

Conflict over eco-park

Outcome of non-participatory project planning

Government has followed the top down approach of planning. No discussion was held with the stakeholders particularly with the Garos about the project. So the Garos have perceived the project from the different angles that do not converge with the purpose of government. Government is defining the project as a "development" while Garos are taking it as counter development.

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Garos protesting government action

converge with the purpose of government. Government is defining the project as a "development" while Garos are taking it as counter development. So the conflict is imminent. Meanwhile Garos have vowed to continue their agitation until government abandoned this project. Other ethnic groups including the "Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity" have expressed their solidarity with the Garos. A tension is still prevailing in Modhupur forest. But this unpleasant situation could be avoided if the project could be planned following participatory approach considering the interest of the Garo community in and around the Modhupur Forest.

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GOVERNMENT has undertaken the "Forest Conservation and Eco Tourism Project" in Madhupur Forest where a part of the Garo community is settled for hundreds of years. These Garos in this area are mostly dependent on this forest for their livelihood. Therefore, the Garos have rightly understood that the creation of the Eco Park will limit their access to the forest and consequently it will appear as a threat to their lifestyle, livelihood and existence in turn. For this reason the Garos living in and around the Modhupur forest have united themselves to resist the construction of the Eco Park. As the Garos are one of the most backward ethnic communities in Bangladesh in terms of education, organisation and economy, they could not draw the attention of the civil society, press and other political parties at the initial stage when the government approved the project in 2000. Rather, this aboriginal community has roused against the mighty government with their blunt traditional weapons on January 3, 2004 after three years of the project initiation. In response to that weak resistance the police and forest rangers have answered with the fire arms. Consequently two Garo youths namely Utpal and Piren died on the spot and 25 others including women and children, were wounded. It has been assumed that the Eco Park is a threat for the existence of 2000 people in this area.

Now the question is: who will be benefited from this project? Of course the beneficiaries are not the Garos whose umbilical cords are buried in the forest. The project will serve the interest of a section that has no fair relation with this forest.

There are thousands of examples in the history of development which show that the planners do not take the problems of ethnic groups into account when they undertake any development project. One of the recent evidences of such indifferences of development planners to ethnic groups is our Kaptai Hydro Electric Project. The Kaptai Hydro Electric Project was planned to implement without considering the effect on the tribal communities living in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) area. The concerned tribal mass was not discussed with before taking up the project. As a component of project the Kaptai dam was built on the Karnaphuli Rive in 1962 to create an artificial water reservoir that submerged 54,000 acres i.e a total of 40 per cent cultivable land belonging to the tribal people in this area. The Kaptai Lake is now an attractive tourist spot abounded with fish and produces 120 mega watts of electricity from which mostly the non-tribal people are being benefited. On the other hand, the inundation caused by the artificial lake pushed thousands of the tribal people deep into the dark forest and neighboring India. It is one of the major causes of the conflict between the government and indigenous people of CHT that caused instability and mounting tension in CHT area since then. If the project could have been planned through participatory approach the dissatisfaction of the hilly people could be lessened.

The Modhupur Eco Park is going to be another example of non-participatory planning in the record of development initiatives. Government has followed the top down approach of planning. No discussion was held with the stakeholders particularly with the Garos about the project. So the Garos have perceived the project from the different angles that do not