

## Conservation and Management of Community and Natural Resources: A Case Study from North East India

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**ABSTRACT** From the days of origin, men develop a close relation with nature. Nature provides the raw materials to build and develop culture. As the indigenous people are living on the mercy of nature, they are to develop various measures to conserve and manage the community and natural resources for the security of larger social system. The present paper examined the various conservation processes that have been developed by certain indigenous communities of Northeast India. The examples cited clearly indicate the strategic measures adopted by each community with regard to process of storing, utilization of plants and herbs, conserving the sacred grooves etc. It is also observed that community fair has developed because of close relations of environment and community life. The paper also indicates the knowledge system with emphasis on the traditional knowledge that had developed depending on cultural values.

### I

Human beings live in communities and group together engaged in mutual concourse. In Anthropology, the word 'community' is used in many ways. In general, "a society that inhabits a definite geographic area is known as community". The mutual understanding among the members is an essential feature of the growth and understanding of a community. A group cannot be successful in its efforts unless it sorts out conflicts and tension, and, works as a unit. As it has been mentioned, "a human community is a body of people sharing in common activities and bound by multiple relationship in such a way that the aim of any individual can be achieved only by participation in action with others" (Firth 1971:41). Thus, in social science, the term community is used for a group of people living in a particular area and sharing certain basic interests. For successful functioning of the community or society they are to develop diverse institutions and organizations. McIver (1924) has described community as the "focus of social life". It is an area of a common living of human beings. An institution has been defined as a definite organization pursuing some specific interest or pursuing general interests in a specific way. Gillin and Gillin (1948) defined it as functional configuration of culture patterns including actions, ideas, attitudes and cultural equipments which possess a certain performance and which

intent to satisfy felt social needs. In other words institutions are the functional units based on standardized pattern of social behaviour that the society has accepted. It may be said that institutions are the machinery through which human society organizes, directs and executes the multifarious activities required to satisfy human needs. Thus, it is clear that a community is composed not only of people living in a certain territory, but has certain institutions in common, which enable them to live and act in a corporate manner.

All community life involves methods of grouping and grading people for the effective carrying out of the various types of activity demanded by the common existence. Community life involves also systems of beliefs and procedures by which activity can be guided and controlled. This social control includes the general system of technical and empirical knowledge by the aid of which people manipulate much of their environment and also the systems, which regulate magical and religious behaviour in particular. Social controls are the regulative factors in community life.

From the day of his origin, man has constantly been trying to adjust himself in accordance with his surroundings. Similarly, human societies have since their inception been developing mechanism of managing the natural resources to meet their needs and greed, according to the values and norms, that have grown among the members of

society through time. These norms, values and procedures became embedded in the social structure of each community, and, helped its members to manage the natural resources on a sustainable basis. Moreover, many species of plants and animal life are interdependent for their sustenance, growth and development. Such mutually beneficial interdependence is called a symbiotic relationship. Thus, environment plays an important role in the formation and development of society and culture. The environment is everything around us, man being the central point. To maintain his living, man has directly utilized the natural environment for food, clothing, shelter, medicine and relaxation. With his knowledge and ability, he has also made use of the environment to build machinery and various constructions for his own comfort. Moreover, he has used society as a tool to pass on knowledge, thought and behaviour to himself and following generations in order to live in society happily and usefully. The environment, natural, man-made and social are deeply and intricately related, creating a relationship often referred to as the "Eco System".

The man-made environment has a socio-cultural component, which is responsible for its range of diversity. The mutual interdependent on nature and man play a significant role in the existence of society. It is a fact that diversity in nature exists due to human culture, but it is equally correct to say that cultural traditions helped in conserving the natural diversity; both are the two sides of a coin. In a small tribal society, the community life or man-nature interaction may easily be focused. Conservation of environment has been regarded important for development. But various studies have revealed that the environmental resources are shrinking, particularly the forest. "Going to current figures, approximately 1–1.5 percent of forest cover is lost every year in the North-eastern region due to deforestation with the increase in population pressures, the need for firewood is expected to increase, which means cutting down trees faster than they grow" (Pandey 2000: 59).

