

Tribal Livelihoods in Transition and Social Development: The Konyak Tribe of Nagaland

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Abstract

Tribal livelihoods are uniquely and intricately shaped by the social relations and norms of their society. They are inextricably linked to the specific social, economic and political contexts. This paper focuses on the livelihood challenges of the *Konyak* tribals of Nagaland as a result of the changing contexts and their relationship with social development. These changing contexts have caused the gradual demise and transformation of some of the traditional livelihoods. Most importantly, there are changes in the society and social relations around which their identity as individuals and members of a society is based. There are factors and agencies both internal and external that play various roles in the tribal livelihoods and they are inextricably linked with social development. Social Development could be looked at from a perspective of “regional modernities” whereby it simultaneously repudiates and acknowledges the unevenness of the Eurocentric dictates on the notion of development. It gives voice to the sub-altern and propagates plurality. According to the indicators used by the government, the *Konyak* tribe ranks the lowest in the human development index amongst all the tribes in Nagaland. They are identified as a “backward” tribe. Although the *Konyak* tribal society is marked with its own set of specificities, their experiences can also find resonance with the various tribal groups in the country that have found themselves caught in a similar livelihood and societal transition. It is critical for civil society, voluntary organizations and the government that are concerned for social development to critically understand and analyse the process of transition and the challenges they pose.

Keywords: Konyaks, Nagaland, Tribal Livelihood, Social Development, Transition

Livelihoods of the tribal people are faced with the challenge of transition from traditional livelihood systems to a newer economy in a globalizing world.¹ This problem is very acute in rural areas like Mon district of Nagaland. According to the indicators used by the government, *Konyak* tribe ranks the lowest in the human development index amongst all other the tribes in Nagaland. The changes and challenges vis-à-vis livelihoods and the strategies these tribes adopt to meet them provide an interesting area of study.

Tribal livelihoods are uniquely and intricately shaped by the social relations and norms of their society. It is inextricably linked to the specific social as well as economic and political contexts. This paper brings to focus the numerous challenges the *Konyak*

¹ S Corbridge, “The Ideology of Tribal Economy and Society: Politics in the Jharkhand, 1950-1980”, *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 1(1988): 1-42.

tribals of Nagaland confront in their livelihoods because of the changing contexts. It describes the transition of the livelihoods and the changes in the society. These changes are especially due to linkages with the market economy amongst others. As part of the strategy for meeting the challenges, they have to re-orient themselves according to the demands of the market. This has caused the dying and transformation of some of the traditional livelihoods. And most importantly there are changes in social relations around which their identity as individuals and members of a society is based. The internal and external factors and agencies that play various roles in the tribal livelihoods and the inter-linkages with social development are highlighted. Social Development could be looked at from a perspective of “regional modernities” whereby it simultaneously repudiates and acknowledges the unevenness of the Eurocentric dictates on the notion of development.² It appreciates the post colonial and post development framework of giving voices to the sub-altern and propagating plurality. However, it recognizes that just because the “modernization” and “development” has its origins in the Euro-west, it need not necessarily entail following the path of “advancement” as defined under the Theories of Modernization and Development. While such ideas can influence a society, their ideals may not be pursued in order to transform or define a society as “modern”.

Although the *Konyak* tribal society is marked with its set of specificities it can also relate to the various tribals in the country that have found themselves caught in a livelihood and societal transition particularly because of its linkage with the market economy. There are numerous challenges posed because of such transitions. It is critical for social work professionals, civil society, voluntary organizations and the government concerned for social development to critically understand and analyse the process of transition.

Locating the Konyak Nagas

The word *Konyak* was applied by the British to a large and not in the least homogenous ethnic group.³ It is derived from the word *Keniak* which means “man” in a small number of villages of the Konyak Tribe. The tribe is broadly distinguished into two groups - *thendu* and *thenkoh*. There were differences between the two groups in their material lives, social classes, cultural and linguistic lines although even within the groups there are large variations and so on. The differences in the material lives were in the structure of the huts constructed on the fields, types of *daos*⁴ used, clothing worn, and settlement and housing pattern and so on. While the practice of tattooing could be found in both *thendu* and *thenkoh* groups, faces were tattooed only in the *thendu* group. A unique feature of the Konyak tradition is the practice of the *Angh* system. It is an autocratic system of governance where the political and economic authority is held by the *Angh* or Chief. The *Anghs* in the *thendu* villages were very powerful

² V Gidwani and K Sivaramakrishnan, “Circular migration and the spaces of Cultural Assertion”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no. 1(March 2003): 186-213.

