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**DEVELOPMENT AND WEAKER SECTIONS :
UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF
DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM AND ITS
IMPACT IN THE CONTEXT OF ASSAM**

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Abstract

Development is characterized with a complex interplay between various societal structures led by multiple or single actors or agents under different contexts at a different pace. Development can be symmetrical or asymmetrical, leading to conflict of interests. In view of this, meaning of development, its kind, nature, implications have been a multidimensional phenomenon. Understanding development is subject to the material and the cultural aspirations of different societies. Likewise, term weaker section carries a broad diverse contextual meaning. In general, it signifies those people who are backward economically, socially, politically in comparison to 'others'. For identification of the weaker sections, the Government has categorized the weaker sections into ST, SC, MOBC/OBC, EWS etc. Further, to identify one as weak or others as weak is associated with certain political motives. The word weaker-section is a very fluid and relative word to deal with. With changing contexts or situation, the position or magnitude of weaknesses differs. Weaker sections itself signifies heterogeneity as well be the subjective and objective position of the individual/community claiming or termed as

weak. The developmental policies adopted by the government also influence the weaker sections position. In this context, this paper tries to throw a brief overview of the development paradigm practiced in Assam and its impact on its people, ecology and identity.

Key Words : *Development, Dispossession, Extractionist Economy, Weaker Sections.*

Development means improvement; change in a situation in case of economic and societal systems of society. In simple words, it denotes the affordability and availability of the basic needs i.e., healthy food, decent clothing and a safe place to lead a life of dignity and respect. It is characterized with a complex interplay between various societal structures led by multiple or single actors or agents under different contexts at a different pace. Development can be symmetrical or asymmetrical, leading to conflict of interests. In view of this, meaning of development, its kind, nature, implications have been a multidimensional phenomenon. Understanding development is subject to the material and the cultural aspirations of different societies (Richard & Hartwick, 2010, p.1). In conventional understanding, development and economic growth has been used interchangeably. Of late this modernist definition of development has been criticized due to its blind understanding of how economic development can occur¹ without addressing the various inequalities that exists in the society. Further for a better understanding of development, the power relationships that exists at different level of societies at regional, societal, personal level on the basis of ownerships, investments, profits, information, communication for exchanging material and non-material goods needs to be addressed.

The development paradigm in India has followed the discourse initiated by UNDP starting with the approach to basic needs as a development strategy enhancing the arena of economic security with a poverty alleviation agenda to a rather contradictory paradigm of the structural adjustment programs which is based on donor's prescription to the postcolonial government to cutbacks, privatization

and free market in its development and economic policies with an exclusion to human security. But due to the failure of the SAP, another measure was adopted by the state i.e. good governance which meant meaningful and inclusive political participation so that the institutions and processes could be made more responsive to the needs of the poor by strengthening electoral, legislative and justice delivery system to put a veil on the adverse effects of the structural adjustment policies on the post-colonial state which adopted free-market ideology, minimizing role of State apparatus etc. The donor agencies found out the ineffectiveness of the SAP due to bad governance characterized by non-transparent, corrupt and undemocratic policy formulations. With this, the term good governance became a prime condition for availing development assistance from the donor agencies. Ilan Kapoor, observed that the post-colonial states were blamed with bad governance and in lieu of it they tend to face some sort of external intervention from the first world in the shape of policy directives to convert bad governance into good governance (Kapoor, 2008, p.29-31). Good governance also demands for a strong civil society as debated by the neo-liberalist agenda which tame the civil society by constructing the civil society by funding its NGOs. Neera Chandoke refers the return of civil society as a part of neo-liberal projects such as privatization, de-nationalization, de-regulation and de-stabilization with an aim to roll back the state. Thus, civil society tends to unleash the market forces and retreat the state from social engagements (Chandoke, 1995, p.10-11). The market on the other-hand tries to rationalize and legitimize social inequalities with the hegemonic ideologies and mythologies which tend to universalize the character of the civil society as an arena of free choice for the individual (ibid, p. 195) Thus if one looks critically, the role of civil society to check bad governance happens to be a profitable agenda of the donor agencies. The civil society in the post-colonial state is different from that of the first world. The civil society of the post-colonial states are of fragmented nature due to the long history of colonial rule, emergence of political leadership from a small group of educated class mostly belonging to the wealthy sections among the colonized people and finally ended up with bureaucratic, patrimonial rule after independence.

