Forests as safety nets in Sonitpur district of Assam in India

Guide: Dr. Bhaskar Majumder, Reader in Economics, Gobind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad
Autor: Renuka Mishra, ICSSR fellow, Gobind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad

Introduction
Development in the North-East of India has posed a serious challenge to the nation-building process in the country. Out of the seven states that comprise the Northeast of the country, Assam has special significance because it is the gateway to all other states of the region. The land area of Assam constitutes about 4% of the total land area of India and shares about 3% of the country’s population and 70.4% of the population of the northeastern region. Assam shares 30.8% of the Northeastern region’s geographical area. By virtue of geographical location, Assam occupies a strategic position in the country as it is located in the northeastern region, which is connected with the main body of the country by a narrow corridor of 32 kms width.

Statement of the problem
Under development is clearly perceived in terms of per capita income and sectoral growth rates as shown below:
Per capita income in Assam was Rs 7,335 as against Rs 12,782 in the country in the year 1999-2000. Agriculture, the main occupation of the people registered a growth rate of 1.2%. Manufacturing sector never contributes more than 5% to the state’s national product. Parasitically, the backdrop of this phenomenon is rich and a fairly diversified resource base that comprises among others, a third of the country’s hydel potential, the largest inland source of petroleum and extensive forest resources.

Resource Base of Assam
Forest Resources: Generally evergreen forests are found in the undivided districts of Cachar, Goalpara, Nagaon, Karimganj, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Darrang and the hill districts of the state. Most of the forests in the state are evergreen in character. In 1992-93, 355 number of reserved forests in the state occupied twenty-two percent of the total area of the state. Forests account for 39.11% of the total geographical area of the state. The highest concentration of forest occurs in the districts of Karbi-Angle and North-Cachar Hills, with 40.2% of the total area under forests of the state.

The state of forestry and logging to Net state domestic product in 1980-81 was 3.70% which declined to 2.05% in the year 1996-97.

Objectives of study
1. To study the existing resource base, its availability with specific reference to forestry resources.
2. To examine the type of utilization of forestry at present.
3. To examine the infrastructure, both physical and human, that exists at present for sustainable utilization of forestry.
4. To suggest strategies for sustainable development as may be derived from objectives (1) and (2)

Methodology

Twelve forest villages have been selected, six each from Sonitpur East and West division. Ten percent of the households in each village were taken as the sample.

A study done by AGROMET center located in North East Institute of Land and Water Management, Tezpur in Sonitpur district has shown records, which is confirming what the villagers have said.

Findings
Forest land in Garo Miri Gaon has also been used as an orchard for growing oranges. Villagers have closely felt that the rapid deforestation in the region is going to ruin their prospects as forest villagers. The fertility of the arable land is going to be affected and the cost to farmers is going to rise due to the increase in the cost of the labor as well as other inputs.

Rainfall has become irregular and the amount has been declining. Temperatures have been increasing in the region. A study done by AGROMET center located in North East Institute of Land and Water Management, Tezpur in Sonitpur district has shown records, which is confirming what the villagers have said.

With the increase in the temperature, the weather is becoming much wetter than before. This has also led to increase in the frequency of diseases. The major disease that is facing the villagers is malaria. Villagers are also concerned about water problem that has developed due to deforestation.

A study done by AGROMET center located in North East Institute of Land and Water Management, Tezpur in Sonitpur district has shown records, which is confirming what the villagers have said.

Deforestation in Mekahi Hill in Charduar reserved forest area

Hypothesis Testing
During the research work, the following hypothesis have been tested:
1. Development strategies in Assam followed so far overlooked the question of sustainability of resource-base.
2. A dynamic inter-active link between the local communities and the state government of Assam for national utilization and protection of forestry will ensure sustainable development for the state.

Conclusion:
Considering the rapid rate of deforestation in Sonitpur districts, if forests disappear or are not available people will lose vital safety nets in the form of forests. They are mostly dependent on forest land for food, fuel and fodder. They do not have alternative source of income. Neither do they have any alternative environment. The state government has only recently become aware of this problem and the draft on State Forest Policy 2002 was submitted to the Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi on 25th April, 2003. The committee for the policy was formed under the Chairmanship of Mr. Wood Germany and a team of experts including Bhabah Talukdar of WWF, Bogdano. The policy is aimed at encouraging sustainable development in the state through people’s participation.