³ C.V. Haimendorf, *Konyak Nagas: An Indian Frontier Tribe* (University of London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston,1969)

⁴ A broad sharpened iron blade with a wooden handle used as a multi-purpose tool for household as well as field utilities.

with the final authority on any decision making for the entire village resting on him. With economic and political power resting in Angh and his clan members, the unequal power relations were apparent in the village. The villagers of Chi would work in the Angh's fields during the times of clearing, sowing and harvest. These were the localized structures of power and the economic and political power was vested in the Angh.⁵ At present, under the article 371 (A) of the Indian constitution, the localised structures of power maintain the authority with regards to customary laws and procedures of the ownership and transfer of land and its resources along with others.⁶

Similar to the other Naga tribes the *Konyaks* had the system of *Morungs* or *Baan*. These were bachelors' halls where discussions and decisions regarding their social, political and economic life were taken by men and young boys initiated into the way of living of the village. In the thendu villages, the social relations were marked by the specified way in which people belonging to different classes in the hierarchy- the *Angh*, the members of the *Angh's* morung and the commoners, were supposed to interact. These differences in social status were lesser in the thenkoh villages where the chiefs did not dominate the social and political life. Women were not allowed in the morung. It was said that the morung being a place to discuss political issues and take decisions relating the village and sometimes on war was not a place for women. It was a patriarchal society where the eldest son inherited the family property.

One of the well-known Konyak villages in Mon district is Chi (officially recorded as Chui) village. It lies 7.5 kilometers away from Mon town, the district headquarter of Mon district. As a result, tourists and visitors regularly come to the village. It is a village of two hundred and fourteen households and a population of three thousand one hundred and twenty, with one thousand six hundred forty males and one thousand four hundred eighty females as per the 2011 Census of India.

Like most *Naga* tribal villages, the *Konyak* village of Chi is still located strategically on the hilltops. In the past, when there were raids and wars between villages, their vantage point helped in spotting the raiders and enemies from a far off distance. Their previous settlement was at a lower level, but because of frequent raids on their village, they moved up to the present locale.

Another differentiation was between the *Pin* (the commoner) and the *Wang* (the clans of the Angh morung). When the villagers went together to the forest, the *Pin* and *Wang* would sit separately for their meal. And the articles for taking their meals like plates and cups would not be shared between the commoners and the members of the *Angh's* clan. Men and women also did not sit together for meals or share plates and cups with members of the other sex. Differentiation was also found in the morung between different batches or *Ais*. The members were categorized in batches or *Ais* according to age groups that usually ranged for those born within three years of each other. Sometimes the batch included members born within a period of up to six years

⁵ Alavi, "Structure of Colonial Formation", *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 10/12 (March, 1981): 475-486.

⁶ Burman and B.K. Roy, *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples: Gathering mist and new horizon* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1994).

if there were fewer members in the batch. In the morung, the elders were treated with great respect by the younger members. Everyone in the morung carried their own plates and cups and these articles would not be shared. The aspect of differentiation in the social status was seen in the *Jhum* practices. Before any villagers build the field huts, the Angh's hut would be first built. The same applied when it was time for sowing and harvesting the rice. The Angh's field had to start the activities before the other villagers could do the same.

Apart from the social classes and clans, the social relationships within the family were marked by differentiation in that the eldest sons in the family inherited the land and all other property. The parents also stayed with the eldest son and his family in the paternal house. So the younger brothers had no share of the family fields. As such, they paid rent to cultivate the fields on lease. Rent was traditionally paid in kind. However, with the introduction of money by the British the silver rupee and smaller coins started being used for paying rent. This social relationship in the family transcended to the economic realm and affected their livelihoods. The wealthy families in the village also rented their plots for cultivation. Rich families were found not only in the ruling clans but also among the commoners. However, the wealthy families from the clans of the Angh morung were accorded a higher degree of respect. Such families were looked up to by the poorer families for help in form of leasing out of land.

