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New economic reforms and livelihood transition of tribal women: A case study of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Tribal economy in India has been witnessing substantial changes since the colonial period. After 1990s with the onset of neoliberal policy the whole approach to tribal development experienced a drastic change. Tribal economy fell into the hands of the market and private enterprises including corporate capitalists. Emphasis was given on the entry of private capital in tune with the process of global capitalist development. As a result, the tribals who were earlier drawing their livelihood from subsistence cultivation and forest resources compelled to switch to modern forms of economic activities. These changes would have impacted them differently. Though there are few studies which captured the issues such as displacement and rising inequality the changes taking place in tribal economy and livelihood in this context of neo-liberal reforms, among the tribes and women in particular is less known because most of these studies conducted in the central and peninsular India. Based on the village level data, the present study analyses the emerging changes in the tribal economy and their impact on livelihood of tribal women in Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: New economic reforms, livelihood transition, tribal women

Introduction

Tribal economy in India has been witnessing substantial changes since the colonial period. Initially the tribal communities throughout India were depending on forest-based economy and were following a pattern of shifting cultivation based on communal ownership of land. The colonial rulers in order to raise the land revenue and generate agriculture production to be used as raw materials for Britain's industrialization compelled the tribals to clear the forests and cultivate more land in due course. They introduced private ownership of land and took necessary measures to commercialize agriculture. Stated precisely, a process of peasantisation was initiated in the first half of British rule pushing tribals from forest based to settled agricultural economy. However, towards the second phase of colonial rule, the increased commercialization of agriculture accompanied by exploitative land revenue policy and credit relations gradually depeasantised the tribals converting them to agricultural labourers and the non-tribals entered into the tribal areas. However, in the north-east region, the inroad of non-tribals was less and the privileged tribal groups emerged as landlords and dominant sections. After independence, the government of India through its planned initiatives in order to protect and promote the tribal land rights introduced several reforms for a holistic development of tribals. The developmental measures during post-colonial period brought some positive changes in the tribal economy and sources of livelihood. But this process of distributive change did not last long. After 1990s with the onset of neoliberal policy the whole approach to tribal development experienced a drastic change. Tribal economy fell into the hands of the market and private enterprises including corporate capitalists. Emphasis was given on the entry of private capital in tune with the process of global capitalist development. As a result, the tribals who were earlier drawing their livelihood from subsistence cultivation and forest resources compelled to switch to modern forms of economic activities. These changes would have impacted them differently. Though there are few studies which captured the issues such as displacement and rising inequality the changes taking place in tribal economy and livelihood in this context of neo-liberal reforms, among the tribes and women in particular is less known because most of these studies conducted in the central and peninsular India.

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Literature Review

Literatures on tribal studies are scanty. The initial studies were mostly anthropological in nature and it focused primarily on tribal culture, beliefs and practices. The colonial government undertook several studies from time to time to understand the tribal society which ultimately facilitated them for smooth governance. Though some studies examined the economic aspects of tribal society they mostly covered the existing exchange system functions in the tribal society. These studies largely helped the colonial government to implement the new exchange system (money) in tribal society for the expansion of new land tenure system. The studies conducted in the post independent era were largely focused on the issues related to policy implementation. Most of the studies were undertaken during these periods were mostly focused on local governance, educational attainment, tribal movements and insurgencies and changing family structure. Though there are many studies covered the tribal issues in north east India during post-colonial period, they were mostly macro in nature. The recent changes on tribal economy and society, especially after the new economic reforms hardly been documented. Moreover, in the exiting literature the issue of tribal livelihood in the context of neoliberal reforms is almost non-existent, less to talk about tribal women. It tells very little about tribal economy in general and of north-east India in particular let alone the situation in Arunachal Pradesh. Hence, the present study proposes to analyse the emerging changes in the tribal economy and their impact on livelihood of tribal women in Arunachal Pradesh which has not received due attention it deserves.

Theoretical Perspective

Though Marx did not refer directly about livelihood transition, his analysis on capitalist transition and disappearance of small-scale rural producers infers how development of capitalism ruined the livelihood of rural masses. The subsequent scholars of Marxist genealogy extended Marx's idea on impact of capitalism on rural society. However, all these analyses were confined either to agrarian political economy or political ecology. It was Marxist revisionist Ian Scoons who brought livelihood perspective in to this debate in 2009 through his famous article "Livelihoods perspectives and rural development". In my work I have tried to see how far Scoones's approach fit into the Indian situation and especially with reference to the tribal women's livelihood transition.