Weaker Sections- An Understanding:

Now coming to the context of who are the weaker sections of the society, the term weaker section carries a broad diverse contextual meaning. In general it signifies those people who are backward economically, socially, politically in comparison to 'others'. For identification of the weaker sections, the Government has categorized the weaker sections into ST, SC, MOBC/OBC, EWS etc. Further, to identify one as weak or others as weak is associated with certain political motives. The word weaker-section is a very fluid and relative word to deal with. With changing contexts or situation, the position or magnitude of weaknesses differs. Weaker sections itself signifies heterogeneity as well be the subjective and objective position of the individual/community claiming or termed as weak. The developmental policies adopted by the government also influence the weaker sections position. The development paradigm based on the idea of five-year plan in India and subsequent state intervention in implementation is predominantly spelled out in the domain of economic policy between growth and equity backed by the modernization theorists. Though planning is criticized by the liberalists as it goes against the free-market ideology where certain technocrats are assigned the power to visualize and implement their visualization on behalf of the nation, the Third World State in order to pacify tried to design the development model in favour of the market forces (Srivatsan, 2016). This move has ultimately has led to a further more complicated class structure in India creating multilayered weaker sections.

Weaker sections in Assam: Vulnerabilities and Challenges

In this paper, I am trying to analyse and identify the weaker section not on the basis of caste, but on the basis of the dispossessed classes of people who have become the prey to the present phenomenon of development based on the economy of extraction. In this context, this portion of my paper tries to throw a brief overview of the development paradigm practiced in Assam and its impact on its people, ecology and identity.

I

Development cannot happen without sustainability: As per the Human Development Report, 2007, Climate change has been one of the most defining factors of human development which threatens to erode human freedoms and limit choices. It calls into question the enlightenment principle that human progress will make the future look better than the past. Global warming, tragedy of global commons has led to environmental concerns linking environment with human being on three basic issues: conservation and sustainability of resource, sink problem-emission or dumping of the developmental waste and the ethical issue, to foster a balance between nature and humankind by reframing the development agenda conservation of wildlife and wilderness, change agricultural practices- organic farming and the respect for others. Now coming to the context of Assam, the development paradigm in Assam has been bases on the arena of extraction of four important resources of the land, coal, oil, tea and water recourses. In this connection, we can see the contexts of coal mining in Saleki Proposed Reserved Forest, Auction of Oil Fields to the Private Sectors, Baghjan Tragedy, Large dam projects etc.

The changing ecological landscape in Assam and as a developmental impact can be traced back to the colonial period. The modernisation backed developmental model was looked up as the model for development in Assam. As per the narratives of Anandaram Dekhiyal Phukoon in his four essays published in '*Inglandor Biboron*' published in the newspaper '*Orunodoi*', talks highly about the educational and industrial progress of England and wished to see Assam prosper on lines of industry and agricultural progress with modern technologies. He further prayed to the 'All Gracious God to shower the people of Assam with a desire to work to transform the jungles of Assam (Habi) into flower garden, let the logs plying in the rivers transforms into steam-ships, bamboo house be changed into brick walls, villages into towns and cities with schools, colleges, hospitals and homes for the destitute etc' (Neog, 1980). This narrative could easily explain the visions of modernity and in the post Treaty of Yandaboo, the wastelands (unused lands) in the then colonial Assam was transformed into plantations land

keeping in mind the financial colonial logic for collecting revenue. With the plantation industry new classes were formed with immigrant tea-garden workers, class of skilled Bengali peasants and new class of tea-planters in the Brahmaputra Valley.

Even extraction of Oil has a same type of colonial extraction history. Even in the post colonial era, after the replacement of the white masters, these resources of Assam still remained in the hands of Indian big capital. Dr. Hiren Gohain in an interview with *The Wire* said:

‘Look at Assam’s tea and oil industries. These are usually thought of in Assam as major resources but the people have no control over it. They never had any control over it before nor do they have it now. The western imperialists are gone but their place has been taken by, let’s say, Indian big capital. As a result, people have no idea how it is really functioning, whether it could have done some good to the economy of the state and give it a push forward for development.’ (Barooah, 2017, *The Wire*)

Further the same is the case with the BCPL, which has failed to directly benefit the locals. No auxiliary industries were built to lift the economic state of the people living near it. The proposed Plastic Park near Tinsukia is yet to function to produce the plastic products to be used by the local markets. OIL, BCPL, Tea and Coal industries were built to but what it producing something that could be sent to rest of India (ibid, 2017)

