

Introduction: Development Dynamics in Northeast India

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The Northeastern region of India, recognised as a part of the Eastern Himalayan belt, is known for its diverse ecosystems and carbon sinks, preserved over generations by indigenous communities. For centuries, the indigenous communities of the region have relied on these resources for their sustenance and livelihoods, assuming the role of custodians of the land, forests, and rivers, with their way of life intricately intertwined with these natural elements. Their interaction with the land, forests, and water bodies shaped their distinct identity and cultural practices. Forests, flora and fauna are integral to maintaining indigenous life and a thriving ecosystem.

In recent decades, the region's rich biodiversity has attracted attention from various stakeholders, both within and outside the region, looking to exploit, extract or appropriate its natural resources. It has led to conflicts and negotiations among various parties around the region's land, forests, and water bodies that have been collectively contributing to maintaining its ecological balance. While offering economic opportunities, these actions have led to interventions to regulate forests and land use, ostensibly for conservation or environmental protection, but also impeding and restricting communities from accessing their livelihood and sustenance sources. This book looks at some implications of such

an interaction that claims to optimise the use of the resources but may result in their depletion and the consequent competition for and conflicts around the depleted resources. Its main theme is commercial plantations, particularly oil palm that are being encouraged. The papers in the book try to take a look at the implications of these processes and possible alterations required for them to be viable.

The Background

An issue emerging from the papers and the study on oil palm plantations that preceded it is the impact of commercial plantations on land relations. While big farmers seem to get its benefits, many small holders and community land dependants tend to lose out because of monopolisation of land resulting from it. Basic to it is the effort to consolidate control over community managed land. For instance, the involvement of large corporations allied with the government and legislative changes like the *Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act 2023* suggests a coordinated effort to consolidate control over land resources.

These changes and actions are justified in the name of development. For instance, addressing the nation on India's 75th Independence Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "Development should be all-round, development should be all-pervasive, development should be all-inclusive. We are now accelerating the efforts that have been made in the last seven years to bring forward such backward areas of the country. Be it the eastern India, the North-east, Jammu-Kashmir, Ladakh including the entire Himalayan region, be it our coastal belt or the tribal region, these regions are going to turn into a major foundation for India's development in future, India's development journey... There is a huge potential in the fields of tourism, adventure sports, organic farming, herbal medicine, and oil palm in the North East. We have to fully harness this potential and make it a part of the development journey of the country. And we have to complete this work within a few decades of the 'Amrit kaal'."

Subsequently, the union cabinet approved oil palm schemes such as the National Mission on Edible Oils-Oil Palm (NMEO-OP) under the mission of "Atma Nirbhar Bharat", or self-reliant India. Since the early 1990s, India has been on a mission to grow oil palm under various schemes and interventions. In a quiet experiment, oil palm has been grown on a few hectares in most states of the region, with greater priority accorded to Mizoram, where the experiment began as early as 2005. Under NMEO-OP, special provisions have been made to promote oil palm cultivation or palm oil production in the north eastern region and Andaman & Nicobar Islands. The potential areas include Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Nagaland. Mizoram was the first state to initiate oil palm cultivation in the region and is recognized as the 'pioneer' in its cultivation in Northeast India.

The activities conducted on and beneath the land and water bodies, such as mineral mining, construction of hydroelectric power projects, commercial plantations and other infrastructural development, have heightened the region's susceptibility to human-made disasters that tend to place the communities and the environment of the region in a precarious situation. The region has witnessed a series of disasters, a prominent one being the Baghjan Blowout of 2020, serving as poignant reminders of our fragile and vulnerable environmental conditions. Due to the blowout, it was recorded that 25,825 animals belonging to 41 genera/families and 70 percent of earthworms in the Maguri Motapung beel were recorded dead (Baruah, 2023). Moreover, in recent decades, with the introduction of commercial plantations, there has been a shift in land management and land use patterns, and this commercial plantation wreaked the nature of land relations. Studies also show that inequalities are caused by the commercialisation of agriculture, to which social and economic ties are inextricably connected.

Commercial Plantations as a Source of Conflict

Development is a contested concept. There are differing views on the developmental discourse both from a theoretical and

a practical standpoint. Theoretically, the post-development school sees the mainstream development paradigm as a faulty idea that reinforces social injustice and environmental degradation by placing economic expansion above cultural variety, social fairness, and ecological sustainability. This approach can also apply to the recent developments in north eastern India (NEI), such as infrastructure, hydro projects, construction of highways, expansion of commercial plantations, etc. On the other hand, some theorists like Sen (1999), contend that development encompasses social, cultural, and economic improvement in all its facets and is empowerment. Equal opportunity should promote social, cultural, economic, and environmental advancement. The state should consider fundamental issues, including the goal of development, its beneficiaries, and its implementation to accomplish it. However, in Northeast India, contrastingly, field-based studies give instances of people's displacement by mega-projects like dams, infrastructure, and industries that benefit some segments of society at the cost of Indigenous people who do not gain from such 'development' which takes land away from them and impoverishes them. It also disturbs the local ecosystem and socio-economic structures (Singh, 2020).