The traditional livelihoods of the *Konyaks* in Chi village were organized around land, nature and community. Agriculture was the main source of livelihood in Chi. From the beginning where omens were read to decide where the cultivation would take place, to clearing the fields, weeding and harvesting, it was marked with the distinction of collective effort. However, with labor being commodified and co-dependence giving way to wages, the collective essence of *Jhum* has reduced to being individual pursuits. Agricultural labor is employed and wages paid to them for clearing, weeding and harvesting. At all these stages money is involved where earlier mutual help used to be provided. Earlier for harvest each morung member would work together to harvest the crop for the individual families. At present, families hire vehicles to carry the harvest back to the village. And community effort for helping the lesser wealthy families are fading. Earlier, the morung lands used to be cultivated by the morung members. Even the sisters of the boys of the morung helped in the cultivation. The yield was used during feasts given by the morung for all the morung members. In the village, it has been some years since the cultivation of the morung lands has been discontinued and the lands have remained uncultivated though they are still under the ownership of the morungs. Group activity like basketry where men sat together in the morungs weaving baskets while discussing various matters concerning their village have become individualised activities which they carry out in their respective homes. Such activities were traditionally inseparably interlinked with the social life. Presently, one can find men weaving with bamboo at their own homes preoccupied with other activities to earn money to meet their needs and no time to engage in group activities.

There were other traditional livelihoods like bamboo craft, woodwork, pottery, black smithy and weaving. To fulfill their subsistence requirements like construction of individual houses as well as community structures like the morungs, woodwork or bamboo work, for food and cooking purposes, for providing fodder to the animals and construction of enclosures for animals, they drew materials from the forest without its exploitation. A marked characteristic of traditional livelihoods is the domestic utility of such work. These pursuits were for house hold consumption and the surplus was either bartered or sold and the money used to buy essential items.

Traditionally, the activities apart from Jhum were all considered subsidiary acts to be occupied within their free time when they had completed their daily work in the fields. Especially after harvest during the months of September and October when the *Konyaks* did not have to work in the fields, they would engage more with their subsidiary activities. No one was engaged full time in the subsidiary works and their primary focus was agriculture. For this reason everyone was known as an agriculturalist and not as a weaver or basket maker or potter even though they engaged in such work. Except maybe for black-smithy which required more specialized craftsmanship and by virtue of there being only a few black smiths, they were more engaged in making tools and implements for the use of the villagers. Beadwork, cloth-making and black smithy were for simple household consumption, barter or when they were sold it was for simple trade and not as generalized commodity production. However, there are changes that are taking place.

Tribal Livelihoods in Transition

Livelihoods are inseparable from the social, economic and political contexts which mould and affect them.⁷ The change in these conditions and the contact with outsiders has brought a shift in the livelihoods that the *Konyaks* used to practice traditionally. The most observable change is the varieties of activities that people now find themselves engaged in. Livelihood production strategies are “complex, diverse, dynamic and draw on a variety of resources in combination”.⁸ Ellis-Jones and Mason⁹ highlights various strategies used by the rural people in Bolivia for their livelihoods. They are risk minimizing strategies; crisis management, production management strategies and strategies to increase agricultural productivity. These strategies include migration, making use of the available resources, connecting themselves better to the market and availing of the provisions of the government and so on. For Ellis,¹⁰ one of the strategies for survival of the rural livelihoods is through livelihood diversification. There are individual livelihood diversification and household livelihood diversification. He

⁷ K Polanyi, “The Economy as an Instituted Process”, in *Trade and Market in Early Empires: Economics in History and Theory*, ed. Karl Polanyi, Conrad Arensberg and Harry Pearson, (Glencoe: Free Press, 1957)

⁸ J Bury, “Livelihoods in transition: Transnational gold mining operations and local change in Cajamarca, Peru”, *The Geographic Journal* 170, no. 1 (March 2004): 78-91.

