

State, Resettlement And Unsettled Lives: Dilemmas Of A Resettled Community In Post Karbi-Kuki Conflict

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Abstract: The relation between land and people are not mere economic but psychological and emotional too as land or natural environment is the major source of culture and identity. It is the land or environment that determines the nature of life sustaining processes. The generations of attachment between land and people are blossomed into unique forms of economy, culture and life-style. Therefore, a sudden separation of people from their original environment or land consists of enormous risks of subjugating and degrading people's flow of life. In this context, the present study has explored the socio-political and economic challenges faced by the Karbi communities resettled after the Karbi-Kuki conflict in the Borjan Model Village of Karbi Anglong District of Assam.

Index Terms: Community, Inequality, Land, Model Village, Karbi-Kuki Conflict, Resettlement

1 INTRODUCTION

Rivalries and conflicts between different ethnic groups is a harsh reality of most of the post-colonial societies including India. Of course, such rivalries between ethnic groups were existed in the past also. But, the intensity of present conflicts are enormously destructive. The present conflicts are deeply rooted on several layers of complex elements of identity consciousness, political mobilization and possession over limited natural resources. The enormous diverse identity and culture of north east India made the region a fertile ground for conflicts between various ethnic groups and identities. The Karbis and Kukis are the two dominant ethnic groups of north east India. The Karbi community mostly lives in the Karbi Hills of Assam along with its adjoining regions. The Kuki community is spread over entire north eastern states of Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Assam. In Assam, they are mostly concentrated in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts. The ethnic conflict between Karbi and Kuki communities in the Karbi Hills continued from April 2003 and lasts to December 2004. The origin of the clash is very hard to specify. But, a little spark of conflict leaded to massive attack and counter-attack by insurgent groups of both communities aiming to harm opposite community members. The common people of both of the community were not part of the conflict rather they were victims of the conflict. The conflict was mainly instigated by the violent activities if insurgent groups and political manipulation of political elites of both of the communities. The Karbi-Kuki conflict resulted in the deaths of innocent people of the Karbi, Kuki and Nepali communities. Many families returned to their homes and many families permanently displaced from their villages, the State authority of Karbi Anglong District initiated Plans and programmes to resettle the displaced communities.

The Borjan Model Village was a part of such resettlement programme where communities displaced from Singhason Hills were resettled. The methodology of the present paper is analytical and explorative in nature. Both primary and secondary sources are used. For the purpose of the study, a pilot study was conducted in the Borjan Model Village of East Karbi Anglong District. The secondary data in this work has been collected from books, journal articles, newspapers, documentaries etc. The objectives of the paper includes-

- 1) To uncover the multiple interests of State behind the resettlement of Karbi communities in Borjan Model Village.
- 2) To analyze the unsettled live ways of the resettled communities in Borjan Model Village.

2 THE KARBI-KUKI ETHNIC CONFLICT:

The Kuki ethnic group has a long history of suffering and surviving several rounds of ethnic conflicts in the region. The Kuki communities faced intense conflicts in 1990s Nagaland and Manipur. In all these conflicts, land and other natural resources are the prime inspiration. With any displaced community settle down in a land already settled by other host communities feuled conflicts. After the Naga-kuki and Kuki-Paite conflicts in 1990s, many displaced groups of Kuki community migrated to the areas near Singhason Hills. The Singhason range is both emotionally and economically attached to the Karbi Community for its spiritual value and good ginger production (Rongphar; 2015, p. 2). The new group of migrants to the Singhason Hills created a sense of insecurity and curiosity among the karbi communities. Thereby, this sense of insecurity was transformed into hatred under the care of insurgent groups and political leaders of both communities. The enemies were made and re-made by insurgent groups, politicians and political parties of both communities through manipulating people's opinion to serve their respective political and strategic interests. Ng. Haokip, a member of Kuki organization remarked, "In reality, the clash is not between Karbis and Kukis rather between United People's Democratic Soliderity (UPDS) and Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA)" (ibid;p.56). the President of Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) Holiram Terang blamed the State Government for the clash. He argued the clash was created by