## II

The present paper explores the communal life of certain tribes and communities of Northeast India. Special emphasis is given to trace how each community has developed their indigenous ways

to satisfy the community needs by considering the environmental context. The tribal people or indigenous people all over the world have accumulated knowledge over time, which in traditional set up allow them to live in balance with their environment and this help them to adjust with the natural resources for their livelihood. Further, such knowledge system, which is conceptualized as Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) is handed down through oral tradition as well as through various sacred rituals, cultural practices and beliefs in which they remain embodied.

During field survey in most of the tribal and non-tribal villages, it is revealed that each village has common property in the form of forest, sacred bushes, temple land, sacred grooves etc. Besides each household in the villages has individual bamboo and pine grooves surrounded by green vegetation and agricultural fields.

The physical environment in most of the villages reflect more or less same environmental picture. They are getting necessary requirements from their natural surroundings. Various sacred places play an important role in maintaining ecological balance in most of the communities. Moreover, forests have been the traditional habitat of tribal throughout the world. Tribal have a symbiotic relationship with the flora and fauna of the forest. The value of the forest for them has been for survival, satisfaction of their wants and not for commercial exploitation. Because of it, the tribal have an inbuilt concern about nature and its importance in the tribal customs and traditions. A few examples would suffice to explain this fact.

In Manipur, the Rangmei Nagas have a tradition of maintaining tree rings to protect the village from fire hazards. Whoever damages it is required to pay heavy fine to the council. The Mizos maintain safety reserve surrounding the village to protect from *Jhum* fires. They also maintain supply reserve, wherefrom fuel wood timber is extracted in a regular manner. Among the Angami Nagas, when certain species of plants are extracted, custom requires double the number to be planted.

Such tradition exists all over the world. In Bhutan, if a decision is taken to cut an old tree as it would not serve the locality, the people of the locality with their traditional dresses first show their indebtedness towards nature for their bounties. Then they pray and offer their gratefulness to the tree. In the mean time two saplings are brought to the spot, preferably by

children. After cutting the tree, these saplings are planted on the spot. If by chance, any of the saplings is destroyed, it is immediately replaced by another. The people of the locality keep an eye on the growth of the saplings. There are many more examples which can be cited for focusing the awareness of the people towards preserving the plant, and thereby, the environment.

From ancient times, every community has a tradition of conserving patches of land in each village, which contain palm leaves or bamboos and are considered as sacred, and some time, sacred groves were dedicated to some deity and kept free from all exploitations. Such a grove may consist of multi-species, multi-tier primary forest of a clump of trees or even a single tree. It is referred by many that they vary from a few clump trees to 300-400 hectares of land. In Maharashtra "there are many sacred groves covering about 3570 hectares in the district of Thana, Kolaba, Jalgaon, Pune, Satara, Kohlapur etc. These groves are preserved since remote past through cultural and religious traditions of dedicating patches of forest to some deity" (Gadgile and Vartak 1981: 270). There are restrictions in most of the communities that girls after attaining puberty is not allowed to enter such groves.

The culture of sacred groves dated back to pre-agricultural era in the Indian sub-continent and is associated with spiritual belief in "Sanatana" Religion. The Hindus and Buddhists adopted it for nature conservation. "Such groves, ranging from a culture of trees to more than 20 hectares are scattered all over India and serve as a last refuge for arboreal animal" (Belsora 2002: 96). The ancient religion has a lot of references and concepts, which teach us living in harmony with nature. In Hindu religion, out of 4 *Ashrams*, the last one is *Banaprastha*, where a person after fulfilling all the earthly responsibilities retires in the forest, where he gets his bare necessities. Since its beginning, Buddhism has been closely linked to forest. Lord Buddha achieved His enlightenment under the shade of the *Bodhi* tree. After His enlightenment, wherever He went monasteries were built in His honour. The first monastery built for him by King Bimbisara was in a bamboo grove, so it was called *Veluvana*, which means bamboo forest. Subsequent monasteries were all forest monasteries, such as *Wat Jetavana*, which was in a garden. The Buddhist monasteries in the time of Buddha always had the word "*Vanaram*" or "*Pa*", which means forest as part

of their names. Lord Buddha saw a close relationship between life and nature. He knew well the impact on nature and environment when treated improperly causing a state of "imbalance", which is still considered a basis of studying biodiversity. Thus, environmental problems worried and talked about presently are not a new topic to Buddhism.

