

Tribal Policy And Development Programme And Strategies In Assam: An Analytical Study

Buddhadev Basumatary
Asstt prof.in political science
Pramathesh Barua College

Abstract

Tribal population from different ethnic groups constitute a major population in North East India. Tribal has the rich cultural tradition with distinct traits. The British administered the tribal dominated areas introducing the policy of excluded and partially excluded area. British followed the policy of less intervention in regard to tribal affairs. After the independence the Nehru govt initiated clear tribal policy known as Panchaseel which focuses on integration rather than assimilation, respect for their traditional arts and culture and protection of tribal rights. Nehru's two-dimensional strategies, protective and promotional measures dominated five year plan approach in regard to tribal affairs. This paper is an analytical study of tribal policy and development strategies across the five year plan and its implication.

Key words: Tribal policy, Integration, Promotional Measures

Introduction :

The British followed the policy of isolation with regard to the tribal issue and administer the Assam introducing the system of excluded and partially excluded area. They did not intervene the tribal affairs. As per the govt. India (excluded and partially excluded areas) order, 1936 the backward tracts of Assam were regrouped as follows: 1. North east frontier (Sadiya Balipara and Lakhimpur tract) 2. The Naga hills district 3. The Lushai hills district 4. the north Achar hills sub-division of Cachar district partially excluded areas: 1. the Garo hills district 2. the Mikir hills in Nowgaon and Sibsagar Districts and 3. the British portion of Khasi and Jaintia hills district (other than Shillong municipality and cantonment). The basic point in governance of these two categories of area was that the powers of the provincial legislature were not extended to these areas. The excluded areas were to be administered by the governor himself in his discretion while the partially excluded areas were to be his special responsibilities.¹

After independence the tribal questions of Assam were debated deliberately in the constituent Assembly. After the prolonged debate and discussion following the recommendation of the sub-committee named 'North East Frontier Tribal and Excluded Areas' under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi sixth schedule status was given to hills tribes. Plain tribes were denied from the sixth schedule status on the ground that they were assimilated with the main stream Assamese society and limited constitutional safeguards were provided to them.²

In 1958 Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru enunciated tribal policy based on five principles commonly known as 'Panchaseel' pillars of tribal development. The five tenets of tribal policy are: (a) Tribal people should develop along with the line of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them, we should try to encourage in every way their own traditional arts and culture. (b) Tribal rights in land and forest should be respected. (c) we should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work and administration and development. Some technical persons from outside will, no doubt, be needed, especially in the beginning. But we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory. (d) We should not over-administer these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through not in rivalry to their own social and cultural institutions. (e) we should judge result not by statistics or the amount of money spent but by quality of human character that is evolved.³

Nehru's tribal policy was based on policy of integration. He gave emphasis on two measures of tribal development: 1. Protective and 2. Promotional measures. Over the decades Nehru's policy dominated the five year plan approach and development strategies for tribal.

Community development programme was launched during the first five-year plan in order to gear up rural development. The programme was also extended to the tribal areas with slight modification. During the second five-year plan special multipurpose development projects were launched in 43 tribal concentrated blocks on the same line with the community development project. Emphasis was given on economic development like agriculture, cottage industries, forest cooperatives etc. During the third five-year plan 489 community development blocks where the percentage of tribal population was 66 or above were converted into tribal development blocks. Tribal development block programme was expected to take care of all the problems in the tribal areas. By the end of the fourth five-year plan the number of tribal development blocks were increased to 504. New strategy had been evolved during the fifth five-year plan. Following the recommendation of SCDUB committee two important strategies were introduced. First, integrated approach to tribal development with a view to bridging the gap between the level of development of tribal areas and other areas. Secondly, improving the quality of life of the tribal people. It was during these plan periods the concept of tribal sub-plan was introduced and areas of tribal concentration (areas with more than 50 percent of tribal population) were demarcated and brought under tribal sub-plan. The immediate objectives of the tribal sub-plan have been envisaged as the elimination of exploitation, accelerating the pace of development, building inner strength of the people and improving their organizational capacity. The tribal sub-plan strategies evolved during the fifth plan period were continued during the sixth plan. Poverty alleviation was the main target of the sixth plan period. There was a shift from infrastructure development to beneficiary-oriented schemes during this plan. The seventh plan approach emphasizes on beneficiary-oriented infrastructure and human resource programme with a view to raise the socio-economic condition of tribal people and strengthen infrastructure in tribal areas.⁴

The most important development strategy so far as the plain tribal areas of Assam are concerned in recent times is the creation of Tribal Development Authority in September, 1983 for the accelerated development of tribal people. It is a corporate body with perpetual succession. The main functions of the authority are: (a) To prepare short term and long term plans for all round socio-economic development of the areas to which this authority is applicable. (b) To formulate scheme for the development of the area in the context and within the framework of the state plan. (c) To recommend such other measures as may be considered necessary for accelerating the development of the area. (d) To review the schemes for the development of the area and their programme from time to time. (e) To call for their report relating to the implementation of the development programme in the area and to suggest measures for co-ordination and supervision of the scheme.⁵

Land alienation is the major problem of the tribals. Immigrants from East Bengal encroached the tribal land, waste land and forest land. In order to protect the tribal land, line system had been introduced during colonial period. Under the system villagers were divided into three categories viz (i) 'open village' where immigrants might settle freely (ii) 'closed village' where the immigrants could not settle at all and (iii) 'mixed village' where a line was drawn and immigrants could settle only one side of it. But this system though ideal could not withstand the encroachments. In Barpeta sub-division alone 50 tribal villages were wiped out of existence.⁶

Gopinath Bordoloi Ministry adopted more pragmatic policy with regard to protection of Tribal land from encroachers. Chapter X had been incorporated in 1947 by amending the provisions of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886 and introduced the system of Tribal Belt and Blocks. In Assam there are as many as forty five (45) Tribal Belt and Blocks now covering an area of total, 25,28,320 B-1K- of land.

Tribal policy vs ethnic assertion in Assam

The successive state govt fails to translate the letter and spirit of Nehru's tribal policy into reality. Failure to protect land alienation through proper legislative and administrative mechanism leads tribal indebtedness. Installation of big industry and govt. projects displace tribal people without proper compensation. They fail to respect tribal cultural and language rights. Instead of integration the mainstream Assamese ruling class adopted policy of coercive assimilation.

Limited constitutional measures, insensitivity and insincerity of the ruling class towards aspiration of tribal people, rampant corruption and relative sense of deprivation cause the tribes of Assam to assert themselves on the line of ethno-nationality discourse inspired with the philosophy of right to self-determination contesting chauvinistic attitude of Assamese nationalism. This is the background behind the ethnic identity politics in Assam. On political line they began to demand more autonomy in the form of statehood within the framework of Indian constitution.

Conclusion:

Policies and development strategies adopted across the plan period till 7th plan fails to fulfill the socio economic and cultural aspiration of tribal population. Problem of land alienation, poverty, illiteracy etc. is still rampant. Tribal land has been encroached by outsiders. Their basic socio-economic problems remained unaddressed. Along with protective measures, policy of inclusiveness should be adopted. Policy in regard to tribal development must be directed towards real empowerment.

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