

Tribal Resources and the Endangered Narratives

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I. Introduction

The trajectory of development is a state mediation through which the issue of connections between tribes and their resources provides both opportunities and challenges. It is one of these issues that this paper points to – the issue of challenges. Whereas challenges can be estimated using several parameters, this paper tends to look at these challenges from a different perspective and pinpoints on an issue – the issue of narratives with reference to tribal resources that becomes a major challenge under the impact of development. In the tribal world, resources like land, water, and forest have a direct impact not only on the life of people but on their approach to life also. The existence of oral narratives in the tribal world is one such approach to life and a careful study establishes that there is a direct link between the tribal narratives and the resources. Relatively, the narratives are directly proportional to the resources available. When the resources are abundant, the narratives are fertile; but when resources are sparse, the narratives become sterile. This is further demonstrated and established by citing three proverbs as a microcosm of narratives in the tribal world. And the proverbs of Galo tribe in Arunachal Pradesh are taken as specimen in this regard.

Proverbs and the Resources

In analyzing the resource-tribe-state nexus, three proverbs of the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, India; are taken into account. The land, the water, and the forest are the three basic resources provided by Nature and like the Galo people; almost all the tribal races in the world are dependent on Nature for survival. Mostly, the dependence on these resources is seen to be physical only, the physical need to stay alive. But many a time, the dependence on these resources is not merely at the physical level rather the dependence is at moral and intellectual level also. For giving birth to many folklore genres like myths, legends, tales, and proverbs, the tribal people have often taken the base of these natural resources. Thereby it can be fairly deduced that for gaining wisdom and expressing intellect, the natural resources have provided stable platform, especially to the tribal people. Keeping aside the other narrative genres, the class of proverbs has been focused to place the point of the paper because the role of these natural resources in respect of the proverbs is very apparent. So, considering the land, the forest, and the water as the three prime natural resources; a categorical selection of three proverbs based on land, water, and forest is made to keep the point. These proverbs derive their origin and existence directly from the natural resources. At the first place, based on land a Galo proverb says:

*Abo ge bome rikse yoye dobesin,
Tade kosum lo ruyum lajuka;
Abo ge isi namsum e yomyum dobesin,
Menggo retem lo derem lajuka.*

Translation

Even if our father's little field be uneven,
Let us huddle in its corner and grow;
Even if our father's home be unfortunate,
Let us align with ancient wisdom and go ahead.

Implication

The proverb is a wake-up call for loyalty to one's society and tradition. The circumstances and conditions under which we are born may not always be favourable, but one should stick to one's place and be loyal to it. One should be able to create heaven in one's own place as happiness and contentment are within the bound of place and circumstances, where there is a society with a tradition of its own. *Abo's bome rikse* is symbolic of the little portion of ancestral land that a father bequeaths to his sons. Though the inherited land may be a small one but in the eyes of the inheriting sons, that little portion of land has great traditional and cultural significance that yields respect for the inheriting sons in the society. Similarly, *Abo's isi namsum* is the symbolic little hut that the sons are likely to inherit from their father. Like the little piece of ancestral land having great social significance, the inherited homes are also seen respectfully in the Galo society. In general, any

inheritance, even if it be a small one, like a little land or a small home, has great traditional and customary values. Based on river, another Galo proverb runs:

*Buro leyyi e tayek bupam be,
Tayek bupam e buro leyyi be*

Translation

Deep water turns into a shallow one,
Shallow water changes into a deep one.

Implication

The proverb implies the capriciousness of fate and the changeability of fortune is symbolized through the changing of deep water into shallow and vice versa. In the proverb, *tayek* is a kind of cat fish symbolizing shallowness and *buro* is a mythical aquatic creature symbolizing depth. *Tayek* is often found in shallow water and thus has become symbol for shallowness whereas *buro*, being a mythical creature is believed to reside in the unfathomable depth of water bodies. Basing on this belief, *buro* is considered symbolic of depth. Again, based on forest another proverb goes:

*Liro gite la dumbo reyu la,
Hiro gite la bega nyigrok la,
Paayom tidi la tumpo mirja la,
Raayom tidi la libo nyomor la.*

Translation

If the rocks are large and strong, deer bear majestic horns;
If the trees are big and sound, monkeys possess sunken eyes;
If the forest is dark and deep, bears develop sumptuous manes;
If the jungle is thick and dense, squirrels grow luxurious tails.