The demographic survey on the land where these industries were built would reveal the traumatic history and narratives of the displaced people who has lost their livelihoods. In an article by Anupam Chakravarty, he narrated how the Assam’s Tribal communities are losing their land and livelihoods to legal and illegal coalmining. The recent controversial coal mining area near the Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary has been the home to the Khamti, Singpho, Sema Nagas, Tangsa, Tai-Phake, Syam, Aitom, Nocte and other communities who have been

impacted by mining and deforestation that displaced them from lands that traditionally belonged to them. These tribes were robbed off their rights over the forest resources that they depended upon. The heavy illegal extraction, has deteriorated the soil and water quality around Dehing Patkai which has not only posed a challenge to the rich ecosystem but also has risked the livelihood and culture of the communities residing in the foothill of Dehing Patkai (Chakravarty, 2020). As Hiren Gohai claimed, how the Industries in Assam actually were set up only to feed the needs of other states without any longstanding benefits to the local communities, even the extracted coal supports thousands of tea factories, thermal power plants, small-scale iron smelters and brick kilns in the Brahmaputra valley in Assam to Punjab and Haryana. These kinds of development can be cited as development by dispossession hereby creating a weaker section based on landlessness as well as loss of identity. For example, the dumping of chemical waste from BCPL into the Sesa River has displaced the fishing communities from their livelihood securities.

The recent Baghjan Tragedyⁱⁱ clearly depicts the lack of safety and environmental governance in the implementation of extraction industries. The Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) was not followed which has led to a huge loss of biodiversity and human habitat. It has been OIL was extracting oil and gas without proper environmental clearances and biodiversity impact assessment hereby violating the environment-related acts and rules of the country during its operation. (Chakravarty, 2020)

Interestingly without learning from two tragedies, Dikom Oil Blowout and Baghjan the draft EIA 2020 aims to legalise such environmental violations through post-facto clearance without disciplinary action. The community ownership of land, grazing land, forests, aquatic resources were undermined hampering not only the livelihood of the community but at the same time has robbed off from them the memories of associated with the landscape. The draft EIA 2020 is also subverting the Constitution by limiting the inclusion of local decision-making bodies and public participation in the region hereby in the name of so called ‘national interest’. Further the auction of Oil fields to private bidders would certainly lead to a massive displacement and disruption of livelihood of already marginalised communities.

Besides Oil, Tea and Coal, harnessing the water resource to produce hydro-electricity has been another vision towards development. The resistance against big dams in Northeast India has been a proof of how development is sought not for the people of this region, but only to extract wealth and resources to the central capitalist Industries. Sanjib Baruah in his article, *Whose River Is It Anyway?* has expressed his concern on the extraction politics of hydro-power and its effects on the natives. He opined, 'The large dams being built on the rivers of the eastern Himalayas have become highly controversial. The hydropower that north-east India is expected to produce is meant almost entirely for use elsewhere. The construction of these dams was directed exclusively towards extracting hydropower but not to be multipurpose dams (hydropower, irrigation, flood mitigation, navigation) to distribute evenly the potential gains and losses. Then closure of the water commons which is the inevitable outcome of these dams would have a devastating impact on the lives of millions, especially the rural poor who depend on the water commons in multiple ways for their living' (Baruah, 2012). Though compensation would be paid for the immediate displaced rural people but the cost effects of the people who depends on the river in the downstream for their livelihoods are not accounted. Sanjib Baruah cited a practical example of the affects of the construction of Ranganadi Hydropower Plant located at Yazali of Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh operated by NEEPCO has not only changed the course of the river and affected the ecosystem but also the public access to the river. A village nearby the project has been suffering ever since its operation when it's released water without notices washes away crops, cattle. Fear of life of the children of the village became a nightmare for the villagers and after complaints to the authorities of Yazali plant's management issued the following notification to refrain the going to the river and also restricted the cattle from moving around the river/reservoir during the monsoon period. The corporation would not take any responsibility for any loss of life of human, and cattle, etc. Thus, these effects on the locals who are dispossessed from the belongingness to the river as a means of livelihood has not been accounted as in terms of the capitalist mentality these are nonmarket means of livelihood. (ibid, 2012)

II

Issue of Identity and vulnerability of Weaker Section: The issue of identity has been another example of the development paradigm linked with the control over land, citizenship rights and belongingness. Resources and concern for autonomy of the people of Assam dates back to the colonial visions of capitalist development which changed the landscape of the region by introducing extraction economy on the basis of tea, oil, coal etc. This required a different land policy to transfer the abundant forest lands and unsettled lands which were termed as wastelands to profitable marketable land. This vision has led to the development of Tea-Gardens, Mining of Coal and Extraction of Oil under direct control of the colonial masters and after independence to the capitalists. These industries required a massive workforce which culminated into migrations, ultimately leading to the change of demography of Assam. In due course of time, concerns related to identity crisis on linguistic and cultural lines led to the historic Assam Movement and aftermath various ethnic movements with their own demands for autonomy and rights over land and her resources.