The groves are identified by different local names in different parts of India. In the Northeastern states, the name differs from tribes to tribes. "In Meghalaya, the sacred groves are present in almost every Khasi and Jaintia village and locally known as *Lakyntang*. The Jaintia hills may have over 200 groves each of which is no more than 3-4 hectares" (Roy Burman 1992: 221). A few sacred groves have also been reported from Rajasthan, where they are known as *Jogmaya* (Roy Burman 1992: 221). In Kerala, it is referred as *Kavu*. Whereas, most of the plain tribal communities e.g., Deori, Tiwa, Sonowal Kachari, Rabha etc., call them as *Thaan*. Similarly, in some areas groves are regarded as abode of the spirits of their ancestors, often referred as burial groves.

The religious attachment to the sacred groves varies a lot among different communities. In the Dehing Kinare Nocte village, which is inhabited by the *Noctes*, a branch of Naga tribes, there is one *Namghar* (house for worship), which is located in the middle of the village. As they are the followers of *Mahapurushia Vaisnava Dharma*, every Thursday, the elderly people of the village assemble there and recite *Bhagabata*. Besides *Namghar*, they have their own place of worship called as *Thaan*. There are four *Thaans* in the village viz. *Ai Thaan*, which is located at the entrance of the village; *Dangariya Thaan*, which is located at the end of the village; the *Jalkuwari Thaan* is located almost at the centre and the *Lakshmi Thaan* is situated near the paddy field. The villagers perform different rituals in these four *Thaans*.

Among the Tiwas of Bherakuchi Borgaon, *Thanghar* is the main place of worship. There are three *Thaans* in the village viz. *Mahadeo Thaan*, which is located in the east of the village; the *Hastra Thaan* is located in the western side of the village. *Baghrajha Thaan* is located at the top of the Dhowmara hill. The villagers perform different rituals in these three *Thaans*. In the same way, the Deori and Sonowal Kachari villages have their own *Thaans*. The common place of worship among the Borgonya and Tengapania section of

the Deoris is known as *Thaan*, while the Dibangias call it *Midku*.

These *Thaans* serve the religious need of the people no doubt, but it also serves the protection of their environment. These places are considered sacred and auspicious as it is believed that some supernatural spirits haunt these places. So the common people normally avoid these places, except on religious occasions and never cut wood or collect tree branches from those localities. Thus a vast tract of land is protected from destruction. The basic philosophy behind these groves among the communities is keeping control of the community over the patches of land. The community employs all the efforts to keep it free from destruction, primarily by dedicating it to a deity. Social scientists believe that in the absence of written laws, the religion played a vital role in protecting these patches of forest in wilderness. Ecologists call them "social fencing".

Elwyn (1954) have noted that myths build around trees and animals are considered sacred because of their economic utility e.g. most tribal believe that the banyan tree is the abode of gods and ensures good health. The *Peepal* is the abode of goddesses, the mango tree protect village community and ensure health and prosperity. Plants being the earliest form of life, it is believed that all other living organisms, including man are dependent on them directly or indirectly. From the day of his origin, man had to depend on plants not only for food, but also for shelter. Many flowers, fruits and whole plants have been used as offerings in worship. Some plants started to be worshipped or considered sacred. *Tulsi* (*ocimum sanctum*) plant is worshipped by the Hindus and care is taken for its preservation, which is believed as incarnation of goddess *Lakshmi*. The *Dubari* grass (*cynodon dactylon*) is the commonest grass and is considered as one of the most essential items of every Hindu ritual. *Dhatura* petals (*calotropis procera*) are used to worship Lord Shiva.