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the State Government in co-operation with Kuki insurgents of Manipur to make the Karbi community distanced from Autonomous State demand (ibid; p.45). In response, Kuki National Assembly (KNA) reminded that the Kuki people are engaged in the Autonomous State demand for Karbi Anglong from its inception like the Karbi community. Even many members of the Kuki Student's Organization (KSO) suffered prison with the leaders of ASDC. Such a series of criticism and re-criticism intensified the conflict. Further, fragmentations within the insurgent groups made the conflict more complex, long lasting and common people the ultimate sufferer. The Karbi-Kuki ethnic conflict of 2003-2004 made both Karbi and Kuki communities to suffer and flee from their original inhabitants to places where they can protect themselves. Karbi communities from the areas of Singhason, Thekerajan, Khnobamon took refuge in the relief camps in Lingnit near Borjan. Most of the people returned from relief camps to their original villages after the clash was over. But, for many of the families there were nowhere to return as their houses were completely burn down or destroyed in the conflict. Afterwards, the government resettled the displaced groups of people in Borjan Model Village, Bofong Tokbi Model Village and Sarthe Rongpi Model Village. Many of the previous jhumia or shifting cultivator families of Singhason Hills was resettled in these Model Villages. However, the government created Model Villages were again the beginning of newer challenges to the resettled communities.

3 RESETTLEMENT IN MODEL VILLAGES: A POLITICAL MOVE?

“Resettlement is one of the acute expressions of powerlessness because it constitutes a loss of control over one's physical space. The only thing left is the loss of body”- Oliver Smith (Hussain; 2009, p.55) The quote signifies that resettlement is a much influential process that essentially leads an individual or a community to lose their power over a physical space. Resettlement makes communities to struggle and adjust with new environment and new challenges. In initial period, communities behave in a conservative and introvert way as they are not familiar to the new locality or environment (Asthana; 1996). It takes a considerable amount of time to mould the life patterns of the community with the newly settled environment. Appadurai correctly remarked that “the task of producing locality is a structure of feeling” (Czarnecka & Toffin; 2011). Locality does not come immediately with the resettlement of the community or group. It takes a long time for the newly settled communities to become completely familiar with new environment and to develop attachment to it. In most cases, the people or the community were compelled to settle in a location which they did not have selected and which is quantitatively and qualitatively different in terms of space and accessibility from their original village (Asif; 2000). These qualitative and quantitative changes of the new settled space or location necessarily change the indigenous practices of production, indigenous values for life and culture of the whole community. Resettlement of communities initiated under the authority of State has always hidden interests. Those interests may range from pursuing development to fulfilling military goals of the State. There exist several historical evidences where State forcefully redesigned or resettled people's flow of life. In many instances, such efforts ended with loss of economic sustainability, diverse indigenous culture and even human

