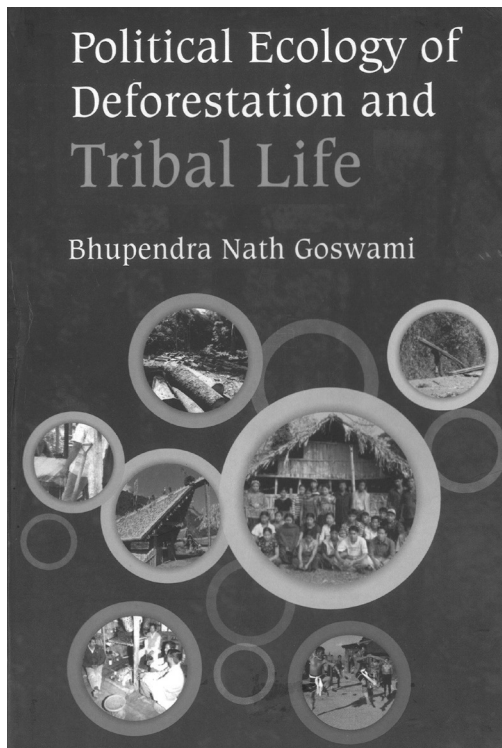


Book Review - 3

Political Ecology of Deforestation and Tribal Life A Study of Assam-Nagaland Border Areas (2017)

by Bhupendra Nath Goswami. Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd.,
New Delhi-110059, 2017



Political Ecology of Deforestation and Tribal Life explores the intricate interactions and interrelations between the ecological milieus, socio-cultural and politico-economic processes over time and space in general and with specific reference to Assam-Nagaland border areas. The book uncovers various issues and conflicts that are emerging in the process of spatio-temporal

change and resultant transformation in the name of development. Though deforestation and its consequences vis-à-vis diverse tribal life in the border areas of Assam-Nagaland is the central theme of investigation, the author continues to widen the analysis through political economy approach that offers a deeper understanding of ecological devastation as a larger process rooted in capitalist mode of economic and social reproduction. An attempt to link between deforestation, colonial and post-colonial forest policies, consequent spatial development with reference to tribal economy and emerging ethnic tensions and crisis is the most noted research highlight of the book. Such comprehensive analysis is supported by necessary data that has been collected through primary and secondary sources of information. Use of ethnographic techniques like personal interviews and their textual narrations is one of the innovative techniques applied in data generation and presentation. As the author is eminent geographer, the regional approach could be seen as a prominent method employed in delineation of the study area; its subdivisions as forest ecosystem and aquatic ecosystem/ zone of non-tribal, zone of plain tribes and zone of hilly tribes and so on; and description of physical attributes. However,

at times, application of spatial approach is also evident specifically with reference to explanations on tribal socio-cultural space.

The book is based on the doctoral research carried out by the author and has been organised into seven chapters. The first two chapters provide introduction to the research theme and study region by providing outline about the physical attributes and salient features of tribal community life. In the following three chapters, an account of deforestation and its impact of tribal groups have been obtained. The last two chapters offer in depth discussion on identification of possible solutions to control deforestation, various methods of forest conservation and efforts to reinstate the tribal life. The introduction offers the chorological explanation of physical attributes of the study area including geological history, relief, drainage, climate, soil, plant cover and wildlife diversity. The geographical coexistence has been well explained while correlating it with the spatial pattern of primary economic activities like agriculture, tea plantation and forestry.

While analysing the trajectory of deforestation, there has been a great emphasis upon the fundamental role of colonisation as a major agent of change in commercialising the forest spaces by integrating the tribal economy into the imperial economy and introducing the tea plantation. In fact, a chronological framework of colonial forestry practices (pp. 140) has been offered to validate the colonial interventions. Author also holds the colonial powers responsible for cultural imperialism by a) suppressing the indigenous cultural practices and ecological perspectives by imposing many restrictions on the indigenous cultural practices that emanated from a specific

interrelation between the tribal groups, forest and nature as a whole; b) introduction of world religions specifically Christianity that introduced a new set of beliefs and ethics in the name of 'modernisation'; and c) forced migrations leading to increasing cultural heterogeneity with varied life aspirations. Similar sentiments have been expressed by various authors on ecological and cultural imperialism specifically with reference to North-Eastern states of India. The same is responsible for disturbing the vary human-nature integrity and tribal way of sustainable consumption of forest resources. The 'sustainability' component has been justified by providing an account of animistic attributes in tribal religions (pp. 65); medicinal plants associated with traditional practice (pp. 79); eco-friendly practices traditionally performed by different tribes (pp. 217); and food related and social taboos that have been introduced in the form of restrictions (pp. 204). According to the author, such unique practices have evolved in the process of environmental adaptation and conservation.