Various folk beliefs and rituals also developed concentrating the plant. One such belief exists in Patahghar village near Tangla, in the district of Udalgui, Assam. Every year, during the *Bohag Bihu*, the people of that area celebrate *gas biya* (tree marriage). It starts on the day of *Sankranti* (last day of the month of *Chaitra*) and ends on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the month of *Bohag* (April-May). It consists of two parts. In the first part, the villagers uprooted two bamboos with roots (one long and

other slightly short) on the day of *Sankranti*. On the first day of *Bohag*, they make two images representing Lord Shiva and Parvati in the courtyard of a selected family. In the mean time, the villagers tie handkerchiefs of various colours in the short bamboo and decorate the top portion with wooly thread. The entire small bamboo is wrapped with cloth placing wooly thread here and there. These two bamboos, according to them, represent *Siva* and *Parvati*. After performing certain rituals, the villagers along with the youth visit every household taking these bamboos. The members worship it tying the handkerchief and seek blessing from the Supreme Being. It continued for five days and on the sixth day, they ceremoniously push the bamboos on the village pond, after removing all the handkerchiefs.

On the seventh day of *Bohag*, they make the images representing Lord *Siva* and *Parvati* with straw, thread and the 18<sup>th</sup> handkerchiefs which they removed from the bamboos in the temple courtyard. They keep both the images in a tree and celebrate the whole night in the temple by enjoying *bhaona*, *nam* etc. Next morning, they bring the images of Lord *Siva* and *Parvati* from the tree to the pandal and celebrate the marriage following entire customs of Assamese marriage ceremony. Two pre-pubescent girls are selected, who act as mother of Lord *Siva* and *Parvati*.

The *gas biya* (tree marriage) is entirely related to the rural agricultural community. It is believed that the performance of this marriage increases the fertility of soil and fruit bearing capacity. The people take special interest to procure a portion of bamboo as it is believed that if it is hanged on the tree it will bear more fruits. Similarly, if a portion of wooly thread is kept in the handloom, the women will become more expert in weaving.

The custom and traditions of this marriage not only reflect the folk custom of that area, but it also unites the population of several villages. On the other hand, protection and preservation of tree no doubt contribute towards balancing the environment.

Among the Gonds and some other tribes, a branch of the *Saloi* (*Bosvellia serrata*) tree is essential as a marriage pillar (*Moond*). The branch often sprouts and thus with one marriage, there is one new tree. They also believe that God *Persapen* has his abode on this tree, and hence, before cutting a branch of the tree, it is worshipped (Deogaonkar 2006: 2).

The religious philosophy of the *Boro-Kachari*

tribe ventures round the superpower of *Bathou*; which is analogous to *Siva* of the Hindu philosophy. The *sizu* plant (*Euphorbia splendens*) is regarded as representing the *Bathou*. Every traditional Bodo-Kachari household plants a *sizu* tree along with a sapling of *jatras* and a *tulsi* in the Northern corner of their courtyard" (Bordoloi et al. 1987: 7).

Many of the plants are fast disappearing due to ecological imbalance. But the tribals have in many cases shouldered the responsibility of germplasm conservation through their age long rich cultural practices. "The sacred blue orchid (*Vanda coerulea*) although very rare has not become extinct since they are sustained by the Wanchoo tribes in Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh for use in worship and festivals" (Mukherjee and Mukherjee 1995: 71). Besides each community has developed different ways and means to satisfy the community need. In the Nocte (*Naga*) village, there is common granary where they store the grains. After every harvest, the village youths collect paddy from each household and store paddy in the common granary. The amount of paddy collected depends upon the harvest of the farmer. The needy villagers may take paddy from this granary, which they have to return in the next year. At the end of every year, the surplus in the granary is sold in the market and the amount, so collected, is used for the improvement of village library, school building, approach road etc.

Among the Tiwas also, there is provision of common granary where each family have to contribute about thirty five kg of paddy after the harvest. In time of crisis, the individual family may borrow paddy from this granary, but they will have to return it with an additional amount of seventeen kg per thirty five kg of paddy.