The announcement of the draft NRC on July, 2018 reflecting the exclusion of more than four million people has led to unrests and even suicides. Furthermore, two dichotomous understanding in support and against NRC along polarized linguistic and regional line could be seen among the people of Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley. The difference was based on identity issues backed by deprivation on linguistic lines along with the issue of illegal migrants whereas NRC was seen to be a legal way of solving the autonomy question around the territorial control over land and its resources by the indigenous people of the region. The proof of indigeneity has been the legacy data creating problem for securing the identities and claims of the migrated unorganized workforce as well as women folks. The process has alienated the Muslims of East Bengali Heritage. (Barbaroah, 2019)

The issue of land alienation due to the British policy of granting huge lands to European tea planters as well as the migration of Bengali settlers from East Bengal, now Bangladesh was a huge concern for the Assamese middle-class elites. These concerns finally culminated to the creation of tribal belts and blocks

under the Assam land revenue regulations securing the rights of the tribal belts and blocks from transferring them to non-tribal people. Further agricultural land protection was another important area of concern which aggravated criticism and protest from KMSS led by Akhil Gogoi criticizing the Congress government of Assam under whose regime the transfer of indigenous agricultural land to commercial traders. This protest led to the Assam Agricultural Land Regulation of Reclassification and transfer for Non-Agricultural Purpose Act, 2015 which prohibited the transfer of Agricultural land for non-agricultural purpose and in case of transfer such land shouldn't be used for agricultural purpose for at least 10 years. This law was again opted for amendment by the present BJP led government, an ordinance to ensure automatic reclassification of agricultural land once the purchaser makes a self-declaration to the effect that the land is purchased for establishing an industry. In case this ordinance is passed then the development of the capitalists by dispossessing the locals will be an added feather to the cap of the neo-liberal agenda of the state. To substantiate, controversy of Rowmari village located in Chirang district of Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) following allotment of some 485 hectares of its land to Patanali Ayurved, managed by Baba Ramdev. The Bodoland Territorial Council which administers BTAD, home to plains tribes (mainly the Bodos), has made the allotment for setting up a *yogpith*. (Azad, 2019). Allotment of 150 acres of land by the Assam Government in 2016 in the state's Sonitpur district to Ramdev-owned Patanjali Herbal for setting up manufacturing units in the name of Patanjali Herbal and Mega Food Park also has created huge resentment. (Barooah, 2016)

Conclusion:

The dispossession of the people from their entitlements to the natural resources like their native lands, forest resources, the eviction of tribal's, from forests that have been their home for decades due to government's leasing them to the mining companies. Development induced displacement due to the construction of Dams without a proper resettlement policy has robbed the people off their right to livelihood securities. The naturally displaced people of Laika Dodhiya which falls in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh District of Assam have since the great earthquake

of 1950s has been waiting for a permanent settlement which has been denied to them. Most of the displaced 3000 people belonged to the Mising tribes. The State has virtually failed to guarantee the basic human rights of the minorities and backward communities due to the politics of accumulation through dispossession. Michael Levien within this context has advanced the concept of “regimes of dispossession” to analyze how dispossession has been politically organized over different socio-historical contexts to serve different class interests with diverse hierarchical economic effects and political “success” (Levien, 2015). Citing Fernandes, Levien tried to highlight the trend of dispossession in India just after independence and in post-1990s. Previously land dispossession was due to the State-Led Development Projects and after liberalization of Indian economy, the trend of dispossession increased as it shifted towards forceful eviction of people in favour of privatized forms of industry, real estate and infrastructure (*ibid*). Thus, in this present scenario, development of the weaker section of the society requires a paradigm shift in understanding development from exclusionary development to inclusionary one.

End Notes :

¹The measurement of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and GNI (Gross National Income) has failed to address the inequality in class, ethnicity, gender, geographical location as GDP measures only a part of production which are sold in formal markets and GNI fails to incorporate the informal incomes earned by the poverty ridden people.

²**Baghjan gas leak** is a natural gas blowout that occurred on 27th May, 2020 in Oil India Limited’s Baghjan well No 5 in Baghjan Oilfield in the Tinsulia District of Assam, India causing three deaths, large scale displacement of the local population, loss of property and huge environmental damage to the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park and Maguri -Motapung Wetland. It took almost six months to kill the well.

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