More importantly, the indigenous way of life or practice is often labelled as 'destructive' or 'barbarian' by most policy makers. For instance, the push for oil palm cultivation in the region and this developmental approach reveal underlying assumptions in the development discourse. This discourse often categorises traditional practices, particularly jhum cultivation, as 'backward' or 'primitive,' 'environmentally destructive,' and 'economically inefficient.' (New Land Use Policy Manual, 2009, p.3). Such framing creates a narrative that positions traditional farming practices as obstacles to progress rather than as evolved adaptations to local conditions. Therefore, the Central Government framed development policies such as the National Mission on Edible Oils-Oil Palm (NMEO-OP). The policy mainly targets jhum (shifting or slash and burn) cultivation and advertises the cultivation of cash crops like oil palm in the region as economically more profitable and environmentally

more sustainable. The shift towards commercial plantations and commercialised agriculture on which the introduction of oil palm plantations in India's North Eastern region is based, have sparked a myriad of debates and discussions revolving primarily around environmental concerns, sustainability, impacts on local social relations, land use and management. The debate and discussion on oil palm emerged from the experiences of the negative impacts of oil palm plantations in Southeast Asian countries. Many critics highlight the adverse livelihood outcomes on rural small landholders and incidents of human rights abuses and 'land grabbing' by oil palm companies that have led to controversies (Rist et al., 2010, p. 1014; Colchester et al., 2013, p. 34). They add that the introduction of commercial plantations like oil palm in the rural space is usually orchestrated with ample state support by national and multinational corporations. It brings substantial profits to a select few, primarily corporate entities and wealthy landowners, while inflicting significant losses on rural communities and fragile ecosystems. They highlight the loss of customary lands, flexible rural livelihoods, diverse ecosystems, and healthy forests that mitigate climate change (Li & Semedi, 2021, p. 2). Corporations enter the otherwise serene rural space with their utopian plans and acquire large tracts of land, including those customarily belonging to tribal communities, through various means such as lease agreements, land concessions, or outright purchases for establishing their farms and factories. With the entry of such new players, the small farmers come under pressure to surrender their land 'voluntarily' (Ojambo, 2023, p. 61). It is likely that a similar scenario will occur in the Northeast.

In that context, the papers in the book question the State-centric development paradigm and how the top-down approach often leads to conflicts and resistance from the communities. The book covers various perspectives, insights and experiences from farmers, research scholars, activists and journalists. All the contributors have questioned how state-centric development without consulting the communities has implications for the environment and land relations and has led to an agrarian crisis, a

concern and policy-related issue in the contemporary period.

Is Commercial Plantation a Boon or Flop?

The book begins with the views and opinions of a few farmers whom we had interviewed during our fieldwork and who had attended the seminar organised by NESRC in September 2024. Their experiences provide insights into the changes that have occurred in recent decades with the introduction of commercial plantations in the form of the shift in land management and land use patterns, as well as the nature of land relations wrought by this monoculture plantation. It also highlights some insights into possible inequalities caused by the commercialisation of agriculture in which the social and economic ties are inextricably connected.

With the expansion of commercial plantations such as oil palm, traditional land use and customary rights get gradually transformed. For example, the new policies favour individual landowners by offering them preferential access to benefits and market opportunities. These factors contribute collectively to the erosion of traditional land use practices. Moreover, the commercialisation of agriculture through oil palm cultivation has dramatically altered the agrarian landscape, giving rise to complex economic and social inequalities. In that context, Roluahpuia's paper 'Is oil palm another thing anchhedawng (cursed tree): Government Schemes and the Politics of Development in Highland Mizoram' delves into the contemporary transformation of agricultural landscape in Mizoram, foregrounding the farmers' voices in relation of monoculture plantations which are being heavily promoted by the state, particularly in the form of oil palm. He explores how these changes affect community-land relations and the formation of new social relations in society. The paper also explores what the introduction of 'boom crops' means for the people and environment, exploring the farmers' and states' views. Ankur Saikia argues that while the oil palm plantation is profitable for some farmers with large landholdings, it does not bring the economic stability and security it promised to the other farmers with small landholdings. This often compels the farmers to look for another source of livelihood or

practised sharecropping. The paper also posits that commercial plantations such as oil palm, instead of being gender-friendly, have exacerbated the already existing patriarchal systems, putting women in inferior positions.

State, Development and Community

Over the past years, Northeast India has experienced profound changes in how its natural resources are controlled and used, primarily driven by political transformations. The region is viewed primarily as an economic resource base with the potential to drive national development. This shift has generated complex conflicts involving different human communities and species, with tension around resource use. Despite growing ecological challenges, state governments and corporations continue aggressively exploiting the north eastern states. Current policies focus more on economic capitalisation than addressing the emerging environmental and social conflicts. A prime example is the resistance in Arunachal Pradesh against hydroelectric projects. Locals are protesting against the proposed dams, highlighting concerns about extensive deforestation and potential human displacement. This resistance challenges the narrative of hydropower as a straightforward climate solution, revealing large-scale infrastructure projects' nuanced environmental and social impacts. The core issue is how Northeast India has transitioned from a region with diverse ecological systems managed by local communities to a strategic national resource zone, where economic imperatives often overshadow environmental and social considerations.