Methods of Study

The analysis at macro level is done using the information from data sources such as Census of India, Agricultural Census, State Agricultural Statistics Reports, NSSO survey Reports and state gazetteers. For micro level analysis 'Adi' tribe households from Mirku, a village situated under Pasighat circle of East Siang district in Arunachal Pradesh was selected. Pasighat is the headquarters of East Siang district in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Situated at the eastern foothills of the Himalayas and it is Arunachal's oldest town. The Government of India included Pasighat in the Smart Cities Mission development scheme in June, 2017. The first Agricultural Institute in Arunachal Pradesh was also established at Pasighat in 1950. In terms of agricultural development this region is way more advanced than other regions of the state.

This study is based on the analysis of both quantitative as well as qualitative data. While for macro level analysis quantitative data gathered from different secondary sources analysed for micro level only qualitative analysis is done. In the first round, a base line survey was conducted in the village covering all 301 households and information on land ownership, demographic profile, education, occupation was collected. In the next phase households were classified in different land holding and occupational categories. In the final phase thirty households (10 percent of the total households) were selected comprising different land holding groups which also includes landless households, gender, different age groups etc. The land-owning households are classified on the basis of Agricultural Census of India as Small, Medium and Large. To understand the different generational experiences with regard to changes in the livelihood household heads belonging to different age groups included in the analysis. Most importantly, while selecting the sample households, equal proportion of women respondents also included for this study. Focus group discussions were conducted comprising diverse age group population to capture the difference in perception towards certain occupations and opportunities. Life history of few respondents were documented to understand the livelihood changes through the life course of an individual.

Macro Findings

Arunachal from time to time have initiated various programmes for introducing development. The first stepping stone of development started from its initiative of improvement in infrastructure of its state and which was initiated in the first five-year plan but that dream came true only during the sixth five-year plan when the real efforts on it were put in. Development Index of the state as 0.242 and 0.328 for the year 1981 and 1991 respectively which is factually the lowest for the whole state. By the tenth five year plan the state aimed at creation and maintenance of physical infrastructure while improving people's educational, nutritional and health profile. Besides these, investments on agriculture, horticulture, food processing, marketing and scientific exploitation of timber resources were undertaken as a part of state's developmental tasks. The state in order to enhance the developmental processes has to stress more on agricultural activities for which it is essential to engage in extensive and intensive agriculture by shifting from subsistence to commercial form of modernizing agriculture through farm mechanization. Agriculturally, the state is backward due to the topography and shifting cultivation and practising mono cropping besides availability of less flat lands and terrace cultivation, lack of proper research in the field of cropping. However, due to the feasibility of temperate and subtropical vegetables and fruits, horticultural plants can potentially generate fair income to the rural poor. This also includes mushrooms and spices cultivation along with floriculture which is a form of income diversification for the educated youth. The Technology mission for horticulture launched in 2001-02 under technology mission of central govt. has already been taken up Irrigation, green house, post-harvest technology, marketing and processing of fruits and vegetables for expansion growing fruits spices, vegetables and flowers in the state that holds high potential to boost the process of development in the state. Additionally, Arunachal is rich in forest resources which is one among the hotspots of bio

diversity in the world because of its availability of varied forms of flora (aromatic and medicinal plants) and fauna. Before 1996, forest generated the largest employment to its people and was the sources for revenue to the state. Average revenue generated by forest sector in 91-92 till 95-96 was 36 crore per annum. Soon after supreme court's imposition of restrictions on forest laws incurred loss of Rupees 300 crores. Later horticulture became source of income for the local people and rescued the localities from the loss of income from forest-based resources.

As most of its inhabitants are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood so it imperative to term Arunachal as an agrarian state. To improve and enhance the livelihood condition of farming communities, department of agriculture adopted various measures so that diversification in agricultural activities occurs (from subsistence based to commercial agriculture). It was possible by implementing various schemes both state and central ones and imposing or accepting Neo-liberal reforms (as its one of the latent functions) in the state. Further, the state started looking at agriculture from an enterprise point and not a mere ritual through means of growing or encouraging of winter cash crops in summer season in parts of Tawang and West Kameng districts. Hence, for higher productivity and improvement in the field of agriculture, initiatives such as introduction of good quality seeds and mechanism of agriculture (distributing power tillers and tractors at a subsidised rates) to the farming community served as impetus to the growth of state's economy, particularly the agriculture sector. To Green revolutionize the region and state per say; an aspiration of attracting outside investors for its rich biodiversity and transforming the state into a business hub of south East Asia, an initiative "North East Vision document 2020, was introduced by Government of India" on 2008. Arunachal also further came up with this idea with an aspiration to draw good benefit out of this neo-liberalist policy