Author has identified colonial and postcolonial forestry and forest policies; 'politics' of forest classification and conservation; expansion of tea gardens; commercial forestry; wasteland management and commercial plantations; peasants' revolts for agricultural lands; infrastructural development and increased penetrability; population growth through immigration and natural factors; cultural heterogeneity and ethnic conflicts; intensified struggle over resources and nativism; intra-class conflicts; and border conflicts between Nagaland and Assam state governments, as major reasons behind the higher pace of deforestation. The impact of deforestation

on the study region could be summarised in the form of a) marginalisation of tribal population; b) accumulation of economic and physical resources in the hands of nontribal population c) depletion of forest resources and forest based activities; and d) erosion of traditional tribal socio-cultural values, etc. The author asserts that the accelerated rate of deforestation is due to external forces and not because of the *jhoom* cultivation that is mostly practiced in hilly region. As a part of solution, the author proposes models of eco-restoration based in the concept of True Island Biogeography by Gorman and biosphere reserves – an international effort recognised under UNESCO’s Man and Biosphere (MAB) programme. Pertaining to the same, basic framework containing four zones – core, buffer, traditional use and transition has been suggested. Each zone is dedicated to specific intensity of biosphere conservation, social and commercial utilisation of forest resources, and preservation of traditional tribal practices to achieve sustainable development in the study region. In addition, the author also suggests various measures including a) tripartite agreement to resolve border issues; b) proper coordination between various state and central agencies dealing with forest resources and tribal welfare; c) check on immigrants and regulated urban development; and d) implementation of biosphere reserve programme, etc.

The reading of the book is helpful in establishing proper understanding vis-à-vis evolving human-nature interrelationship and particularities of tribal life in the study region. However, as the book is based in the doctoral thesis, it emerges with certain limitations. The sections of the book could have been revised to offer a logical link and better

sequencing of information. For instance, the impact of colonisation is discussed in many places. The chronological sequencing and mentioning of time line becomes must while writing the historical facts. The author in first three chapters navigates or rather jumps through various ‘times’. The same leads to confusion and loss of information. The maps included are informative but are not readable. They could have been printed either with better resolution and / or colours. The publication year of the book is 2017. The information contained regarding physical and economic attributes is till the year 2011-especially information related to forest cover could have been updated as the remote sensing data is easily available.

Though the book titles as political ecology, there has been hardly any emphasis upon the empirical understanding of the concept of political ecology. Instead the literature review refers to environmental determinism, possibilism and other older concepts. Though the term was introduced in 1935 by Frank Thone, the rigorous theorisation occurred only in 1970s as a part of radicalisation of geography. Neo-Marxist thoughts dominated the theorisation in social sciences to understand how political, social and economic differences are intrinsically linked with development discourses and political economies to shape the geography of unequal distribution. Owing to this undercurrent, political ecology was thought to be ‘any change in environmental conditions must affect the political and economic status quo’. The book limits itself to consider the political influence to the understandings of colonial and postcolonial policy interventions and efforts of modernisation and absolutely neglects the local political economy and vested interests of local capitalist class

and their due nexus with a set of affluent people placed in various higher positions. There is a complete ignorance vis-à-vis linking the various forms of capital and capitalism and associated political economy of growth where the modus operandi of how new green pastures could be hunted and made subservient to capital, for that matter even the development paradigm and economic policies, is inimically planned. The study area is essentially vital in terms of regional politics as it has not only huge internal politico-social conflicts but also confrontations with The Centre and a sharp divide from mainland of India on the basis of racial and ethnic identity. The author has not recognised post-colonial political equations including militarisation of North-Eastern states and introduction of AFSPA that has complicated the political situations and has a major impact on the political perspectives of indigenous people. The same needs to be considered as it complicates the policy making and implementation in general.

There is almost no recognition given to the influential environmental movements that were vital in shaping the political ecological perspectives in India. Similarly, a great deal of efforts by governmental and nongovernmental organisations has gone into shaping environmental policies, laws and regulations in India. Such trajectory of development has been covered in a very limited sense. A naïve understanding has been communicated to readers about the tribal life aspirations. The author at times conveys that the tribal are very happy and could be satisfied if their traditional practices are reinstated. Such claim needs

to be scrutinised as the life aspirations will definitely differ across age and gender, for instance younger population might have different life aspirations than remaining in the traditional culture. The author could have used the techniques of cognitive mapping to represent such perception oriented data.

Lastly, the suggestions given for the preservation of forest are not innovative. Probably such suggestions have been discussed at a length by various stake holders and policy makers. The possibility of implementation of such suggestion becomes a real question as now even Northeastern States are also open to market economy that integrates global economy with local and to facilitate the penetration of international finance capital, the finance has been institutionalised by the Centre in the name of ‘Look East’ policy (now renamed as ‘Act East’ policy). How far one will be able to push sustainable development agendas in ‘investor friendly’ political environment is the real question.

In spite of such limitations, the book turns out to be immensely informative about tribal life and their interconnections with forests. As the author name them - ‘forest tribes’, continue to live a very distinctive culture that should be appreciated and appropriated in the future policy making on deforestation.

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