

## An Analytical Study on Tribal Economy of Assam with special reference to Goalpara District

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### ABSTRACT

Tribals are the part and parcel of rest of the society. They have been contributing the society in almost all levels of fields, including the economy, basically characterized as subsistence oriented; but an economy of their own having a great speciality. To have transition from traditional to modern economy, tribal people have been trying their level best; but they have yet to go miles. Through this paper it is intended to summarise economy of the tribal communities of Assam with special reference to Goalpara district. Like other regions, the tribal people of Goalpara district, in these days, with socio-political aspirations, are expanding their traditional socio-economic activities, transforming these to modern technology-oriented activities.

**Key words :** Tribal economy, Goalpara district, the Rabhas, the Garos, tribal produce.

### INTRODUCTION

It bears a global connotation that tribals are part and parcel of rest of the society. They have been contributing the society in almost all levels of fields, including the economy. Though tribal economy is basically characterized as subsistence oriented; it has been an economy of their own having a great speciality. This inspires the researchers and scholars to study the subject matter of tribal economy.

The term 'tribe' is derived from the Latin word 'tribus' (the tripartite division of Romans into Latins, Sabines, and Etruscans), which means a social group bound by common ancestry and ties of consanguinity, state of being related by blood or descended from a

common ancestor (Columbia Electronic Encyclopaedia, 2007.)

The word 'tribus' was also used for tribal. In ancient Greece and Rome, the word tribal represented any group of political and demographic subdivisions of the population (Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia, 2008.)

While taking account of the implications of such homely synonyms as simple society, pre-industrial society, or folk society, a satisfactory characterization of tribal society must therefore concentrate upon criteria of form rather than of content. Here the most useful general criterion is that of scale (Wilson, *et al.*, 1965.)

According to Oxford Dictionary, A

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tribe is a group of people in a primitive or barbarous stage of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding them as having a common ancestor." The present study has been conducted with the following objectives :

1. To find out a separate identity of tribal economy.
2. To focus on the economy of the tribal people of Assam as a whole and Goalpara district in particular.
3. To identify the economic activities and the produce of tribal people of this area.
4. To find out their socio-economic problems, responsible for their backwardness.
4. To outline a conclusion with some suggestions for the development of their economy.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This research paper is in the form of an explanatory study in analyzing the tribal economy and its potentiality in Assam as well as Goalpara district in terms of nature of the economy, economic activities and produce of tribal people. The present study is based on secondary data, collected from various sources like books, journal, magazine, reports, publications and internet sources. Personal observation is also put forward here. The techniques of synthesis have been applied to analyze the data and as such, the findings and conclusion have been sorted out.

### **Study Area**

Assam, a constituent State of India, is located in North Eastern part of the country and situated within the longitude 90° E to 96° E and latitude 24° N to 28° N. The area of the state is 78,438 sq. kms. The economy of Assam is mainly agrarian in nature. The population of the state is total 31.17 million according to 2011 census of which 1,52,14,345 are female. As regards sex ratio, it is 954 females per 1000 males as per report of 2011 census. Basic data on the position of women in the state vis-a-vis men reveals that there is a glaring inequality between them.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Tribal economy**

I.M Lewis believes that tribal societies exhibit a remarkable economy of design and have a compactness and self-sufficiency lacking in modern society.

Some anthropologists believe that tribes developed when more stable and increased economic productivity, brought on by the domestication of plants and animals, allowed more people to live together in a smaller area. A tribe may consist of several villages village, small rural population unit, held together by common economic and political ties. Based on agricultural production, a village is smaller than a town and has been the normal unit of community living in most areas of the world throughout history. (Lewis, 1961)

Economic relations are usually of the subsistence type, although trade and barter often extend outside the community. At the same time, economic differentiation and specialization are not developed, and by modern standards, technological knowledge and environmental control remain restricted.

Tribal economy is basically characterized as subsistence oriented. The subsistence economy is based mainly on collecting, hunting and fishing or a combination of hunting and collecting with shifting cultivation. Even the so-called plough using agricultural tribes do often supplement their economy with hunting and collecting. Simple technology, simple division of labour, small-scale units of production and no investment of capital characterize subsistence economy. Subsistence economy is imposed by circumstances, which are beyond the control of human beings, poverty of the physical environment, ignorance of efficient technique of exploiting natural resources and lack of capital for investment. It also implies existence of barter and lack of trade.

The activities of the traditional economy of the tribes, based on their eco-system and recent "impacts of modernization" may be classified as such: a) Hunting, collecting and gathering, b) Cattle-herding, c) Simple artisan, d) Hill and shifting cultivation, e) Settled

agriculture and f) Industrial urban works.