⁹ Ellis-Jones and T Mason, “Livelihood Strategies and Assets of Small Farmers in the Evaluation of Soil and Water Management Practices in the Temperate Inter-Andean Valleys of Bolivia”, *Mountain Research and Development* 19, no. 3 (1991): 221-234.

¹⁰ F Ellis, *Rural Livelihoods and Diversity in Developing countries* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

defines the diversification as “the process by which households construct a diverse portfolio of activities and social support capabilities for survival and in order to improve their standard of living.”¹¹ However, there is an inequality in the ability of using diversification as a strategy. The differences in social status, wealth and more recently in education and acquired skills determine the way in which people are able to face challenges or prospects in the livelihoods. And the differentiation of social relations of the Konyaks plays a factor in this scenario.

The transition in livelihoods encompasses movement away from agriculture towards non-agricultural work, from unpaid towards paid work, and from household-based to more individualized labor activities. None of these observed tendencies can be understood as uni-linear and are yet to be explored fully.

While the Konyaks have taken up new livelihoods they still engage in the traditional livelihoods. Presently, the degree of specialization in the works is not very pronounced and the traditional and new livelihoods are not vastly different from each other in the sense that both are labor intensive. Gender based division of labour still remains. Women continue not to be engaged in the traditional domain of men’s work like basket making, black smithy and construction of field huts. And men do not take up collecting taro from the fields, weaving, and pottery and so on which are considered women’s work. In the new livelihoods this division has continued and men would never sell garments, sew clothes or carry the produce from the field and forest for selling them in the town’s market etc. And women would not be found working as village guards, masons, drivers or handymen.

There have been some changes in the traditional livelihoods and addition of newer livelihoods. A shift can be seen in the livelihoods that earlier was largely characterized by the subsistence agriculture and communal nature of livelihoods. There is a movement towards a commercialization of agriculture and general commodity production of cash crops. Also, the subsidiary livelihood activities like selling forest and field produce, beadwork, weaving and so on are linked to the town which has become a market for their products. A characteristic of subsidiary works is that it is easy to discontinue and is temporal in nature. A person engaged in making baskets might not be able to make more than two to three baskets a year due to some other work demanding his attention and time. A woman might be engaged in making beadwork and because of lack of time required to put into such work, give it up to sell field produce in the town instead with more immediate benefits. At the same time it is common to engage in two to three subsidiary activities. The transition in the livelihoods is visible in the way the traditional livelihoods are presently being practiced, their relationship with the religious beliefs, and social relations in the village, taking up of new livelihoods and changes in the factors affecting the livelihoods, and so on.

Schermerhorn¹² had commented that tribal people place little value on surplus accumulation and instead places more importance on immediate consumption.

¹¹ Ellis, *Rural Livelihoods and Diversity in Developing countries*

¹² R.A. Schermerhorn, *Ethnic plurality in India* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1978)

However, a change in the approach towards consumption, and their increasing needs is visible. And agriculture is rapidly becoming incapable of meeting their increasing needs. In order to look for ways of meeting those needs, some of them have also taken to cash crop cultivation. They cultivate cardamom but their efforts and dedication are mostly given to agricultural work. In the upper *Konyak* areas, most of the villages are taking up cardamom plantation, and in the lower areas, tea plantation is being taken up. The governmental and non-governmental agencies work towards pushing these people to explore cash crop cultivation. Self-help groups have been formed for such work. They are new to such dealings like finding buyers and setting a price according to the current value. It is a daunting task because of lack of market knowledge. In such a scenario they are left to find buyer for a crop unfamiliar to them. They end up selling them at throw away prices not knowing how much their crops were worth. Such half-hearted attempts of these agencies have also adversely impacted their livelihoods.

Livelihoods and Social Development

Social development is a term which has not been definitively conceptualized in a way as to wholesomely capture its essence.¹³ Cleveland and Jacobs¹⁴ persuade an orientation of social development that is people centered and which understands the way a society runs and organizes itself. Up till now, the focus of social development has been on an econometric paradigm, its instruments and the results which are quantifiable - laws, policies, institutions, etc. The emphasis should be on the social processes.

