

Title**SCARCITY OF LAND AND CONFLICT: CASES FROM NORTHEAST INDIA***Name: Konkumoni Boro**PhD Research Scholar**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**IIT Guwahati**Email id: konkub123@gmail.com***Abstract:**

Land occupies a central place in the cultural, social and political organization and economies of many nations. Beyond the economic benefits, the cultural and social values of land are enormous too. Local people and communities, who are generally decedents of the original inhabitants, have greater historic relationships to their land. Popular expressions like ‘motherland’ and ‘fatherland’ are rooted in these strong cultural and social sentiments associated with land. Because land and forests have such a critical place in human society, the access to and management of them define relationships between individuals and communities; individual and the state; and the state and communities, as well as between human society and nature. There can be two reasons for scarcity of agricultural land and forest resources; rapid population increase and governance both policy and institutional failures. This paper discusses scarcity of land and conflict caused by immigration impact on the host people and society in northeast India. The paper studies two cases one in Assam and the other in Tripura. The paper discusses how increasing resource scarcity develops a sense of insecurity among people that finally leads to conflict.

Key words: land, conflict, scarcity, northeast India.

Introduction:

Land is a fundamental resource especially for an agriculture-based economy like Northeast India. Land not only has an economic meaning but also cultural meaning is attached to land. It is both property as well as identity for those people inhabiting in it.

Moreover, in an agrarian society, land is the primary source of livelihood. Land is where people dwell, work and cultivate experiences, struggle to survive and possess it. Therefore, people develop a relationship with the place that they inhabit and it fosters for the development of the conception of the self (Bolanos, 2011). Land is the basis of human existence (Hoebel, 1949). Therefore, people develop a relationship with the place that they inhabit and it fosters for the development of the conception of the self (Bolanos, 2011). Land provides for forests, which in turn perform the ecological and hydrological functions needed to ensure the survival of biological life. However, there is no direct connection between land and conflict. As neither the abundance, nor the lack of access to, nor the misuse of resources would, ipso facto, result in societal conflict. It is rather the perceived or actual feeling of threat, insecurity, and hopelessness arising from deprivation that could trigger and cause conflict. When there are contesting claims over a particular piece of land, conflict is certain to arise. These contesting claims over land have been increasing with rising numbers of migration of people. There can be various causes of migration; environment induced migration, economic migration, and political persecution led migration. When migration leads to scarcity of resources has been called by Dixon as ecological marginalization. Ecological marginalization results when groups of people migrate due to scarcity of resources to places with a weak eco-system thereby increasing scarcities leading to native-settler conflict (Homer-Dixon, 1994).

Conflict erupts after all available coping strategies are exhausted and when public policy and institutions fail to make a timely intervention. When we talk about insecurity, our primary concern is the security of human beings as individuals and within communities. Individuals and communities are said to be secure when they are free from threats, conflict, hunger, disease, deprivation, and poverty. 'Insecurity' plays a vital role between land and conflict. Resource scarcity, absolute or relative lack of access to land and forest resources and increased vulnerability breed insecurity that could eventually result in migration and conflict.

Land and conflict:

Scarcity of land can be caused by various factors, migration of people from one place to another being one. Dixon draws inferences from cases of Bangladesh and India where large numbers of population movements in recent decades, has produced pervasive social changes in the receiving regions. It has altered land distribution, economic relations, and the balance of political power between religious and ethnic groups, and it has triggered serious intergroup conflict (Homer-Dixon, 1994). According to Dixon decrease in quantity and quality of renewable resources can boost environmental scarcity of agricultural land, forestland and water resources (Homer-Dixon, 1994). Environmental scarcity can directly result in population movement and population movement can also cause environmental scarcity. Population movement or migration expulsion can also be caused by increased poverty that results from environmental scarcity. When the affected people move or are forced to move to new lands that often trigger group identity or ethnic conflict in the receiving area. Again, decreased economic productivity can directly lead to deprivation conflicts like insurgency and civil strife. In developing countries, population expulsions and decreased productivity can further weaken the state decreasing its control over 'ethnic rivalries and increases opportunities for insurgents and elites challenging state authority' (Homer-Dixon, 1994). However, Dixon has given too much emphasis on environmental scarcity as the result of unequal distribution of land, whereas it may also have political consequences. Hauge and Ellingsen claims, "Theories about the relationship between maldistribution of land and conflict and about income inequality and conflict have a long tradition in conflict research, largely linked to the study of revolution" (Ellingsen, 1998). On a similar note Libiszewski argues that it is not necessary that resource scarcity will every time cause environmental conflict (Libiszewski, 1992). Here the means by which the scarcity has occurred is important. If land becomes a bone of contention because of soil erosion, climate change, and so on, it can be called environmental conflicts; but not when land becomes a territorial conflict or colonial conflict or an anti-regime civil war (ibid). Hauge and Ellingsen argued that countries undergoing environmental degradation, specifically land degradation is more likely to have civil conflict.