As far as the economy of Indian tribes is concerned, Mandelbaum mentions the following characteristics among others: a) Absence of strong, complex, formal organization, b) Communitarian basis of land holding, c) Little value on surplus accumulation on the use of capital and on market trading (Mandelbaum, 1972).

In the same line, T.B Naik has also given the following features: a) A tribe has least functional interdependence within the community, for a comparative geographical isolation of its people. b) It has economically backward (i.e. primitive means of exploiting natural resources, tribal economy should be at an underdeveloped stage and it should have multifarious economic pursuits) (Naik, 1956).

A detailed survey of the tribal economy and social organization reveals that diverse forms exist but there are some fundamental characteristic of tribal economy. These can be outlined as follows: a) Dependence on forests and natural environs, b) Unit of production, consumption and input of labour being the family, c) Simple technological base, d) Small profit base in economic dealings, e) The community working as a cooperative unit, f) Periodical markets and fairs at local and regional level, and g) Interdependence among various tribal groups.

Assam has been the abode of many tribes. Almost all tribal groups in Assam do practice agriculture as the situation is fit for. Most of the hill tribes used to practice shifting (jhum) cultivation and plain tribes do both, i.e., Jhum and general agriculture. Naturally, they earn their livelihood in a primitive way by means of exploiting natural resources in forests, lakes (beel) and other fields. They are expert in horticultural practices, catching and drying fishes, collecting forest resources, rearing poultry and cattle etc. The tribal economy in case of Assam is almost alike that in case of Goalpara district.

### **Tribal Economy of Goalpara district**

#### ***Tribal population in the district***

Goalpara is one of the backward districts in the state of Assam. The total population

of the district is in 2011 census is 1,008,183. Out of total rural population, the total number of tribal people are 1,13,401 (18.5 per cent approximately). They are mostly rural as the total number of rural people are 6,16,042 (75 per cent approximately). There are a number of tribal dominated villages in the district. The Rabhas, Bodos, Garos, Hajongs, as the indigenous tribal people, have been living in this rural locality since ages. Moreover, for the Rabhas along with other tribal communities, there is an Autonomous District Council, namely the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council and they have also been demanding this council as the Sixth Scheduled area. However, as the basic amenities are concerned, they are severely lagging behind still today.

### **Economic Activities**

A common feature of all these is the simple technological base, which allows for limited generation of surplus. The economic relations among the tribal themselves are mostly based on barter and exchange, based on the fact of interdependence amongst the different community. The basic economic activities of the tribals may be classified under the following heads.<sup>2</sup> (a) Food gathering, (b) Pastoral, (c) Shifting hill cultivation, (d) Handicrafts, (e) Cultivation, (f) Trade and Commerce, (g) Labour (Buddhadeb, 1982)

Many tribal groups have more than one economic activity. However, tribal regions are also famous for their traditional handicrafts and artesian skills. Weavers and other craftsmen have always occupied a special position in these societies. Many tribal communities also pursue wood and cane works, metal crafts and stone works.

There is a division between the sexes in terms of tasks performed. For example, in general, women do the sowing and cutting of paddy; whereas the ploughing and levelling fields is largely done by men.

Some tribal communities are also involved in trading activities.

The traditional economy of the Rabhas and Bodos in general, is based on agriculture, forest based activities and weaving.

In the past, the Rabhas used to practice shifting cultivation. They continued to cultivate the land with Go-go or billhook. Later they took up the job of settled cultivation and started cultivation with plough. Besides cultivation, hunting was also an old practice of Rabha people. Weaving was a traditional occupation of the Rabha women. (Mitra, 1953)

Today, one finds Rabhas in diverse occupations from forest workers and cultivators to all modern occupations like school teachers and government office bearers etc., though their number in white-collar jobs would not be very high.

#### **Agriculture and Allied Activities**

Precisely speaking, agriculture and horticulture form the backbone of the economy of tribes of the district. They have an agriculture-based economy. The main occupation of most of the tribal people is agriculture and allied activities. Some of the important crops that form a major part of the economy are Rice, Jute, Ginger, Sugarcane, Chilly, and Mustard etc. Common crops grown here include sesame seeds, castor seeds, mustard seeds, food grains (rice, pulses, maize etc...), pineapples, bananas, papayas, oranges etc. Plenty of the surplus crops passes on to the adjoining areas, where they are marketed elaborately.

The climate is ideal for the growth of a large number of horticultural crops like fruits and spices. Besides, the tribal areas are known for its production of fruits like Pineapples, Bananas, Oranges, etc.

The Southern part of the district is vastly covered with hills; adjacent to Meghalaya is quite rich in natural resources, particularly forest. The landscape of the district is made up of beautiful rock formations and many rivers. It has also the tourism potential in these areas. Most of these natural resources are extracted and sent outside the district only in raw form.

