP have by and large bypassed their CPR based activities and concentrated more on Private Property Resources based activities be it the promotion of high yielding crops varieties or afforestation programmes. Consequently CPRs go unnoticed by rural researchers as well as development planners.

Although this process of resource alienation is in the context of rural India as a whole, it is by no means absent in the contemporary developing tribal societies of the North East. The Khasis are one of such tribal communities who are experiencing increased resource alienation and growing infringement of their traditional rights to usage of CPRs.

This paper is aimed at examining the emerging problem of resource alienation and the changing status of CPRs affecting the Khasi rural livelihood.

The Khasis of Meghalaya are a matrilineal community. Their economy is land and forest oriented. The land occupies a central place in the socio-cultural and economic life of the Khasis. The Khasis have a deep-rooted affinity with nature. The earth, which is symbolized as 'mother' or (*meiramew*), is looked upon as the caretaker of all the natural resources. "*U Khasi u im bad ka mariang bad ka mariang ka im bad u*". This resounding declaration of the famous Khasi writer H.O Mawrie, which literally means, 'A Khasi lives with nature and nature lives with him' sums up the strong emotional bond that has sustained between the Khasis and nature.

Land to the Khasis is 'a gift of nature' that belongs to the community, therefore, access to land not only ensures economic security for the individual but also control over it symbolizes territorial integrity for the community as a whole (Nongbri, 2003:257) According to the 'Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills, 1975, the social customs, religious beliefs and the inheritance pattern prevalent among the Khasis are the predominant factors of Khasi land tenure system. That the land belongs to the community, 'the Raid' is simply proved by the fact that each individual member of the community possesses the right to use the land and he need not pay any revenue for that land use. Khasi land tenure system recognizes three types of land- (1) 'Ri Raid' land or Community land (2) 'Ri Kynti 'land or Private land and (3) Government Land. The Ri Raid Land is the community land which is managed and controlled by the concerned community. The community maybe a village, a group of villages or an elaka. No person has proprietary, heritable or transferable rights over such land. Such lands revert back to the community when the person ceases to occupy or use the land for a consecutive period of three years or more. But if a person makes permanent improvement on the land by constructing retaining walls, permanent building, fruit garden, fishery pond or any other projects that accrues permanent income the land becomes a private property.

Ri Raid land also includes forestlands like 'law kyntang', 'law niam', 'law lyngdoh', 'law adong', 'law shnong' etc. Leaving aside these restricted forests all other unclassed forests that fall within the Ri Raid land belong to the community from which any person can cut firewood, timber, bamboo, thatch, fodder, fruits, vegetable or any other forest produce. That is considered as the common property resource of the village as a whole. It is in this land that Jhum cultivation or Thang Shyrtri is usually carried out and from where the rural folk eke out their livelihood.

The forest which is an important natural resource, holds an important place in the socio-economic life of the Khasis. It is looked upon, as a well loved home, a game sanctuary and an abode of worship all rolled into one, around which their social, cultural and religious activities revolve.

The extent of the Khasis dependency on forest and forest products can be gauged from their daily subsistence needs. The forest is the natural storehouse from where they derive everything for their daily needs. To begin with, a large variety of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) are used by the Khasis to supplement their daily food requirements. These include tubers, fruits, roots, wild edible plants, mushroom, bamboo shoot, creepers etc. A special kind of tuberous root locally called 'U Sohphlang' (*Flemingia Vestita*) is eaten raw (Gurdon, 1975:51). The Khasis use a number of wild edible plants in their diet and it is a natural quality of the Khasis to be able to differentiate between different wild plants. They can also distinguish between edible and poisonous mushrooms. It is also interesting to note that the Khasis generally use the prefix 'Ja' to name the wild variety of edible plants that are found in the woods. The reason for this could be that 'Ja' which literally means 'rice' is the staple food of the Khasis and so the use of these edible plants with the prefix 'Ja' was a supplement to rice specially amongst the poorer section of the people. Khongsit, who made an in-depth study on the various types and uses of forest produce with the prefix 'Ja', gives a list of 113 species of such plants and herbs. (Khongsit 1999: 28).