lives. The State enforced village re-grouping in Mizoram and forced sedentarization of Kazakhstan under Soviet regime are some glorifying examples. The resettlement programmes of remotely located Karbi villages were justified essentially as a development programme. Yet, such development programmes hide several interests. On one side, the relocation of Karbi Villages consist instinct of the State to permanently settle down these communities to make them engage in economically rationalized forms of production other than the jhum cultivation. State authorities provide a view of the present condition of people's life in the interior Karbi Hills as primitive and beyond civilization. James C. Scott in his celebrated work ‘The Art of Not Being Governed’ argues the present definition of civilization is too rigid, dogmatic and based on knowledge created under certain structures. It regards the people in the lowlands are only the fully civilized. Those dwelling in the midlands are partially civilized and those who live on high elevation are complete savage (Scott; 2000). Under such justification, State has enormous duties to civilize and modernize those communities that does not produce surplus for the State by resettling or re-locating people's life-style. The inaccessibility to government initiated schemes is often used as a justification by the State to show the life of the Hills as backward. Scattered located Karbi jhum villages practice land ownership that is neither permanent nor individual. Such ambiguous way of life makes it almost impossible for the State to extract surplus from remotely located population. Therefore, State has obvious interests to merge 2 or 3 villages and relocating these sparsely populated communities into space easily accessible to State. Further, military goals are also fulfilled under resettlement in such Model Villages. Resettlement is always regarded as a clear expression of the State to preserve its monopoly in the management of violence and other human activity (Kapoor; 2014). Simplification of people's living space and ways of life are seen as installment of mechanism that makes State surveillance an easy task. Most of the illegal activities like drug trafficking, insurgent activities are smoothly run in these Hills where institutions of State become lazy. The insurgent activities of different ethnic groups in Karbi Anglong are centered in the Hills beyond the plains or urban places of the district. The Karbi-Kuki ethnic conflict of 2003 was also originated in the Singhason Hills where roads and other facilities are poorly connected. In such situations, the military operations often run into failure. Thus, the has such obvious military reasons to initiate redesign of living spaces of the Karbi Hill communities.

4 RESETTLED COMMUNITIES AND UNSETTLED LIVES:

The Borjan Model Village is located in Lumbajong Development Block near Longnit of East Karbi Anglong District. The village has nearly 230 households and most of them are relocated families after Karbi-Kuki ethnic clash of 2003. The displaced communities resettled in the Borjan Model Village are provided adequate facilities of road connectivity, electricity, educational institutions along with some families got government schemed homes. Through the nearby plain village have facilities of drinking water and irrigation, the Model Village lacks the essential need of drinking water facility. However, the Model Village has a co-operative shop from where villagers collect life-sustaining food and other utensils at the government decided price. The Model

Village has a stadium and a park too. It has two lower primaries and one middle primary school. Apart from these, the Borjan Model Village has also a Missionary High School situated in the middle of the village. The Missionary school building is very well maintained nowhere near comparison to government school. The equal and just distribution of opportunities among the resettled families is regarded as the bedrock of a democratic policy of resettlement. But, the contrary happened in the process of re-locating the Karbi communities in the Borjan Model village. The local government failed to equally distribute the most basic asset of land-holding among the resettled families. The local government did not have any clear cut rules and regulations about how much land had to be allotted to each family. As the communities in the Borjan Model Village were resettled in different time phases, the early settlers got advantages regarding land-holding pattern. But, those families came in the later phases got relatively smaller size of land. Thus, the seeds of inequality developed with the very establishment of the village. The early settlers got more than enough land for the homestead and a kitchen garden. Of course, that piece of land produces never enough to sustain for the whole year. Yet, the earliest settlers enabled to get something than nothing. Without providing enough land holding, many families were pushed into several kinds and levels of vulnerability and alienations in the new created Model Village. The most essential livelihood of the Karbi communities that is the agricultural lands were not provided in the Borjan Model Village. Prior to resettlement in Borjan, the communities sustained through jhum or slash and burn cultivation. They produced all food & essential crops like rice, maize, potato, yam, cotton and vegetables along with cash crops like organic ginger, broom, pineapples etc. Thus, the jhum cultivation provides almost all the necessary staple needs and the traditional cash crops were the source of little income. The Borjan Model village has almost no perfect land to settle cultivation. The nearby plain and hill agricultural lands are already occupied by Karbi communities living next to the Borjan Model Village. Without agricultural land, the previous shifting cultivators resettled in the Borjan Model village become dependant and vulnerable to market. Apart from the agricultural lands, the community forest and water resources are the most crucial space that the community lost in the transition from their indigenous villages of Singhason Hills to the Borjan Model Village. The community forests work as the prime source of essential food nutrients and numerous utensils for everyday use like bamboo, timber, firewood etc. Community forests reduce the dependency on agricultural products and provide numerous alternatives for a healthy diet of the community. The availability of natural water resources in the Borjan model Village also changed. The relocation of Karbi communities of Singhason Hills to the Borjan Model Village is a major setback to the whole community as they lost the access to resources of water. People are completely alienated from their rivers and innumerable benefits it brings to the community. Thereby, several bonds of people with the rivers visible through festivals and rituals are also weakened. Further, Borjan Model Village is the new home for Karbis of both Hindu and Christian faith. Again, the Karbi communities of Hindu faith are fragmented into different clans. Therefore, people find it very difficult to assimilate with the community of different faith and customs. The present Borjan Model Village has a number of 'Gaonburhas' or Village Heads. Yet, one official village head exists who perform all governmental

