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Menoseno Senotsu and Lanusashi Longkumer



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CASE STUDY

EMERGING DYNAMICS OF HUMAN-LAND RELATIONSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF NAGALAND

Menoseno Senotsu* and Lanusashi Longkumer

Department of Geography, Nagaland University, Lumami

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ABSTRACT

Community solidarity perhaps defines best the concept of land-man relationship in Naga society. Traditionally land is considered, a gift from God/Nature and its resources a blessing. There is no monetary value attached to land as land was beyond the material value and land with its resources belonged to the community; where individual land ownership was temporary and usage based. Every village among the existing tribes practiced sovereignty; as such, there exist variation even in their relationship to the land as a resource and their management as well as development. However, a new emerging trend of monetisation has infiltrated his community solidarity and created individualism in their relationship to land. Though this is transitional and not pre-determined, yet it creates a scenario where accumulation of resources is observed in the hands of a few elite groups. It also tends to breach the harmonious relationship of man as stewards of the land.

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INTRODUCTION

Land is the basic resource of human society. Human life both social and economic depends on the land and its resource. Humans organise and regulate the structure of land system through production technology and lifestyle, occupying a certain area of land as a place to live and consuming the products of land system. Systematic utilisation of land has promoted economic and cultural advancement of different societies throughout history.

The sovereignty of community land ownership in Nagaland have never been challenged until the early 19th century, where the Nagas living in more or less confined territory were confronted with the British colonial of mainland India. Since then, the Nagas have endured reorganisation and encroachment through political agendas until the formation of Statehood in 1963. It has resulted in the demarcation of the state geographical area with 16579 sq km, where the state Govt. owns 7% of the total area and the other percents are under the community. The demarcated area represents only a small portion of the entire Naga population and the land, which stretches over a vast tract of mountainous region between the Hukphang valley of Myanmar in the North West and in three states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur in the North East Region of India. Article 371(a) of the Indian constitution recognises the customary laws in owning and managing the land and its resources.

This century also heralds the introduction and adoption of western culture into the traditional culture. In the process of

civilization and economic progress, the Nagas have slowly adopted the western culture of religion, education and lifestyle. Through the introduction of money economy, the tribals were forced to opt for non-traditional avenues of work, which compelled them to work outside the unit of direct man-land based economy leading to gradual alienation from land and their relationship. Globalisation has also brought about a trend towards increasingly individualised livelihoods, or at least individual decision-making concerning livelihood opportunities. Rather than 'harmonious' entities pursuing an optimal balance, individual household members pursue individual ways to improve their situation. (Haan *et al*, 2003)

Study Area

Nagaland is situated in a narrow rugged mountainous terrain lying between 25°60' - 27°40' N latitude and 93°20' and 95°15' longitude, on the extreme east of India. The state covers an area of 16,579 sq km with its district of Kohima, Mokokchung, Tuensang, Zunheboto, Mon, Wokha, Phek, Dimapur, Kiphire, Longleng, and Peren. It is surrounded by the state of Arunachal Pradesh in the North, Assam in the West and Manipur in the South and straddles the Patkai mountain range, adjacent to Myanmar. According to 2011 census the population is estimated at 19, 80,608 and the literacy rate is 80.11%. Tibeto-Burman speaking tribe inhabits Nagaland where there are 14 major Naga tribes and many sub-tribes existing in 1428 villages and 26 towns (Census of India, 2011). The state of Nagaland still depends largely on agriculture and its allied activities for their livelihood though various small-scale industries are also emerging. Census of India, 2011 estimates

*Corresponding author: **Menoseno Senotsu**

Department of Geography, Nagaland University, Lumami

that of the total population 71.1% lives in the rural areas with the other 28.9% in urban areas.

Objectives

Shift of community culture to individualism
Impact of monetising land and its resources

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Observation and collection of first hand information from the field has been emphasised. Interviewing of key informants as well as group discussion has been undertaken in 22 villages; two villages each from the existing eleven districts. This selection was done based on a number of factors such as population structure, proximity to town, and livelihood structure. The analysis is based on qualitative data collected through unstructured interview, covering 200 samples from the selected villages. Human -land relationship in Naga society in this paper will be qualitatively analysed through the emerging issues in land ownership and utilisation.