Booming Agro Industry

Soon after the realisation of good income generation from crops like Ginger, potato, Oil seeds and spices local people went to grow it beyond subsistence. This rise in the production after from the 10th plan onwards have boosted the rural agrarian economy. So it can be appropriately decoded that the production of commercial crops have by now proved to be a source of livelihood to the rural people in the state. Similarly, local variety of chilli called as *sibol* (the hottest of all chillies in the world) in Adi tribe has a great market demand for its flavour and medicinal value is cultivated in plenty. Moreover, Turmeric in Arunachal Pradesh is yet another crop with high value is grown in the state. A high economic return is guaranteed to the farmers with cultivation of these agricultural crops besides growing horticultural crops. Being rich in natural resources and biodiversity, the state is favourable spot for enhancing a gateway of trade and commerce to south East Asia, power trading, tourism, tourism Agro-business, cultural exchanges. Abundance of blossoming apple, kiwi, orange orchards with specific aroma, are pride of the state. India has one among the highest Bamboo resource in the world. 12.8% of the total forest of the country is covered with Bamboos (FSI, 2011). Forest area in Arunachal Pradesh is 51,407 km² which is 61.39% of its geographical area (FSI, 2015). Bamboo bearing area in these forests is 16, 083km² (FSI,

2011). In Arunachal Pradesh, there are about 46 bamboo species.

However, the impact of these changes was not encouraging. The Population census report reveals that the proportion of cultivator which was 67 percent in 1991 declined to 52 percent in 2011. The rate of decline in female cultivators' percentage was more compared to male. The percentage of female cultivators which was 34 percent 1991 declined to 25 percent in 2011 and so in case of agricultural labourers. However, an interesting trend observed in changes of land holding pattern. While the all-other states in India shows a trend of marginalization of operational holdings Arunachal Pradesh is the only state where noticeable increase in large land holders observed. The rate of change between 1991 and 2015 for large land holders was the highest. The proportion of large holders which was 23 percent in 1991 increased to 27 percent in 2015. This clearly indicates the emerging trend of landlordism in the state. It is important to mention that no major changes observed in terms of female land holding position.

Though the available macro studies throw some light on the changes it failed to capture the impact of these changes in details due to the unavailability of data on non-farm economic indicators.

Micro Findings

Mirku is governed by elected representatives of the village as per the Panchayati Raaj act of Indian constitution. It has gram members, a zila parishad member and an Anchal samiti who looks after the administrative work associated to the village. Besides this, there is a village headmen known as Gaon Budha who is accountable for socio-cultural, matters involving the village and its dwellers. According to the census data of 2011, this village is comprised of about 154 households that shelters 935 people out of which there are 452 male and 483 female. Majority (774) of the village population is scheduled tribe. The population of children under the age of 6 years in the village is 96. The average sex ratio of Mirku is 1069; higher than the state's average which stands at 938. However, the child sex ratio of the village happens to be 959, which is relatively lower than the state average of 972. The literacy rate of the village as per census data of 2011 is 85.82% which is significantly higher than the state literacy rate of 65.38%. The village has a government school established in the year 1964 which provides education till secondary level to its native children. The curriculum of the school being CBSE based ensures quality education to the native children. There are 91 illiterate people in the village who get themselves employed with some form of unskilled work like labour or cultivation activities to earn their living. There are 351 working population in the village. Out of the total working population 183 people who are engaged in some form of work for the maximum part of the year. Totally there are 19 people who practice cultivating activities and only 2 members in the village serves as agricultural labourers, as a whole the village has 172 marginal workers, among them 117 people has work for three to six months a year and 55 people in the village are those who could find work for themselves only for maximum three months a year. 580 people living in Mirku, according to the census data of 2011, do not have any work for themselves.

Most of the villagers earlier were engaged in farming activities to meet their livelihood. A simple casual labour or

a casual worker employed under government agencies in those days were considered to be the wealthiest of all. Among the native of Mirku village, cultivation was never done on large scale. People on those days cultivated banana and brinjal. Paddy cultivation took place outside the village which happened to be situated at minimum 1 hour of walking distance from the village. Ploughing of paddy field was initially done with bullock but later due to the farm mechanisation modern machineries supplemented the bullock requirements hence gradually the need for bullock started to vanish. The womenfolk were also actively involved in the farming activities as they cultivated vegetables such as alocasia and yam, pumpkin and gourd on subsistence basis and whatever little was only remnant were sold to nearby market.