The Karbis have traditionally maintained grain bank, called *Kerung Amei*. They maintained three types of grain banks. In the first type all the families, irrespective of their social status have to contribute five kg of paddy after the annual harvest to the grain bank. During the lean month of the next year, the poor and needy families are given paddy on loan with the condition that the principal amount along with 50% interest in kind must be returned after the harvest (Bordoloi et al. 1987:66). In the second and third type, a plot is assigned to the youth and the aged and after the harvest; the product is kept in the granary. During lean months, paddy is given as loan to the needy

Karbi families to be repaid with 50% interest after the harvest. The excess may be sold only to the Karbi families at 10% less than the prevailing market price. The third bank serves as the co-operative credit society. Paddy of the bank is sold when the price goes up and the sale proceeds are given to the needy families on loan to be repaid with cent percent interest.

The existence of such community based voluntary organization is universal in human society and is perhaps a survival trait from the stages of primordial social formation. The people also develop their own way to meet their need. It was reported by M. and S.L. Fortes from the Tallensi of the Gold Coast, that food supplies are at their lowest in the rainy season at the time of greatest agricultural labour. But the people have excellent receptacles for storing food and know how to utilize it. They could live sparingly during the dry season, when there is less work to be done, and keep the major crop for the wet season to sustain them in their harder labour. That they do not prefer to do this due to the social and ritual values they attach to the food, as against the more purely economic and nutritional values (Firth 1957: 45). Indifference, aesthetic aversion to some kinds of food or traditional taboos may also be important. The Andamanese do not trap animals or birds; though they could easily do so; the Tikopia do not eat many kinds of birds or eels, for religious reasons, though their Polynesian cousins, the Maori eat both freely, and prize the flesh and fat that they yield" (Firth 1957: 31).

The Tiwas also need a special variety of wild paddy, which is grown only in the hills, to perform a ritual. During *Lakshmi puja*, they select few pre-pubescent girls, who are given the task of collecting a particular type of paddy from the hills. This type of paddy grows naturally in the midst of stones; since the shape of the place is almost like a *Jokai* i.e., fishing basket and is commonly known as *Jakoi Sila Dhan*. In the mean time, the villagers collect a handful of grain from each household and gather it in a common place. Then, the wild grains which are collected from the hills are mixed with it. These grains are again distributed among the families, who then preserve the grains for the next year's cultivation. It is believed that this act will give a good product to each household. As they are aware about its customs and beliefs, they take care for the growth of this wild paddy in the forest. Such incident

naturally reminds us the man-nature relationship (Barua and Dutta 2006: 25).

Wild herbs and plants play an important role in the life of the tribal and peasant communities as they directly depend on various wild plants as vegetable stuff. They are also aware of its medicinal values and special care is taken for its preservation. It has been reported that the Tai Khamyangs take various herbs and plants as vegetables e.g. *Ketury* (wild turmeric), *Musandari* (A kind of plant shrub), *Mehundi lata* (A kind of medicinal creeper), *Mishimi teeta* (A kind of bitter medicinal plant root, brought down by the *Mishimis*). (*captis teeta*). Besides *Keheru* (a kind of esculent root, *Scirpus kysoor*) are very favourite item in their diet. Some other common shrubs taken by the *Tai Khamyangs* are *Mesaki* (a kind of tree), *Mejenga* (a kind of shrub), *Medeluwa* (a kind of shrub), *Tikoni Barua*, *Lehati sak* etc. They normally collect these plants from the nearby *Chola* reserve forest during the *Chang-kyan* festival, when the roots came out during monsoon. All have medicinal values and the people are aware about their preventive capacity against many common ailments (Barua 1998: 318). They take special care to preserve the particular area, where these herbs and shrubs grow naturally. Thus, along with meeting the communal need, it also helps in preserving the natural environment.

The existence of totemic belief also plays a significant role in maintaining the bio-diversity. Several tribes claim to have mysterious or mischievous relationship with some physical object, namely plants, animals, etc. A totem, wrote Frazer in his first essay, "is a class of material objects which a savage regards with superstitious respect, believing that there exists between him and every member of the clans an intimate and altogether special relation. The connection between a person and his totem is mutually beneficent, the totem protects the man and the man shows his respect for the totem in various ways, by not killing it if it be an animal, and not cutting or gathering it if be a plant" (referred from Freud 1919: 141). Specimen of the totem animals are sometimes raised by the clan and taken care of in captivity. A totem animal found dead is mourned and buried like a member of the clan (Freud 1919: 143).