Community and land

The Nagas have considered their land as the living abode of both man and spirits. Whom they seek guidance and blessing for their prosperity through worship and sacrifices. Land, for them, is more than just a habitat or a political boundary; it is the basis of their social organisation, economic system and cultural identification. (Longchar, 2015) Land was the source of their traditional knowledge system, which guided them to read and understand their environment. Their interaction has developed a way of life with the land as a traditional resource based on egalitarianism and their economy was closely knitted and sustainable. Community solidarity in the form of clan and village was the epitome of life for a Naga; hence, no member in the Naga society is without land. As such, their every activity both social and cultural was never an individual business but was an affair of his clan or community. Thus, their attachment to land was as deep rooted traditionally as that to their family and clan.

The basic classification of land ownership in Naga society is individual and community. Generally, most of the land belongs to the village community, which has gradually changed its pattern with the different management system of the land. Land holding system not only varied among different tribes but even among villages of the same tribe. There exist variation in the ratio between the community and private land among tribes and among villages within the same tribe depending on cultural reasons and practices. Autocratic rule is practised among the Sumi and Konyak tribes while individual ownership is more common in Angami villages and among the Ao and Lotha tribes, most of the land is owned either by clans or by individuals. (Longkumer and Jamir, 2012)

Ownership also shows contrasting character in Nagaland when taken at a village level. The Sumi Nagas who practice autocratic chieftainship is nonexistent in Lazami village, where majority of the forest belongs to the clans and the cultivated land to individuals. Similarly, while majority of land belonged to the village council in Gaili village of Zeliang tribe, in Benreu village of the same tribe, the clans own majority of the village land.

Traditionally, there was strict restriction regarding the transfer of ownership and use of land within a village. Outsiders were not allowed to use land for any purpose and selling of land was a social disgrace to the family/clan. Though selling of land have happened under certain exceptional circumstances, effort is always taken to retain ownership in the clan. In Naga society, property is inherited by the male heir and transmitted through them. They have legal rights in ancestral property regulated by customary laws. The women as such have no inheritance although acquired properties even land can be gifted to daughters also. In every family, though a women/female member is entitled to use land of their father's or husband's clan, they cannot personally inherit or own land.

In the consciousness of the Nagas, land did not and could not belong to the individual, but the individual to the land, where his life was embedded to his community. The spatial entity (village) where his very identity and life revolved was so close knitted with loyalty that one would seldom leave his home or village. A Naga village functions as a social, political and cultural unit and is defined by its territory and sovereignty where the land belonged to the community. Within every sovereign village land was the base of every individual as well as the community livelihood system. Every household as a citizen of that particular village had equal right to the traditional resources for his sustenance. Ownership was temporary and usage based. They practised collective rights to land, it includes the right to access, utilise and mobilise the resource for the community livelihood. Generally, Nagas have a strong sense of Common Property Resource (CPR) over land and its resources. For instance, within the village community any individual can harvest banana and bamboo resource from any land both private and community near and far for household purpose in Kidima village.

Population and change

As one travels in the land of Nagas one common feature of all the villages, is the site or location of settlement on the spur of the hill ranges. This was the ideal location for security reason, and the village community land would extend from the peak ranges down to the foothills. The slopes and foothills were cultivated through jhumming, a community agriculture, where one depended on another for seed and labour through exchange system. It was also the ground for learning and sharing of traditional knowledge about their land, cultivation, crops and environment. As an exception, the Angamis and Chakhesang tribes of the Southern Naga practiced both terrace cultivation and shifting, where rice as the staple food was the major crop and a number of multiple crops were cultivated to meet the diet requirement of the household. During the lean season of agriculture produce (January-April), they depended on the forest and harvested the rich wild vegetables as supplements of their livelihood. As it is, the livelihood of the tribals was as much land oriented as forest or in other words, the traditional community economy was wholly inclusive with resources owned and mobilised collectively. This pattern in the villages is breaking down and land management or planning is growing weak where individuals are getting more involved in multi-livelihood strategies. The establishment of administrative sub-centres has created the origin of towns in the districts of the state in the twentieth century. It has initiated the first

fragmentation of the formidable community settlement and livelihood activities. The state govt. has also initiated the people to come down to the foothills of their settlements, for easy access to transport and communication and thus the growth of developmental opportunities. This has propagated the growth of land fragmentation and haphazard developmental activities as well as created a sordid competition of the available foothills for agriculture and commercial activities.