Unlike other tribals of the district, as the matrilineal society of the Garos, property passes from mother to daughter.

#### **Other Economic Activities**

It is already discussed that agriculture is

the principal occupation of the tribal people of Goalpara district. Besides agriculture, a substantial proportion of tribal people are engaged in fishing, forestry, mining and quarrying. Handicraft and handlooms are other major significant income and employment generating activities of the different groups of tribes.

**Weaving:** The most of the Rabha women are expert of spinning and weaving. They have developed their expertise in it to the extent that a fellow Mrs. Lady Rabha won the national prize in weaving. One may find that almost all the households do have their weaving appliances (Tant Sal). The varieties of products they produce, after keeping all the household requirements are sold either in market or in cooperative marketing societies.

**Sericulture:** Most of the tribes of the district used to have sericultural practices.

**Handicrafts:** The tribal people are traditionally experts of making many types of handicrafts. Among these, bamboo products are most remarkable.

**Pisciculture:** The tribes of Goalpara district are of common traditional Pisciculture practices. Many tribal people earn their livelihood with it.

**Rice Bear production and selling:** The tribal people have a socio-religious tradition of indigenous rice bear preparation. In these days, some of them used to prepare it in commercial purposes, through which they are earning a lot.

#### **Other Household Activities**

The tribal people have their very common household businesses of cattle farming, goatery, piggery and poultry farming. All these are used as ATM in their financial hard times. Some of them are involved in commercial mushroom production also.

**Food item collection:** The tribal women generally collect various food items, like leafy and other vegetables, fruits etc from forest and jungles. Out of which, they used to sale in local markets.

**Bamboo, Betel nuts, Orange farming:** Almost all tribal people have their own bamboo fields, horticulture of betel and nuts. In the hilly areas, they used to have orange farms, with a commer-

cial motto. They earn a lot from these commercially viable farms.

**Banana Plantation** - A big banana market has been growing up at Daranggiri under the aegis of Daranggiri Anchalik Unnayan Samiti since about 1973. Variety of bananas, e.g. Malbhog, Chenichampa, Kachkal etc from nearby villages, including Meghalaya are being gathered in weekly basis and at least 30 - 35 nos of loaded trucks are exported to other states and overseas. The process of marketing is kept open for whole the year. This market is recognized as

the largest banana market in Asia. It needs no mention that the producers of all the bananas are tribal people.

**Rubber Plantation** - A great success stories are being written in Goalpara district in lower Assam in case of rubber plantation and its production. In a very short period of time, it has got a remarkable position for its cultivating feasibility and viable financial prospects. It has also a complimentary character of alternative forestry.

**Table 1.** District wise Area and Production of Rubber in Assam during 2010-11

District	Area (in hectare)	Production (in MT)	Tapping Area (in hectare)
Goalpara	7394.08	1675	1056.00
Assam	27082.57	10213	7686.25

Source: The Rubber Board, Zonal office, Guwahati

The credit of the most of the plantation and production goes to the tribal people of the district.

**Tribal Produce:**

The Tribals collect a large number of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) to eke out their

livelihood / supplement their income. All forest products other than timber, firewood and bamboo are included under minor forest produce. The different types of MFP items collected by the tribals using very primitive methods are broadly set out as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Minor Forest Produce (MFP) collected by the tribals using very primitive methods

<i>Food and Beverage</i>	Mangoes, Jackfruit, kendu, tamarind, edible roots (Simalu Alu) and tubers, green leaves, mahua, date palm, salap juice and wild animals and rodents
<i>Oil seeds</i>	Cashew nuts, sal, neem, mahua, karanj, kusum, char and others
<i>Medicinal herbs</i>	Anantamool, chereita, dhunku, patal garuda, gaja pipal, amdantan, bhui nima, shekoy, dhaki flower, arrowroot honey, wild onum, nux vomica
<i>Fuel wood</i>	Brush wood and other woods
<i>Grass</i>	Broom grass sabai grass
<i>House building and Agricultural material</i>	Small timber, thatch grass, creepers and bamboo
<i>Household/Cottage Industries</i>	Siali leaves, arrowroot, karanj seeds, green bark, tamarind seeds, sabai grass, broom grass, tassar cocoons, honey, wax and bamboo
<i>Produce of economic importance</i>	Soapnut, honey and wax, tssar cocoons, mahua flowers, shikakai, kujila, neem, nageswar, sal seeds, simul cotton genduli gum, lac, char seeds, aswand, asok and sisal bark
<i>Fibers &amp; Fossiles</i>	Sialifibre, simul cotton, jungle jute, kharma creepers, swan creepers
<i>Tan &amp; Dye stuff</i>	Myrobalans, fenfena bark, sunaribark, sialibark, kakala bark, datari bark
<i>Leave</i>	Kendu leaves, sal leaves, siali leaves.