Complimentarily, the conceptual and empirical research on livelihoods today is taking a shift towards a more integrated context-specific grassroots approach. Since the emphasis of such an approach is on working with people and their existing strengths and constraints, it is important to understand the importance of different livelihoods to different people. Also it is important to understand the way people and communities develop strategies to exploit diversity and opportunity and cope with risk, uncertainty and vulnerability within their day-to-day lives.¹⁵

In Rural Livelihood Systems Research Project undertaken by Baumgartner and Hogger¹⁶, a design was developed which focused on two aspects: the first was the complex nature of traditional rural livelihood systems and the role of natural resources, and the second emphasis was on the perceptions and strategies by which farmers try and adapt to these systems in a continuously changing physical, social and political environment. Similarly, it should be embraced with an understanding that the success

¹³ J Cole, *More to life than Economics and Livelihoods: The Politics of Social Protection and Social Development in Post-apartheid South Africa*, (Working Paper 13, Mandlovu Development Institute: Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies, 2009).

¹⁴ H Cleveland and G Jacobs, "Human Choice: The Genetic Code for Human Development", *Futures* 31, no. 9 (1999): 959-970.

¹⁵ C Twyman, "Livelihood Opportunity and Diversity in Kalahari Wildlife Management Areas, Botswana: Rethinking Community Resource Management", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no. 4 (2000): 783-806.

¹⁶ R Baumgartner and R Hogger, R, "The RLS approach in project cycle management", in *Search of Sustainable Livelihood Systems Managing Resources and Change*, ed. Ruedi Baumgartner and Rudolf Hogger, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004).

of any approach to improving access to resources and empowerment of disadvantaged population will depend on a holistic livelihoods perspective as well as the people's capacities to use the options and opportunities. These options should be attuned to the livelihood strategies of the people themselves.

While attempting to locate livelihoods in a village it is important to know that a village is affected by its ties with other villages in terms of economic and social specialization, marital ties, religious and political organization and so on. Political and economic forces of the larger society also directly affect the village.¹⁷ Another factor is the physical location of the village. Rosser¹⁸ notes the inaccessibility of the Malana village in Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh as directly affecting the village's social organization, negligence by the government officials and a different kind of autonomy of the village.

Tribal economies have been looked at through modernization theories. Modernization of agriculture is taken to be a necessary part of a successful transition. The closer a traditional society shares with the "western ways", the sooner the society would be towards becoming an "advanced society". Regional Modernities view modernity in a way that factors in the role of all the specificities of a community in charting its own modernity. It expounds that modernity can vary from place to place depending on the dynamics of specific geographical, cultural, historical, socio-economic and political factor. A specific kind of modernity can be manifested depending on a particular community. There need not be a predetermined course of modernization. It is unlike Modernization Theory and its Euro-centric conception of modernity which dictates the kind of path a society has to undertake in order to qualify as "modern". Regional Modernities view modernity and development as geographically and historically uneven.¹⁹ While it acknowledges the western contribution to the origination or construction of the initial idea of "modern" and "development" which it transferred through colonialism and neo-colonialism, it also repudiates it on the grounds that the interpretation and manifestation of such ideas may differ from place to place according to the specific context.

The course of modernity of the *Konyaks* is different from the national and the Euro-west idea of modernization. There is a unique mix of social relations, geographical backdrop, and local structures of power in the Angh and presently in the newer institutions of village decision making, the reaction of the community to being deprived of "socio-economic development". It was generally accepted that the poor in the village needed the wealthy in order to survive and in return the poor would also provide their service to them. Presently, with people moving out of the village and sending remittances, there is also a tilt in such social relations. Even though not all work outside the village are comfortable and might not be very profitable the

¹⁷ M.N. Srinivas, M.N., "Introduction", in *India's Villages. West Bengal*, Ed. M.N. Srinivas (West Bengal Government Press, 1955)

¹⁸ Rosser, "A Kullu village", in *India's Villages. West Bengal*, Ed. M.N. Srinivas (West Bengal Government Press, 1955)

¹⁹ V Gidwani and K Sivaramakrishnan, "Circular Migration and the Spaces of Cultural Assertion", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no. 1 (March 2003): 186-213.