Census of India 2011 shows a decrease of rural population in Nagaland by 239,713 persons and the increase in urban population by 228,179 in the decade though during the same time 111 villages increased. The growth of urbanisation as well as the migration of rural population to urban areas within the state has also affected the concept of land to the people. It is the major cause of alienation of the people from their culture, their concept of land as their identity and their responsibility as a custodian of their ancestral land. This detachment from their land and their aspiration for growth/better life is the core issue in the emerging dynamics of human-land relationship among the Naga society.

Challenges of land alienation

Nagas are at various stage of alienation from their land, as their identity and community solidarity. As the present developmental paradigm does not give much scope for the continuity of the revered customary practices, land faces severe stress and pressure from mass exploitation for wealth accumulation in the growing money culture. There exist a generation gap where an individual grows up as a member of a peer group within a community, learning the values and practices as a custodian of the traditional resources. Customary practice of sharing land and its resources as neighbours, family within the village and between villages are decreasing where individuals are more concerned about their welfare than that of the community. This has deepened inequalities and eroded traditional ethos and values relating to man-land relationship. For instance, the vanishing of the once abundant and rich forest resource due to over exploitation especially wild animals and vegetables. Overexploitation is a result of labelling resources with monetary value, where some individuals taking this advantage exploit the resource for instant monetary gain. It is a process, which ultimately results to the extinction of their habitat and population, unless the present community ban on hunting and commercial exploitation of wild vegetables renew its population. Similarly, the plantation belts of rubber, teak, gomari along the Mokokchung, Wokha, Dimapur, Peren valley in the Southwest bordering Assam valley is an alienation of traditional bio resources from the community. Monoculture has been rightly called 'green desert', its homogeneous nature has invaded the provisions of forest non-timber products which are a huge supplement of everyday needs to the community and their livelihood both health and wealth. Commercialization of forest and its products has resulted in the ultimate destruction of habitats. Out of the 22 sample villages, nine villages have different areas designated as community virgin forest whereas the other 13 villages are with no more intact forest.

Likely, another aspect of alienation is from the community (clan, khel, village) land both the right to access and utilise as collective owners. It is more of a persistent threat for landlessness than any other factor. If the community lands are

to be privatized, it will create a class of landlessness in the Naga society. It is a harsh line to write and more so to witness. Personal interview in some villages notes that there are farming households who totally depend on community land for their livelihood. Privatisation of community land is a process, which does not favour every household of the community. For instance, to establish individual ownership on a community land where it is allowed, only the influential as well as the individual with money for land development can attain ownership. On the other hand, clan land which formed majority forest both cultivable land and woodland are been granted individual ownership through division among the members.

The above scenario seems minor when one considers the threat, which the State Government has recently created, the concept of Nagaland Special Development Zones soon to be implemented in the foothills. It is a technique of handing market policies to the people as the only option for economic development and coercing the community to reorient their customary law and practices for vague developmental vision. Vague in not only sustainability but also feasibility to the physiography and culture of the people. It is a system/plan for direct alienation of people from their land, not only ownership but also the right to access and utilise the resources. In the early twentieth century, the State Government in agreement with the Government of India had introduced various jhum control programs to stop the practice in Nagaland and failed. It reflects the failure to acknowledge the agriculture system, which they have developed and practised for ages and its relation to land and their livelihood. Even today, jhum cultivation forms the major agriculture system in the state. However, the state Government departments have become successful in changing the agriculture landscape of the state. It is a concern for one observes exotic plantations and commercial crops becoming a phenomenon all over the villages, replacing the traditional agrobiodiversity with no proper market strategy and vision for sustainability. Plantation drive has not only increased individual accumulation of land in a village community, but at the same time, it has also created a market for transfer of land rights to non residents of that village which is a new process, mostly prevalent in the frontier lands and border areas.