activities. Apart from him, the Borjan Model Village has five Village Heads. They represent their own clans or village communities of old Singhason, Khonbamon and Thekerajan. One of the villagers resettled in this Model Village explained that he resettled in the Model Village with a hopes to better the life with better education, transportation, electricity, housing and job card facilities. Though many of such needs were fulfilled; yet, people are struggling for a better life without agricultural lands and employment opportunities.

5 NEEDS VERSUS LUXURIES:

The transition from the original village of Singhason range to the Borjan Model Village also witnessed a complete reformulation of the living space and thereby indigenous habits & culture of the people. In this process, some new structures were created and some earlier structures were systematically eradicated. The newly settled communities in Borjan were almost out of the process of developing their own village. Therefore, the physical structure of the village was not an outcome of social interaction within the community. In any normal case, the village community that resettled in another Hill itself develops all essential spaces require sustaining life in that certain hilly environment. But, the contrary happened to Borjan Model Village where everything was imposed from top authority to bottom in a pre-fixed order without considering the people's needs and opinions. "The present Borjan Model Village is a very narrow space than compared to the Karbi Hill Villages in Singhason range"- it was the first response of one of the villager when he was questioned about the changes in transition to Borjan Model Village. The respondent laughed and further explained that now they have a lot of people living in one single village. A normal Karbi Hill village is usually very small in population and wide in geography that essentially includes jhum plots, community forests etc. Further, the Borjan Model Village also witnessed the superimposition of some new and alien structures that are regarded by State as essential to modernize the village space. In Borjan Model Village, the village park and Langklangvong Model Village Stadium are the new spaces that were overemphasized than the community forests and water resources. These artificially created structures in Borjan found rare importance among the villagers. In the course of field study, it was seen that the Langklangvong Stadium is not well maintained. One respondent mentioned that the stadium is occasionally used for football matches and community gatherings. On the other hand, the Model Village Park is completely abandoned by the villagers and it is barely recognizable as a Park. Thus, the reformulation of living space after resettlement in Borjan Model Village brought several social and economic consequences to many families of the resettled community. The efforts of the State to modernize the village space in Borjan Model Village through constructing pucca roads, stadium and park were found to be unnecessary to improve the lives of the resettled communities. Rather, the elimination of forest and water resources further degraded people's life. Life becomes tougher for the new settled communities in Borjan Model Village without adequate land, forests and water resources. Thereafter, communitarian ethos, cultural imprints and indigenous food habits are also running under transformation and are gradually alienated from the newer generations of the Karbi community.

6 CONCLUSION:

Thus, the State sponsored resettlement programmes of Karbi community that aimed to improve people's life-style and livelihood seems to be ended with creating several difficulties in the society. People's livelihood, community ethos, relation with nature, cultural patterns and even food habits are significantly influenced by the resettlement in a village that was not completely chosen by the people. The basic aspirations that people thought to be fulfilled in Borjan Model Village remained far from being fulfilled. The Model Village that was portrayed as 'Natun Adarsha' (New Way of Life) among the people proved to be vogue and meaningless. Thus, it can be concluded that State as having monopoly over power & authority should not impose its development designs on people. Rather, development designs should come under proper & just reconciliation from the people.

7 ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wish to thank Dr Barun Dey for his valuable recommendations on the paper.

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