



Tribal traditions and crises of governance

Based on Working Paper no.22: Apurba Baruah, 'Tribal traditions and crises of governance in North East India, with special reference to Meghalaya'. This is intended to provide a summary of the principal findings, and an indication of the implications these may have for debates over policy.

In this paper, which sets the scene for new research, Apurba Baruah points to the need for close examination of the workings of traditional institutions of tribal communities in order to understand the conflict between traditional values and those of modern democracies. Such comprehension can help to resolve the conflict of values, that otherwise may create a major crisis of governance and may well be the cause of current violence in the North East India region.

- **'Democracy' in traditional Indian communities**

Politics in traditional tribal communities of North East India were based on two principles: only the wise, meaning the elders, should rule and most members of society should participate in ruling. Such political practice is based on the principles of egalitarianism and popular participation. Therefore, some form of democracy did exist in these traditional societies before the coming of colonialism, but of a different genre to that of modern democracy.

- **Democratic values propelling conflict**

When a form of modern democratic governance is introduced to traditional societies, traditional political values conflict with new political values. That is, the imposition of foreign democratic values in a 'traditional setting' conflict with local political practices influenced by traditional values. The powerful demand, by North East Indian communities, for constitutional recognition of their traditional institutions, which in the contemporary sense are not democratic, emphasises this conflict between traditional tribal values and those of modern democracies.

- **Persistent traditional values**

In the case of Africa, despite influences from Western values and practices, Africans adamantly retained traditional African values and institutions. Similarly, tribal societies in North East India (comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura) also persisted in following traditional political values and practices. Communities in this region have only recently begun to adopt the system of governance introduced by the 1950 Constitution of India.

- **Democratisation, rather than ethnicity, may be a cause of conflict**

As democratic practices and values are introduced in the North East, insurgent violence and conflict is taking place. We should look beyond nationality aspirations as the cause of such violence and consider the implications of political changes. The process of democratisation in the region, rather than ethnicity, may be a crucial cause of conflict. Tribal organisations in Meghalaya have actively contradicted basic principles of liberal democracy. Yet, newspapers have seldom reported on such conflict.

- **Traditional values interfere with democratic governance**

In traditional societies the community has precedence over the individual. Yet, the process of democratisation revolves around individual liberty. Hence, traditional political values are not compatible with forms of governance that advocate democratic principles. The principles of the rule of law, individual liberty and the expectation of competitive politics directly contradict the values of tribal life, implying group assertion, kin-protection and collective effort and therefore may interfere with 'good governance', as it is understood locally.

- **Possible construction of traditions**

Since no studies have been made that date such traditions, nor analyse their political orientation, it is possible that they have been invented to suit the newly emerging social forces and to suit the requirements of contemporary politics.

- **Ignoring critical issues**

No one has studied the effect of exposing traditional societies to the federal democratic polity. In addition, research on the conflicts between traditional tribal values and the value premises of constitutional governance under the Indian constitution, remains limited. Unfortunately most work on traditional institutions remains descriptive, and is sometimes little more than a reproduction of the official records of British rulers.

- **Understanding tribal traditions may be first step to preventing violent conflict**

Analysing the nature of traditional institutions of tribal people under the modern democratic system helps us to understand how values and practices inherent in these institutions affect democratic governance. We need to study the tribal traditions and practices still important within contemporary political reality in order to foresee and prevent potential violent conflicts.

New research is addressing the following questions:

- How does the introduction of new values and democratic principles affect traditional tribal practices and institutions?
- What are the consequences of conflicts, between traditional and modern democratic values on the new systems of governance?
- Do traditional institutions fail to recognise democratic principles because they adhere to traditional political values or because of vested interests?

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