Scarcity of land and conflict in Tripura:

Migration of people from East Pakistan, present day Bangladesh have led to demographic alteration of Northeast India thereby changing land holdings and land relations in the region. Assam and Tripura being the most prominent cases in this line. There were Bengali people living in Tripura prior to partition of India in 1947 but gradually the numbers of the settlers have increased. The Bengali settlers, who came to Tripura only for cultivation before partition, tend to settle permanently in Tripura after partition. And this has resulted in sharp upsurge on non-tribal population in the state. The situation is very much evident from the figures that from August 15, 1947 to March 24, 1971, the official figures of people settled were 6,09,998 (Bhattacharyya, 1988). According to 2001 census, the indigenous tribal population comprises only 31 percent of the total population of Tripura.¹ Now, the Bengali settlers have become a dominant section of the state controlling not only the economic sector but also the political sector of the state.

The state government of Tripura made every effort to rehabilitate all the refugees at the cost of the indigenous people of Tripura. As a result, more than 60 percent of the tribal land was lost to the refugees by 1970. Many conflicts over land took place in Tripura. Constant migration of refugees led to population explosion thereby resulting in scarcity of resources and therefore conflict over resources.

Scarcity of land and conflict in Assam:

The Bodos are the largest plains tribe in the state of Assam and share a history of loss with other tribals in the valley, having seen their traditional rights over land and forests being taken away. It was a process that started under the British Raj, and it continued after India's Independence in 1947. Colonial intervention in Assam and northeast India transformed land relations, landownership patterns and demographic structure. Colonialism saw the systematic process of further marginalization and impoverisation of the tribal population of the Brahmaputra Valley (Pathak, 2012). Bodos, are a historically marginalized community. The state's attempt, after independence, to resolve the issue by

¹ See Census 2001.

² See Primit Bhattacharya, "The contours of the Assam conflict," Live Mint, December

identifying tribal blocks has only been partially successful. All too often, corrupt land revenue officers have allowed the sale of tribal land in these blocks to non-tribals, even allowing the sale to be registered without a corresponding transfer of land titles.² That dubious practice has returned to haunt Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) in the current crisis, with the Bodo leadership demanding eviction of all “encroachers” who do not own land titles.

Land resources played an important role in the communal conflict of 2012 as the Bodo landowners are dependent on the labour of Bengali Muslims, which the Bodo extremists are desperate to bring to an end. The violence and resulting panic exposed a fragile peace in Assam and confirmed the speed with which historical tensions can bubble over into larger confrontations that could roil the whole country. A lot of this tension could worsen with the confluence of climate change, migration patterns, and community security in Assam and India.

Conclusion:

The two cases discussed above, indigenous people’s struggle to preserve their land and identity in Tripura and Assam are classic cases of immigrants’ impact of resources and consequent outcome of conflicts between communities that may at times result in violence. Different aspects that land holds in peoples’ life has been discussed and observed how it may lead to native vs. settler conflict. For agricultural economies like Northeast India, land has not only economic but also social and cultural meaning. Therefore, sudden influx of people creates land scarcity giving rise to a sense of insecurity of not only loss of land but identity and also opportunities, which inevitably results in conflict, both violent as well as non violent.

² See Prमित Bhattacharya, “The contours of the Assam conflict,” Live Mint, December 3, 2010.

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