



Challenges to 'Livelihood' in North-East India

A Perspective in light of Sustainable Development Goals

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A Perspective in light of Sustainable Development Goals

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Ensuring appropriate 'livelihood' opportunities for the communities are central to achieving many defined goals of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) framework. In this paper livelihood challenges are addressed in the purview of Goal 1 that attends to end poverty in all its forms, everywhere and Goal 2 that talks about Zero Hunger. It is important to note that livelihood is also a central component of the Goal 8 which envisions 'Decent Work and Economic Growth'.

Livelihood Challenges of the North Eastern states of India in general and Assam in particular could be addressed in the following categories:-

- Tea communities of Assam
- Bengali speaking Muslims of Assam
- Tribal Communities
- People with disabilities
- LGBTQ+ communities
- Migrant labourers
- People inhabiting in the remote locations

Tea Communities of Assam

The tea communities of Assam are living on the income from their work in around 800 tea estates, spread mostly in Eastern and Northern Assam along with some tea gardens in the Barak Valley of the state. The population of the community is around 1.8 million and could be categorized into 3 different livelihood patterns. The most influential are those working as permanent labour in the tea estates. They have around Rs. 217 daily wage per day, after it was increased from Rs. 167 in the month of February 2021. The permanent labour get food subsidy, low cost limited health services and housing as their perks.

The second category of the tea community lives on the seasonal and casual labour. At the season of tea plantation and harvesting, a major population of the community gets employment in a seasonal term on the same wage rate. However, the subsidized food grain, low cost health care facilities and housing are not their entitlements. Moreover, they are employed only 50% days of a year.

The third section of the community is living absolutely with no economic certainty. They have no assured income sources, no land for agriculture, no housing and so on.

Generation after generation the people of this community inhabits the privately owned tea estates as labourers without having any land rights and not owning a single house in their life time. The poor health and hygiene condition of the community is demonstrated by the high MMR and frail, anemic women of the community.

The children of the community also suffer from the limited access to education. More specifically the dropout rate of girls is alarming; it is caused by the need of sibling care, domestic chores and non-conducive school environment without a separate girl's toilet, lack of uniform and safety at large.

Social evils like alcoholism, child marriage, teen pregnancy, trafficking coupled with social exclusion and lack of alternative livelihood options have made the upliftment of the members of this community to achieve the time bound sustainable development goal a herculean task.

Bengali speaking Muslims of Assam

Mostly inhabiting the sand bars and banks of the rivers, these Bengali speaking Muslim communities is as large as 2.5 million in the state of Assam. Frequent internal displacement due to flood and ethnic conflicts adds to their poor standard of living. The community is an agrarian one with no economic certainty and limited competitive access to the market. High level of social and political exclusion in the recent past has made the community more vulnerable to have access to decent livelihood options.

Tribal Communities

Around 3.3 million people from the tribal population inhabit the state of Assam, which is around 12.5% of the total population. The sixth schedule provisions of the constitution of India have given autonomy to the tribal populations of the northeastern states of India. By virtue of which, at present 9 autonomous councils under sixth schedule and one autonomous council with four districts in the northeastern states is being ruled by the special sixth schedule provisions of the constitution of India. This is a magnificent system which is protecting the lands, customs and cultures of the communities from external encroachment.

However, the autonomous councils are formed around a community with a jurisdiction where many other communities also live. Like Dima Haso Autonomous Council has 13 other tribal communities along with Dimasa community for whom this autonomous council was formed. In such a situation the growth of minor communities is paralyzed due to exclusion of minor tribal communities within the Autonomous Councils. They are deprived of jobs, social protection schemes and political advantages along with livelihood options.

When Tribal Communities of the rest of the country are protected, promoted and supported with special schemes under fifth schedule, the tribal communities of the northeastern states which do not live in the sixth schedule areas are deprived of all such advantages. In such a socio-political dynamic, development of the minor tribal communities of the region is a tough call. No reservation for women and tradition of the tribal culture has restricted inclusion of women in the tribal local governance and in all other development pursuit.

People with disabilities

Needless to say, the persecution of the differently-abled population is also a major hindrance towards the Sustainable Development Goals. This section of society has minimal, if any, direly needed social protection. The aid and appliances necessary for their sustenance and growth are yet to be commonplace. Furthermore, there is a lack of implementation of the reservation available for them as per the PWD Act, 1995

LGBTQ+ communities

The LGBTQ+ population throughout the world faces extreme social ostracizing. In the North-East of India, the community faces social exclusion to the point of no acceptance even in the family level. There are negligible dignified livelihood options available to them, which often makes them resort to begging and commercial sex work.

Migrant labourers

Migrant labourers from different states are employed as short term help all over the North-Eastern states. However, the terms of this employment are short, seasonal and circular. As per the 2011 census, 37% of the population falls into this category. Such a huge number makes them extremely replaceable, and gives them very low bargaining power in the job market. They are deprived of political rights, have a distorted family fabric and are susceptible to many illnesses, including HIV/AIDS.

People inhabiting remote locations

The people living in remote and geographically cut-off locations have limited access to livelihood options. Consequently, they have no access to the market. There is also a lack of social protection services for them.

Way forward

The gamut of the mentioned impediments could be dealt with primarily by bringing about some changes in our development paradigm, of the northeastern states of India. Few recommendations to overcome the hurdles to achieve the SDG in a time bound manner are outlined hereunder:

- ☞ Rigorous implementation of The Plantation Labour Act, 1951
- ☞ Legitimize the participatory democracy in Autonomous Councils
- ☞ Implement fifth schedule provisions for tribal communities inhabiting other than sixth schedule areas
- ☞ Strengthen decentralized governance – PRI and Autonomous Councils
- ☞ Social sensitization initiatives and Special social protection measures for differently-abled and LGBTQ+ communities
- ☞ Ensure political power to MRIs through voting rights
- ☞ Enhance rural communication and energy infrastructure.

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