The elements of totemic clans are also present in the greater traditions. The names of some of the *Rishis* providing clan (*gotra*) names, such as

*Kashyapa* (tortoise), *Gotam* (cow), *Vata* (calf), *Sunaka* (dog), *Bharadwaja* (a kind of bird), *Mudgala* (a kind of fish), *Sandilya* (a kind of bird) indicate the same (Kumar 2008: 3 internet source).

*Mushahari* clan of *Bodos* protects tiger (Kar 2004: 76). It is reported that the Munda is divided into various clans, and, some of their clans are totemic, e.g. tortoise is the totem of *Kachim* clan and Swan is the totem of *Hansa* clan (Bhowmick 2002: 100). The *Zeliang Nagas* are divided into four exogamous clans (*Fuam*) viz. *Gangmei*, *Kammei*, *Gonmei* and *Longmei*. *Kammei* and *Gonmei* are further divided into several sub-clans. They observe totemic practice. The totems are called *Kagei*. Tiger is the totem of *Gangmei* clan. Dog or crow is the totem of *Longmei* clan. The *Kammei* clan is divided into 7 sub-clans and *Ahuina* (a kind of bird) is the totem of all sub-clans of *Kammei*. The *Goumei* clan is divided into 5 sub-clans; each has different totem ranging from bird, frog, tree etc. Killing and eating of their respective totem is taboo for them (Sahu 2002: 228).

Most of the tribal and peasant communities have perennial water sources and form life supporting system for the villagers. In most of the surveyed villages, there are common ponds situated normally in the middle of the village. The villagers in natural circumstances are not allowed to fish in these ponds. Only in specific occasions, fishing is allowed. Among the *Tiwas* of *Bherakuchi*, it was reported that the villagers are allowed fishing only during the *Bohag Bihu* festival. The fishes are distributed among the villagers in equally, and, the decision is taken jointly by the villagers.

Community fishing is also common affair among the *Tiwas*, particularly in the winter season, when the water level of the *beels* and rivers go down. Tradition of community fishing among the *Tiwas* has provided an opportunity in developing a *mela* popularly known as *Jun beel mela* in greater *Dimoria* area. The historic spot is situated 5 km from *Jagiroad* in *Morigaon* district of *Assam*. Community fishing among the *Tiwas* has both historical and cultural significance. *Dimoria* king possesses large number of water sources (*beel*) in different areas. The community fishing is done at the *Parsali beel*, *Bomani beel*, *Jalihara beel* etc. Only on the eve of *Magha Bihu* the king allows the community fishing.

The fishing is done simultaneously in various areas and the *mela* had sprung up beside the side of the community fishing. The community

fishing, which is done on the line of ritual has taken the shape of an annual *mela* in the greater Dimoria area with the passage of time. Originally, the Kings of Gova, Dimoria, Nelli and Kholā collectively took the decision to hold this get-to-gather. But presently the Gova, Tiwa, Dimoria Raja solely declare the holding of the *mela*. In January 2008, Shri Rama Kanta Deuri along with three other Executive Members of Tiwa (Lalung) Autonomous Council formally inaugurated the *mela*. The information collected from the Bherakuchi Bor Gaon village, inhabited by the Tiwas, reveals that every year during the *Magha Bihu* all the villagers go for fishing in Parsali *beel*. First a man belonging to Amsiyale clan of this village offers five betel nuts and leaves in the *beel* in the presence of the King.

Regarding the origin of the *Jun beel mela*, different versions are found. According to historical records, the *mela* started not later than 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. During the *mela*, the tribal people came down from the hills to meet their relations e.g., uncle, aunts in the plains. Historically, till the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the hill people frequently created disturbances among the people of the plains of these areas and looted their valuables. To overcome this problem, the Ahom Kings during the 15<sup>th</sup> century organized some *melas* in the border areas of the kingdom to ensure commercial and cultural amity between the hills and the plains. Probably, the tradition continues through get together like “*Jun beel mela*”. Earlier, it lasted for a day and a night and now it is a three day affair.