Implication

The rocky mountains, the trees, the forest and the jungle are home of deer (*dumbo*), the monkey (*bega*), the bear (*tumpo*), and the squirrel (*libo*). Without these natural entities, the existence of these animals is not possible at all. Unless these entities are safe, the lives dependent on them are unsafe. In the proverb, the lives of animals are drawn to give a symbolic reference to human life. If the surrounding is insecure, life itself is not safe. Majestic horns (*reyu la*), sunken eyes (*nyigrok la*), sumptuous manes (*mirja la*), and luxurious tails (*nyomor la*); all symbolize ripe old age and thus fullness of life. But this fullness of life is attainable only when the rocks are large and strong (*liro gite la*) to shelter the deer, the trees are big and sound (*hiro gite la*) to give secure home to monkey, the forest is dark and deep (*paayom tidi la*) to ascertain the full life of bear, and the jungle is dense enough (*raayom tidi la*) to keep the squirrel guarded. Thus, by keeping a parallel with the lives in Nature, the human life is hinted to be safe only when the home and vicinity are safe.

Nature is the greatest resource of tribal peoples from where they derive not only livelihood but wisdom also, in particular, the Galo people. The existence of these three proverbs is examples to prove that the tribal people are also depended intellectually on the natural resources. These proverbs show that they are born from the womb of Nature and are surviving still in its lap. If the resources nurturing them are intact, the relevance of these proverbs lives, but if the resources are disturbed and destroyed, these proverbs lose their relevance and die out permanently. The death of a proverb may have little significance but the death of narratives that are born out of age-old custom and tradition has no little significance. And this is that significance this paper tries to drive home. The land, the water, and the forest are resources and from these resources, the tribal people, like the Galo of Arunachal, have derived their wisdom. The wisdom derived from these resources is the storehouse from where the Galo narratives are emanated. But under the impact of development designs forwarded by the state, there is chance that these resources may be affected adversely, thereby affecting the tribal world negatively, particularly, the tribal narratives.

II. Discussion

In case of Arunachal Pradesh, several hydropower projects are in the plan with the view to enrich the state exchequer. A study shows that the assessed hydroelectric power of the Northeast India is 63,257 MW, which is 43% of the hydropower potential of the country. Out of 63,257 MW, Arunachal alone has a share of 50,328 MW; perhaps country's biggest hydropower player. With such a promising scope, the state has decided to do business in power sector. Today, the state has 132 hydropower projects with total installed capacity of 40, 140 MW already allotted by the state government to private and public sector power operators. The figure gives a clear picture that the installation of these projects is likely to cause imbalance of land, water, and forest

resources. This imbalance further would result in degradation of the habitable areas of flora and fauna. In the EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) report of Tato-II Hydro-Electric Project (THEP), it is stated that this 700 MW project, to be executed in Tato circle of West Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh; is estimated to have a total catchment area of 2,560 sq km. If a mere 700 MW project is responsible for the loss of such a huge area, then the magnitude of resource loss is unimaginable if Arunachal is to harness its full hydropower potential of 50,328 MW. The development of this extent of power will result in the submergence of untold area under forest coverage, where thousands of creatures are safely sheltered.

From the safety of these various creatures, the question of the death of proverbs in the context can be drawn back. There is no negation that execution of hydropower projects in Arunachal would lead to depletion of biodiversity-rich ecosystems. And it is from these rich ecosystems that the age-old proverbs of Galo were born. Though there are proverbs having different origin context, but the proverbs which originated from these resources would severely be afflicted under hydropower development designs. Afflictions aside, there is a direct threat to their survival and existence. Such proverbs are on the verge of extinction. At the very outset, on account of power projects, there would be land loss where too many ancestral fields would be lost. For example, the Kaptai dam, built in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in the 1960s, submerged the traditional homelands of the Hajong and Chakma indigenous communities, and forced them to migrate into parts of Northeast India. Over the years, this has led to serious conflicts between the refugees and local communities in Arunachal Pradesh. In the 1970s, the Gumti dam in Tripura submerged large tracts of arable land in the Raima Valley and displaced the local tribal population, leading to unrest. If there is such land loss and displacement of ancestral land, with what context a proverb like

Abo ge bome rikse yoye dobesin,

Tade kosum lo ruyum lajuka;

Abo ge isi namsum e yomyum dobesin,

Menggo retem lo derem lajuka;

would exist? Where would be that intellectual justification? What ideological base it would have?