Firewood is the main source of energy in the Khasi rural households. Besides firewood, the twigs, branches, woodlots, bushes and other forest litter are collected from the forest and used for fuel purpose by the rural folk. However, firewood and charcoal remains an indispensable source of energy used in Khasi household for cooking, heating and drying purposes. Data collected from Lawbyrwa village in Ri-Bhoi district shows that 20.56 percent of adult workers are engaged in cutting and selling firewood and 22.22 percent of them eke out their livelihood by making and selling charcoal. (data based on actual fieldwork conducted as part of Phd research) Another extensive way by which the Khasi village folk acquire monetary value is through the collection of medicinal herbs and plants from the jungle. Khasis are known for their medical lore in the treatment of diseases. From a historical retrospective, the traditional woodcraft and bamboo craft, which were in

existence since long, are still in use till today. Many articles of daily use are made from cane and bamboo such as *Trap* (a container for serving as a package used for travelling), *Khoh* (a conical structure with a seat provided, used for carrying sick persons or travellers), *Knup* (used as a cap by women to protect oneself from the hot sun and rain), *Pdung* and *Prah* (winnowing fans and trays), *Shang* (baskets) and *Mula* (stools made of cane slips).

Bamboo or '*siej*' as it is locally called is of multifarious use. Khongsit in his book *Hangne Tang ia u Siej*, gives the names of 43 species of bamboo that are locally grown and used for different purposes by the Khasis. (Khongsit 1999: 24).

Bamboo is modelled into several crafts, baskets and other articles such as fishing rods, water or irrigation pipes, huts, bridges, decorative gates, chairs, toys, furniture, containers, water vessels etc. Mats are also woven out of special bamboo called '*siej lieh*'. Thus, one can say that there was once and there still is a widespread bamboo culture (Bareh, 1985: 428).

Woodcraft finds expression in the handles of hoes, knives, daggers, *daos* and sometimes spears. An important item used in Khasi kitchens till today is the mortar and pestle or '*U thlong*' and '*synrei*' made of wood for pounding.

To understand the significant role played by CPRs in the life and economy of the Khasi rural folk we now briefly highlight the general benefits offered by the CPRs.

- (a) CPRs have helped the poorer farmers in the supply of fodder and grazing space which in turn saves their lands to be used for agriculture which otherwise would not have been permitted on private land owned by individual owners.
- (b) CPRs contribute to the poor man's diet by facilitating his food-gathering strategies that he derives from jungles, ponds and other sources thus strengthening his self-sustaining system.
- (c) CPRs, as reliable sources of both physical supplies (food, fodder, fuel, timber, water etc) as well as employment and income have also played the role of an 'adjustment mechanism' (Jodha.1985:256) during crisis situation or non-crop season for poorer households. Most of the CPR based activities are neither time bound nor full time jobs and the rural folk including women and children can engage themselves without sacrificing alternative employment opportunities.
- (d) In the presence of CPRs, rural inequities are partly reduced because the resource-poor households supplement their income from CPR based activities but this is not so in cases where PPR – based farming system prevail.

Changing Status of CPRs

In recent times physical productivity of CPRs both in terms of quality and quantity has declined. The level of contribution of CPRs towards income of the rural poor has also declined drastically. The issue of land, forest and CPRs has therefore brought to light the serious problem of conflict for survival. The conflict lies between people's right over their land as a natural productive resource and the policies of the state. While there are many factors that have played a role in producing such a situation, the following seem to have directly affected the rural poor.

Forest for revenue

The advent of British colonial rule may be seen as a watershed in the ecological history of Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The British considered the forest as a revenue yielding property, which could be commercially exploited. They created state forests and scientifically organized them as profit making enterprise. The British through the enactment of forest laws and regulation declared vast forest tracts of Khasi Hills as 'Reserved Forests' and 'Protected forests' and introduced statutory interference on the traditional usage of free gifts of nature. It is a well established fact that state control over forests has systematically eroded people's traditional rights over natural resources thus posing a threat not only to their livelihood but also to the delicate balance between tribals and the forest. The objectives of the Forest Acts and regulations were to define the legal status and extent of property rights of the government over the tribal land and forests. That the imperatives of colonial forestry were essentially commercial and not environmental was amply clarified when the government exploited forest resources of the country for supplying timber for ship building and sleepers for railway expansion. During the long period of British rule, a considerable area of forested land of Khasi and Jaintia Hills which were clad with rich forests and natural vegetations were brought under legal ownership of the British Govt. depriving the tribal people of their natural rights. From the Khasis point of view the Reserved forests conserved by the Forest Dept. had no meaning at all as they were restricted from entering into it or even removing a branch or a tree. For a rural dweller it amounted to loss of common property resource from where they derived their daily necessities of life like food, water, shelter, timber grass and leaves.