### Socio-Economic Problems

The colonial rulers deprived Rabhas, who once used to live in the forest and practice shifting cultivation, of their rights to the forest since the formation of forest department, banning on shifting cultivation and demarcation of forest boundaries. Consequently, with the colonial land settlement system, most of the displaced Rabhas either adopted settled cultivation as sharecroppers or took refuge in the forest villages as plantation labourers. After independence, Indian Government more or less continued the same colonial system of forest management, where the communities like Rabhas could not regain their rights to the forest. (Das, et.al., 1967)

The industrialization and economic changes have greatly influenced the traditional tribal economy. Deforestation, land grabbing by non-tribal, lack of infrastructure and technology has increased pressure on limited resources. The traditional and self-sufficient economy was greatly disturbed. Indebtedness of the tribal for various reasons has been one of the major problems of these areas. Consequently, large number of tribal was forced to look for livelihood outside. Now they are available for mines, factories and agricultural farms as labourers.

The meagre condition of tribal people may be recognized from the following indicators.

a) **Poverty and Indebtedness** - Majority tribes live under poverty line. The tribes follow many simple and primary occupations based on simple technology. The technology they use for the purposes belong to the most primitive kind. There is no profit such and surplus making in economy. Hence there per capita income is very meagre much lesser. Most of them live under abject poverty and are in debt in the hands of local moneylenders.

b) **Health and Nutrition** - In many parts of

India tribal population suffers from chronic infections and diseases out of which water borne diseases are life threatening. Leprosy and tuberculosis are also common among them. Infant mortality was found to be very high among some of the tribes. Malnutrition is common and has affected the general health of the tribal children as it lowers the ability to resist infection, leads to chronic illness.

c) **Education:** Educationally the tribal population is at different levels of development but overall the formal education has made very little impact on tribal groups. Earlier Government had no direct programme for their education. But in the subsequent years the reservation policy has made some changes. There are many reasons for low level of education among the tribal people. Moreover, Most of the tribes are located in interior and remote areas where teachers would not like to go from outside.

d) **Superstitions and myths** – Women killing in the name witch hunting are common here for their age-old superstitions and myths.

e) **Excessive use of liquor** – The tribal people are generally lazy and reluctant in their works due to use of liquor and other narcotics.

The ecological imbalance like cutting of trees have increased the distances between villages and the forest areas thus forcing tribal women to walk longer distances in search of forest produce and firewood. It may also be noted that tribes exist generally until the transition to a class society. The transition is preceded by the stratification of wealth, the rise of a tribal aristocracy and so on.

### CONCLUSION

An economy attributed to a particular community is based upon their socio-economic conditions. The condition of tribal people reflects the economy of the tribes of the concerned area. It is based on the ground early

that there should have their rights over the nature and ecology, where the used to inhibit. So, it should be ensured that the tribal people have the rights in an important source of livelihoods, such as, non-wood (timber) forest products (produce). One of the long-term needs for tribal development is improvement in their quality of life. Old and outdated methods of production, chronic unemployment and serious underemployment contribute to their poverty condition. The only way of raising their productivity in agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, forestry, cottage, village and small industries and provision of employment in all seasons, this can reduce the incidence of poverty of tribal people. Moreover, tribal land policy should be improved so that they have no option to question about their belongingness of their land.

Arrangement should be made for an extensive use of modern technology-based production methods in both industrial as well as agricultural sectors. Along with these, development in infrastructure, like- transportation should be brought about for the movement of the produce of the tribal people and communication for marketing. In addition, facilities for the purchase of livestock, fertilizer, agricultural equipment, better seeds should be provided to them. Cattle breeding and poultry farming should also be encouraged among these people.

The Governments should do for encouraging the development of cottage industries by providing loans and subsidies through various schemes. Through multipurpose co-operative societies, they may be provided credit in cash and kind. Government initiated organisations like TRIFED, whose main activities are like retail marketing development; minor forest produce marketing development, skill up-gradation & capacity building of tribal artisans and Research and Development activities should be enhanced. There should be a wide arrangement for promoting tribal

handicrafts and tribal arts through giving chances to participate in various exhibitions and fairs. Elimination of exploitation and enforcement of protective and anti-exploitative measures are the basic needs of tribal development as well as the development of tribal economy. In many cases, tribal men and women are equal participants in their economic life. So, equal opportunity for work for men and women should be implemented.

Superstitions have been playing a negative role in tribal societies of this region. In rectification law enforcement is highly recommended. A change in ideas, norms, values, rituals and religious observances have helped in transformation of the society. A radical change in economic conditions can be brought about through a change in the spirit of the youngsters in seeking new options in the direction of economic development. Political forces like self-ruling have definitely been the important cause of socio-economic change.

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