In order to improve the opportunities for interaction with the state and to thwart various attempts to infringe upon the rights and entitlements of marginalised communities, cooperation with the community at the ground level is required. The alternative development models that have arisen from the real-life experiences of marginalised communities are highlighted in this volume. Bringing the field narratives, Neden Dukpa's paper 'Connecting the Periphery: Ecology, Development and the making of Sevoke

Rangpo Railway Project,' examines the infrastructural development of the Sevoke-Rangpo Railway Project in Sikkim. In the paper, the author looks into how the construction of the Sevoke-Rangpo Railway project results in the deterioration of the cultural practices and livelihoods of the communities who rely on the forests and worship the mountains and rivers. People's lives are profoundly impacted when they lose their homes and means of subsistence. The project also negatively impacts the environment, causing frequent landslides, streams drying out, water body contamination, and deforestation. She argues that the projects' encroachment into ecologically sensitive zones exacerbates community apprehensions about displacement.

Moreover, the state's notion of development negates the concepts of people and land and takes people out of the process. This feature of development has been enormous. Prem Taba, for example, refers to the same feature when raising the issue of how the top-down developmental approach often leads to resistance from the local communities. In his paper titled 'Indigenous Resistance against Hydropower Projects in Arunachal Pradesh' he highlights the voices of the community deprived of its rights over land and other resources, as well as of people excluded from the prevailing notions of progress and development, and elucidates the resistance of indigenous communities' against mega hydropower projects in the Dibang Valley of Arunachal Pradesh. Through two field case studies, the author illustrates the delicate balance between state-led development agenda, environmental conservation, and local resistance in India's border regions, highlighting the need for inclusive decision-making processes that consider local community perspectives.

Devastating Cost of Development: On Land and Ecology

Due to resource extraction, Northeast India is experiencing an alarming surge in extractive industries, with oil, coal, and mineral mining expanding rapidly across the region. This relentless resource extraction is having devastating ecological consequences.

Migratory bird populations are declining, endemic animals are losing habitats, and entire ecosystems are being disrupted. The impact extends beyond local environments, creating chain reactions that affect multiple species and their interactions. Environmental degradation is not just a local concern but also has broader implications. Scientists link biodiversity loss to increased risks of zoonotic diseases and cross-species viral transmission. In the face of broader ecological transformation in the north eastern region, it is important to analyse the influence of neo-liberal capitalist motives on landscape changes and their significant environmental implications.

In that context, Vincent Darlong, a veteran activist, researcher and writer with decades of experience, lays out the significant coordinates of the debates around ecology, resources and access we are concerned with here. The shift in people's relationship with their land and resources under the neo-liberal paradigm has triggered conflicts, from land and forest policies to developmental agenda, and has exacerbated ecological crises. These disputes over tribal land and resource competition have contributed to environmental disasters in the region, by diminishing the forest, land, and river resources that are the sustenance of the communities. He proposes policy alternatives focusing on tribal land rights and considering socio-economic impacts to prevent future ecological catastrophes. In this line of argument, Tongam Rina also highlights the need to conduct prior studies for any kind of developmental projects taking into consideration the socio-environmental aspects. The volume ends with a concluding chapter by Rupa Chinai.

Conclusion

The contributors to this book highlight that the approach to development has to be people-centred and people-driven. Both approaches complement each other when they are based on mutual respect and trust, and the process can embrace principles of transparency, inclusiveness and accountability. There is a

pressing need to explore using a bottom-up approach in which development is a process in which communities make decisions, identify and prioritise their needs, and participate actively. The publication of these essays is timely, as it is being made available at a time when the communities in the Northeast are beginning to be aware of the impacts of the development from the government.

Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge the indigenous knowledge and traditions in the development policy framework, and recognise their profound connections with their ecosystem. By integrating their perspective and involving them in decision-making, a more sustainable and inclusive approach to development can be fostered in the north eastern region. By delving into the communities' understanding, concerns and negotiations regarding their environment, we gain insights into why development poses a serious challenge for the communities in Northeast India.

Drawing from diverse experiences across various north eastern states, particularly in the context of projects such as the push for oil palm plantation and hydroelectric power initiatives, we witness the complex interplay between development, resource exploitation, and indigenous communities. Development in the region is not universalistic, and to pursue or achieve people-centred development, one needs to go beyond the dichotomy of tradition-'modernity to a continuum. There should be a balance between economic development and the environmental and social aspects. It can be achieved through consultation at the ground level. This understanding can only be achieved by using an inductive approach rather than a deductive, positivist paradigm.

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