The other version is that like the Ahoms, the Koches, the Tiwas has also separate kingdom, known as Gova *Rajya*. When the rays of moon fell on the water of *Jun beel*, it shines beautifully and the Gova King was fascinated by the beauty of dazzling water and decided to celebrate *Magha Bihu* on the bank of *Jun beel*. It is to be noted that the initiation of the King Langbor was done after one week of Assamese *Magha Bihu*. Considering the popularity of the King the *Tiwas* started to celebrate it on the day of initiation of the Gova King.

The unique feature of this *mela* is that where barter system still prevails. In the past, men’s needs were limited and they were mostly catered by the nature. But in course of time when community life developed, exchange of different products became a necessity. So, barter of goods came into existence. Significantly, exchange of goods takes place primarily among the hills tribes of Assam and Meghalaya and the plain people.

The tribes barter edible produce such as ginger, turmeric, arum, chilies, lac, indigo, mats etc. and procure various traditional cakes, rice powder, dried fish etc from the plain people. With the necessary food items collected from the plain people, the tribal people celebrate their *Bihu* on the following Saturday.

Keeping continuity of the traditional customs, the King invariably visits the *mela* every year and formally takes his seat in the *Darbar* which is arranged at the site of the *mela* by his officials. Fishing is not allowed without the formal nod of the King and the King still expects that this tradition should be maintained. But he also expressed his unhappiness that this custom is not strictly followed by a section of people. Subscriptions are collected by the representatives of the King and during this act traditional *Tiwa* songs are sung by the royal team in their traditional attire. It is reported that the amount collected is utilized for the development of the respective areas. The King along with the officials enjoys the community feast. Though at present purchase of commodities against payment of money started yet the barter system continues side by side. The *mela* is of ethnic and socio-cultural importance as this becomes a common meeting ground for different hill tribes of Assam and Meghalaya, including the people of the plains. Now a day, these *beels* are auctioned for fishing on commercial basis, and, only on the day of *Magha Bihu* these are opened for the common people. Moreover, the left over water from the nearby paper mill affected the *beels* and because of environmental degradation the water levels of the *beels* are receding. It is feared that it will greatly affect the *mela*, which has much socio-cultural significance.

The *Jun beel mela* is a significant example of maintaining ecosystem. The existence of number of water sources (*beel*) and the cultural characteristics of community fishing among the Tiwas have developed the community gathering initially, and later on, it gave rise to community fairs and festivals which have also historical significance. This *Jun beel mela* indicates the impact the environment on community life and vice versa.

### III

The above discussions reveal that from the beginning of human society, each tribe or community develop its own ways of utilizing and managing the community and natural resources.

As the indigenous people are living at the mercy of nature they are to develop various conservative measures for the security of the own community. Depending on environment and cultural values, the procedures of utilization vary from community to community, but it is also a universal fact that human beings are always aware of balancing ecosystem and maintaining harmony with nature. Man live in a variety of ecosystems, warranting both biological and cultural adaptations. The adaptive mechanism and the knowledge of utilizing the natural resources is the key factor of surviving the human society. The study focuses that the knowledge system or precaution which the indigenous people emphasize is entirely mean for ensuring larger social security. The various socio-cultural beliefs and practices emerged in course of development of human society no doubt, reflect the unwritten laws for their action. Different communities maintain their indigenous ways to manage the community resources in terms of food, storage, wild herbs and shrubs for their benefit. The sacred conservation practices, superstitions, religious taboos and prohibitions no doubt play an important role in protecting the natural resources and thereby managing the ecosystem. It has also been revealed that various fairs and festivals (*melas*) develop centering round their community/natural management process. Their knowledge about different aspects and elements from their traditional environment is also reflected in their folk literatures. Thus, to have a greater understanding of the entire process of preservation and management, the various aspects i.e., cultural, historical and political factors need analysis, what anthropologists refer as holistic approach. It is the responsibility of a social scientists and anthropologists to explore the indigenous process, because there rest the basic philosophy of survival mechanism of society. The indigenous people may not be aware of the scientific reasoning behind each action and it is the job of the social scientists to put scientific meanings into what may be referred as traditional wisdom.

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