There were two types of farming prevalent among the people of Mirku village. The first one was *jhuming* or the shifting form of cultivation which was referred to as *Ahu Kheti* by the localities. Seeds were sown by the month of April and May and its harvest was done during October. This form of farming was characterised by Mixed cropping pattern. Amidst the crop vegetables such as creepers, climbers and finger millets were also grown. The cultivation was rainfed. One advantage of this form of cultivation was that as it was cultivated by several families together as a unit hence the pressure of cultivation was never on a single family but shared among several families. Not only was this but even the fencing of the farmland collectively done instead of separate fence. Hence the workload was lesser in comparison to other form of cultivation. But gradually people started to leave *Ahu kheti* and shifted their interest on Wetland rice cultivation due to low production rate.

The other form of cultivation practiced by the people of Mirku was the wetland rice cultivation which was a settled form of cultivation came into existence after 1940s. The villagers themselves used to till their land and cultivate the crop. However, due to proper education facilities and administrative set up other avenues of income in government sectors were opened for the people and they started hiring people from outside to cultivate their land by providing them with permits. It was the *Nepali* and *Kachari* migrants who cultivated the land of the Adis on the basis of Adi system of Agreement or sharecropping. And these migrant workers who came to cultivate the land of the Adis after saving some money went back to their native and built settled there. But now the wetland rice cultivation is not evidently practiced due to high cost of cultivation and less profit in market. Moreover, the public distribution system came into being and people opted for it as it was cheaper and easily available for the rural poor. Above all after state government's farm mechanisation programme the labour problem of the inhabitants of the village was sorted to certain extent as labours were replaced by machines. The rapid mechanization also displaced agricultural labourers and most of them were women.

It is observed that before the occupational hierarchy in the village was not clearly demarcated and so in case of male and female of small land holding households. Though there were gendered division of labour in terms of doing certain agricultural activities but the gendered specific occupational categories were hard to identify. Most of the activities whether it is agriculture or non-agriculture, high paid work or low paid work the male as well female members were together working to earn their livelihood. But after the

integration of market to the village and recent growth of urbanisation in nearby Pasighat town created opportunities for non-farm work. It is observed that due to the growth of urbanisation and participation of male members in the non-farm sector in increasing numbers made the women in the village overburdened to carryout agricultural work. Now the gendered nature occupational hierarchy is very much prominent. If you are a female with less educational qualification, which is of course many women of the village are, then it will be difficult to fetch an urban based job. Most of the women in the village are now work in agriculture and most of the men work in non-farm sector. Agriculture which was once considered one of the most preferred occupation and livelihood perspective in the village lost its significance and more so in case of male young members. This has not only created the gender difference in terms of preference of work but it has also created the difference in terms of income. While within the households it is difficult to find out the existing inequality but when you take an individual male or female respondent as the unit of your analysis one can easily find out how the economic transformation has changed the existing livelihood pattern pushing the women to the edge.

Conclusion

Tribal economy and society which was earlier considered homogeneous has transformed significantly due to the rapid market integration. Neoliberalism changed the village economy to a significant extent. Baring income from forest resources, agriculture (whether shifting or settled) which was once considered one of the major sources of livelihood lost its significance due to decline in profitability in agriculture. The mechanization of agriculture and rise in landlordism caused labour displacement owing to decrease in proportion of agricultural labourers in the village. On other hand due to availability of non-farm works in the nearby urban town the male members of the household preferred to switch their occupation. It was also found that apart from the large landholders group it is rarely a case in point for a household member of three successive generations to remain in the same occupation. However, in case of female members this was not common. One of the major changes observed among the women from small land holding groups is, as there is decline in the work opportunity in agriculture many of them side by side started small scale animal husbandry and handicraft work to earn their livelihood. The women from privileged class, though in small numbers, obtaining professional higher education and availing the benefits of reservation got into government service sectors. As Ian Scoons rightly said: "Neoliberal policy brought crisis in rural livelihoods which are structured by relations of class, caste, gender, ethnicity, religion and cultural identity. Social relations inevitably govern the distribution of property, patterns of work and divisions of labour, the distribution of income and the dynamics of consumption and accumulation. As with gender, it is women who always remains at the disadvantageous position."

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