Consistent change in land use pattern has facilitated the privatisation of community land all over the State. It has also created permanent transfer of land rights both ownership and utilisation from the commoner to rich individuals, who are more than ready to exploit the resources with new technology. Though both may procure some benefits in terms of money, once in the hands of developers there is no effort for rehabilitation of the land and less environmental considerations.

Monetisation of resources

Modernisation or the introduction of money marked the gradual decline of tribal creativity, disappearance of traditional occupation and the increase in monetisation of resources, both community and individual lands. As discussed above privatisation of land is but a prerequisite for commercial exploitation of land in varying degree. When one says commercial, it is the exploitation of land resources as a necessity for the advancement of, both the detached farmers

who are venturing into business as well as the farmers who are compelled to lease their land rights to augment income and finally the well off individuals to improve his lifestyle. There is no household whether Government employed or otherwise who does not involve in land development for his livelihood. This however does not imply a mass agreement for exploitation of land as a commercial entity. Interviews suggest two classes or category of prominent land value often stated as "money does not stay, even if we acquire money today in exchange of our traditional richness, tomorrow it will be gone" " new development as a choice is the ultimate source for household economic needs and growth".

Tea plantation in Tizit area and wet rice cultivation in Dimapur, situated in the urban centre of the foothill valley of the state are the two most prominent representation of alienation from cultural practice of farming to mere landholders. Farmers in and around Dimapur, Peren and Mon districts are transferring the right to use and develop their wet terrace land to families of non-locals as sharecroppers. For instance, majority of farmers in Gaili (Peren), Tenyiphe (Dimapur) and Tizit (Mon) villages practice sharecropping system. Settled in the field with free access to water and firewood, they till the land with their choice of seeds both khariff and rabi crops and have been living on the land for more than a decade.

The increasing issue is that for maximum produce; fertilisers are repeatedly used, which has decreased the natural ability to replenish fertility as well as made the land chemical dependent. Tea plantation as an influence of the Assam agriculture has created individual tea plantations along the Tizit town and its surrounding villages. Benei Tea Estate with an area of 4.07 hectare is an individual tea plantation producing 75000 kgs (2015) of tealeaves in Tizit village, one of the many existing tea plantation.

This tea estate employs 20 non-locals as permanent labourers from manager to daily wage earners. Indeed, every household maintain tea gardens ranging from 20.7 hectares (large) to 4.07 hectares (medium) as well as smaller plot next to their settlement. All the daily labourers and managers are non-locals as well as the tealeaves are transported to Assam as raw materials. Leasing of land for commercial quarrying, logging and mining is also another sector that is recent yet a growing venture for the local businesspersons. This has not only affected the land value, it has caused vegetation cover destruction and increased soil erosion and created disharmony among the community. These economic ventures in terms of road connection and land fill, waste disposal and labour settlement becomes a source for diminishing the land biodiversity as well as an agent of environmental pollution.

CONCLUSION

Man by nature and process of development are evolving several strategies in utilising and management of both individual and community land. However, this process and objectives are not attuning to the traditional community economy, which is sufficient and exclusive. It also has the tendency and power to alienate the people from their culture, their customary laws, where collective rights and community economy are supersede by individual accumulation of land and

wealth. Leasing of land and sharecropping as discussed benefits more the labourers and businessperson than the landowners.

These are determining the value of land to the people and the process to attain the resources by individuals. It is not just a simple money oriented individual business anymore, leasing becomes a necessity for the land rich but money-lacking household. It becomes their major source of monetary income and the ample market facilitates their growth. It is important to raise the question whether this new developments are improving the livelihood of the concerned individuals as owners or are becoming an important source of livelihood for other immigrants.

The State Government as the head of the state has the legislative power and great responsibility to develop and secure the livelihood of the people. For this to evolve, it is important that respect for customary law should be a priority and planning should respond to the local resources, whereby growth should come from within. It is time that department's should consider and stop continuing experimenting on the farmers field and community land as an institution with so many new market seeds yet with no intention to see it through thick and thin. The mere introduction of new schemes and new seeds or plants is not the end it is just the beginning. Moreover, it is necessary to analyse whether the ramifications are worth the change or not for the people as well as the land. As there persist a growth of landlessness and economic divide in the community. Nagaland a tribal community with land as their identity will in no time, find itself with a class or a group who will become landless in their own land and become mere labourers.

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