The post Independence period saw the continued control over management of forests and utilization of resources by the administrators, which was an extension of the Colonial past. This is evident from the first forest policy of 1952 which affirms the claim that the policy envisaged towards expansion of forest cover to one-third of the country's geographical area and 60 percent of the total area in respect of hill states. This policy gave a new thrust to the colonial forest expansionist policy and also brought additional areas of land under forest cover. As a result there was an increase in the area

under forest in Meghalaya by 3.10 per cent. In 1988, on the other hand there was corresponding decrease in the area under cultivable waste and pasture grassland by 8.90 per cent. This increase in forest area and decrease in waste land undoubtedly suggest consequent deprivation of that much of jhum land to the tribal jhumias. The Forest Conservation Act 1980 restricted State Govt. from conversion of any forest land (Reserved Forest) into non-forest purposes meaning thereby that any further requirement of land for other developmental purposes like construction of roads, buildings, dams, etc has to be met from cultivable waste land, jungles or vegetables etc. which again are the lands where jhum cultivation is carried out.

Under the provision of the Sixth schedule of the Constitution the administration and management of the forest in Khasi and Jaintia Hills passed on to the Autonomous District Councils. Barring a meager area of 1134.232 sq.km of forests under the State Forest Department of Meghalaya the entire forest areas of the State went under the control and management of the three Autonomous District Councils. The District Councils converted the forests into revenue earning properties disregarding the ecologically vital life sustaining aspect of the natural cover. Large-scale forest operation was carried out to meet the increasing demand for industrial wood, bamboo and other forest produce both from inside and outside the state. According to the Socio-Economic Review furnished by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Meghalaya, Shillong 2003, the outturn of forest produce during the period between 1979-80 to 1999-2000 has shown an increasing trend with a record production of industrial wood at 513.731 metric tones, bamboos at 56, 82, 000 metric tones during a single year of 1999-2000. This hectic activities in forest operation resulted in sharp fall in the area under forest cover. The forest exploitation by District Council continued unabated till the Supreme Court of India imposed blanket ban on felling of trees in December 1996.

The Autonomous District Councils enacted their own set of forest laws, forest produce and prohibiting people from cutting and removing even 'Minor' forest produce for the specified forest areas. According to Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Management and Control of Forest Rules 1984, MFP includes tezpatta, firewood, agarwood, broomstick, charcoal, thatch, bamboo, fodder, grass, pepper, sisia bark (*cinnamomum Zelanicum*) etc. This means that practically all kinds of natural resources grown in the forest except commercial timber are classified as minor forest produce which actually constitutes the most essential items of everyday use of the Khasis. More than timber, it is these minor forest produce which play a crucial role in supporting the livelihood of the tribal community. But according to Section 5 of the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Management and Control of Forest) Act 1958, it prohibits removal of these minor forest produce also from the District Council protected forests, Green Blocks, Unclassed forests and Reserved forests. This made the prohibition effective to both the State Forest

and District Council Forests thereby leading to the infringement of people's traditional rights over forest absolute. Thus the issue of forest for revenue, which basically was a legacy of the British Forest Policy has made its mark in the existing system land and forest management leading to usurpation of Common Property Resources of the Khasi rural folk.

Privatization of CPRs and the problem of land alienation

An important issue that has surfaced in recent years is the possession of land by a few private owners and acquisition of land by the Government for various developmental works. As the resource demands for massive developmental programmes like roads, railways, industries, dams, airfields etc increased, it induced the Government to acquire vast areas of CPR lands, which was the main source of livelihood to the economically vulnerable and poor village folk. In the village Lawbyrwa where the author had conducted a fieldwork as part of Ph.D research , it was found that in 1959-1968 the Assam State Electricity Board acquired a vast stretch of cultivable land for constructing a massive water reservoir covering an area of 4 sq.miles and a power house in the village itself. However no substitute land was given to the villagers who lost their CPR lands and neither were they given any compensation even after several years of dispossession of the land. It was also found that almost 50 percent of the villagers of Lawbyrwa are marginal farmers with land holdings of less than 5 acres each and 20 percent of them are landless labourers who eke out their livelihood by working as daily labourers or collecting NTFP and selling them in the local market. This problem of landlessness has become visible in almost entire Khasi Hills."In the village Smit under Mawrykneng Block in East Khasi Hills about 12 kms from Shillong, there are about 580 families 80 percent of whom are landless" (Dutta and Karna, 1987:87) A logical inference that one can draw from such a process of conversion of Ri raid land into Ri-Kynti land is that there has been a gradual and inevitable shift in the status of CPRs that has affected the pattern of livelihood of the Khasi rural folk. With increased resource scarcity the days are not far when time is not far when CPRs will soon be infringed upon or substituted by PPRs.

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