Besides land displacement, the hydropower projects would have its assaults on the water bodies too. Examples are the 2,700 MW Lower Siang project, and the 2,000 MW Lower Subansiri project located in the Arunachal foothills just before these rivers enter the plains. The reservoir of the 2,000 MW Lower Subansiri project will submerge a 47 km length of the Subansiri river while the 2,700 MW Lower Siang project will submerge a 77.5 km length of the Siang river. The above-mentioned projects will also cause drastic daily fluctuation in river flows downstream due to power generation patterns, particularly in winter. Even the EIA report of the 1750 MW Demwe Lower Project in Lohit district is completely silent on the downstream impacts of the project on critically endangered grassland birds such as the Bengal Florican in the Lohit river basin. Projects such as the Loktak Hydroelectric Project commissioned in the 1980s in Manipur, have impacted the wetland ecology of the Loktak lake in Manipur, seriously affecting the habitat of the endangered Sangai (the brow-antlered deer) and the livelihoods of local people. In the Lower Subansiri project on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border, the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) spent six days doing an additional study and then made surprising statements such as: "...The long and vast water body thus created by the reservoir will be happy haunt for aquatic creatures." Such misleading statement from a reputed governmental organisation like ZSI certainly fingers at the State's lopsided approach in so-called public welfare developments. It is well known that native aquatic species, whose habitats are fast-flowing rivers, do not find the still waters of a reservoir a 'happy haunt.' While reservoirs may benefit exotic species that are introduced for fisheries, such introduction has very often proved to be detrimental to the native species. Similarly, there would be countless such other cases where there is threat to lives. No doubt the rivers would feed these projects but would lose their aquatic habitats at the same time. This loss of habitats would result in the absence of lives in the rivers. In such an altered riverscape, it would become hard to look for the meaning of the proverb such as:

Buro leyyi e tayek bupam be,

Tayek bupam e buro leyyi be.

Then again there is the issue of forest. In the face of development, forest suffers the most. All development perspectives lead to the displacement of thousands of hectares of forest. Whatever is the case, forest is a resource and if lost, it would have a direct assault on the proverbs like:

Liro gite la dumba reyu la,

Hiro gite la bega nyigrok la,

Paayom tidi la tumpo mirja la,

Raayom tidi la libo nyomor la.

With the process of development, if there is depletion of forest; (which certainly shall be there if hydropower projects are to come true) then there would be no large and strong rocks (*liro gite*) to shelter the *dumbo* (deer), no big and sound trees (*hiro gite*) to give secure home to *bega* (monkey), no dark and deep forest (*paayom tidi*) to ascertain the security of *tumpo* (bear), and no dense jungle (*raayom tidi*) to keep the *libo* (squirrel) guarded. Not only the *dumbo* or *bega* or *tumpo* or *libo*, but mass species extinction would be there. In that scenario, where do the Galo people look to find their inspiring *dumbo* or *bega* or *tumpo* or *libo* to explain the proverbial meaning to the progeny? Were these *dumbo*, *bega*, *tumpo*, and *libo* created by Nature just for a time being to establish one Galo proverb only? The answer is absurd. That time is not very far when such proverbs would be seen in the pages of history alone.

III. Conclusion

The above discussion amplifies that in the proverbs used by the Galo people from time immemorial, the resources like land, water, and forest; serve as a fertile ground for their germination. Within the framework of Galo oral tradition, there are numerous proverbs that derive their origin and sustenance from these resources. But, under the impact of developmental activities initiated by the state, sometimes these resources are adversely affected and consequently, there are reverse effects on the existence of these proverbs too; whose survival solely depends on the survival of these resources. As such, the developmental paradigm envisaged by the state, though positive and constructive in many ways, has its negative side too; which overlooked, can prove costly to age-old tribal customs and traditions. The development designs have assaults not only upon the physical side of things but also upon the intellectual side. The vanishing Galo proverbs are living examples on intellectual assaults. This way, the connection between tribes, their resources, and state at times becomes a major challenge along the path of development, especially, if development is seen one-sidedly.

References

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