
Role and Status of Women in Land Use Control and Management

The role of indigenous peoples and traditional knowledge systems in the conservation of biodiversity is so well known as a general fact that it needs no further assertion. The particular role of women however is less acknowledged and even where such acknowledgement is offered, is not accompanied by the concomitant offer of space on related platforms of discussion and decision making particularly by mainstream processes. North -Eastern India is a region with rich forests and wetlands, inhabited by over 250 indigenous peoples. This region of India has historically been contiguous with the northern region of Burma and of Bangladesh. Since villages of numerous peoples co-habit the same territory, interlaced in an intricate mosaic, self-governance and village level autonomy with tribal alignments extending over non-exclusive and geographically UN-integrated territories is a typical political configuration.

The cultures however different in many ways share the characteristic hunting gathering economic base that has led to the development of intricate codes of land use and harvesting of natural resources, within village populations, among villages and between different tribes. The only agriculture traditionally practiced is of staple cereals, cotton, small kitchen gardens and poultry.

A broad range of traditional land and water rights and use practices, all of them community or clan rather than individually controlled, adapted to the specificities of the variable terrain of the region exist among the different indigenous peoples. While actual legislation of the Indian system recognizes little of these systems, the peoples still adhere to customary practice wherever not actually obstructed or prevented from doing so. This is usually effective in matters internal to the community, but is problematic when the collective rights of the community require interfacing with state processes such as land acquisition for development or military bases or in re-settlement programmes.

Wet rice cultivation is practiced in the small valleys interspersing the hills and in the lower hill slopes. Swidden or slash and burn cultivation is practiced in higher slopes, usually for cotton, other cereals such as maize and legumes. The water, rivers, lakes and ponds and the forests are harvested for insects, vegetables, herbs, game and fish. Extensive lands are traditionally maintained by religious and cultural practice as bio-diversity preserves. Sacred groves, forests and water bodies have been preserved for millennia by powerful taboos against contamination and harvesting of produce.

With the advent of the State structures of resource control and management, the traditional control and practices have eroded. Partly due to greatly increased population pressures of migration into the region of mainstream populations and the discreditation of swidden cultivation practices, even marginal lands are brought under wet rice cultivation. Lands once protected by religious taboo against intensive exploitation are a bonanza for lumber, wood and bamboo industry, for monoculture plantations, for wildlife and environment conservation projects and even for mining. Indigenous control over these lands has been de-legitimized with the State expropriating all lands within its territorial boundaries under various laws and policies based on the principal of terra nullius characterizing colonial practice.

While each of these numerous peoples of the region has its unique social and cultural gender

attributes, from the matriarchal to distinct patriarchy, the women commonly are responsible for a great deal of the economy, subsistence, cottage industry and indigenous market. Their activities include agriculture but also harvesting of produce from non-cultivated sources such as waterways, marsh and forest and also the management of buffer stocks and seed stocks. Women have inalienable rights by community laws over the harvesting of produce for consumption and sale. Single adult women, whether unmarried, widowed or divorced, also have customary rights to homestead and agricultural land from clan, tribe or village holdings. Every woman can claim land and resources to construct traditional shelters on community holdings of clan or village lands. She can also claim a share of the agricultural or other revenue generating lands and resources owned by the family, clan or tribe.

Based on kinship and village alignments, women have powerful traditional institutions and networks, which facilitate and support their responsibilities towards family and community. These networks are the main agency in organizing access to and distribution of resources and for support to individuals and sections affected by some kind of temporary dysfunction or problem such as illness or crop failure, which disable them from providing for themselves and their dependents. These associations, whether of kinship or friendship, whether formal or institutional also hold, share and transfer the information regarding agricultural diversity, the knowledge and stocks of traditional seeds and plantation methods.

With substantial access and control over land and water use, it is not surprising that indigenous women of this region have developed both formal and informal institutions and networks for protection of biodiversity. As most harvesting of vegetables and herbs is done by women, they are also naturally the authorities on the subject of the various species and their characteristics, their use and value. This knowledge is passed down through generations in those communities without formal systems by word of mouth among kin and by the apprenticeship of younger women to elders. Some few peoples have evolved formal systems of women's trusteeship of knowledge and natural resources, such as the Meitei of the Imphal valley. Among this people there is a formal institution of priestesses known as the Maibi Loisang who have custody of such traditional knowledge and are also responsible for transmission in different formal methods and situations to different sectors of the community. The Maibi Loisang is also responsible for maintenance and preservation of the shrines of the numerous deities of land and water, natural shrines at what are evidently biodiversity conserves. Similar if less formal associations of female shamans, healers and elders exist among many other peoples of the region.

The relationship between fertility and regeneration, between female spirituality and the sacredness of the earth and its diversity, between sustainability and trusteeship rather than ownership and exploitation is the essence of indigenous culture, the essence of the significance of womanhood and women in indigenous society. It may also be the only ethic that can preserve and conserve our world for the future, any future at all.

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