prestige of working in the town itself creates a new identity of self-dependence. A distinctive brand of modernity is being manifested. Slowly there are instances when women, youth and the community have articulated and asserted their needs. This includes questioning leadership and authority. There are talks running underneath of government funds being siphoned off by those in leadership positions for their own individualistic gains. This was seen from the affluence of the leaders. The villagers did not know of the Below Poverty Line cards they were entitled to. Some of them expressed dismay that the leaders in the village had been withholding this right from them. However, few and far between these instances may be and sometimes in an unorganized way, it is in essence demanding accountability from those in authority and this is a big leap for a traditionally autocratic society.

Earlier plots of cultivable land which was the dominant means of production would be owned by the wealthy families and by the eldest male sons of the family and leased to the poorer families and their younger brothers that did not own lands. With other opportunities in the form of newer livelihoods coming up there has been a tilt in the social relations. With the coming up of the town nearby, people have other means to survive and not on land alone. The traditionally wealthy and land owning families do not have economic power over the other families. The localized structures of power in the village with the economic and political power in the Angh and the powerful families of the Angh clans have slowly been diluted with the coming of the newer structures of power of the civil administration.

Conclusion

Brunner²⁰ locates “various economic avenues” to exploit the natural resources of Nagaland and rest of the North East Region. He proposes investments in this area towards the end of economic development. The direction that he suggests is towards structural changes and capitalistic in nature given the stress on privatization and placing the region in the global economy. However, Wilson and Wyn²¹ are apprehensive about such structural changes. According to them such a process would lead to not just a new form of economy but also a basic reorganization of the workforce and also the nature of work. Consequently, there would be a major redistribution of wealth favoring the corporations and the owners or decision makers of these corporations. Shifts in the nature of workforce would also mean that with technological advancements, machines and computers would substitute human labor. These tendencies would be strengthened by the continuation of monetarist policies. This would lead to a fundamental struggle between the ones gaining out of this process and others whose right to livelihood is increasingly being marginalized. Consequently, along with the change in the patterns of investment and industrial organization there will be an increasing division between the have and have not. Also, technology is not culture neutral and as long as

²⁰ Brunner Hans- Peter, “Economic challenge meets trade-driven development in India’s north east region”, in *North East India-local Economic Development and Global Markets*, ed. Brunner Hans- Peter (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010).

²¹ B Wilson and J Wyn, “Livelihood and Social Division”, *British Journal of Sociology of education* 6, no. 3 (1985): 273-288.

it cannot be well integrated into the unique systems of each region, it poses a threat to the population.²² In Orissa, adoption of sophisticated technology during land survey and settlement operations, coupled with non-recognition of the traditional system of regulation of access to and management of resources as prevailing among the concerned population, has led to massive dispossession of tribal communities from their age-old resources. In Karbi Anglong of Assam, the adverse effects of the nearby cement plant on the forest environment, agriculture and health of the people of the area could be seen.

Tribal societies are traditionally economies with simple production which is characterized by self consumption and simple trade.²³ The production in such economies was mainly for self-consumption and the surplus was used for exchange. Their social, cultural and religious life is closely tied with their economic life. Tribal economy was and is mostly dependent on land and forest. It is critical to understand their past and present context for any approach to work towards their developmental potential.

Mandelbaum (1970) notes for the tribal people collective living as a community used to be the hallmark of the village. An unmistakable change in the livelihoods is the slow erosion of the communal nature of work and shift in the focus on the individual. It is strongly visible in their main livelihood of Jhumming which earlier used to be an innately communal work. Such changes points to something wrong with the way “development” is brought in to their society. Co-operation and interdependence are essential for fostering any social development and they are especially critical when the Konyaks are facing the challenges of livelihood transitions.

²² B Chaudhari, B, “Role of Tribal crafts in Tribal Economy”, in *Tribal Transformation in India*, ed. B Chaudhari (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1992).

²³ S Corbridge, “The Ideology of Tribal Economy and Society: Politics in the Jharkhand, 1950-1980”, *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 1 (1988): 1-42.