

Crossroads to Globalization: Experiences of the Forest Dwellers from the Dooars Region of West Bengal

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Abstract: *The process of Globalization essentially involves the dilation of boundaries across time and space. It has been three decades since India opened its doors to the World and accepted globalization as a process of mobilization for its economy and society. Since then India has transformed in many ways, and so is the ethos and praxis of its traditional society. Of course, the vigour is not the same across the physical-social-cultural space but it is evident that the 'boundaries' are dissolving everywhere. The presence of the mighty Himalayas in the north played a watershed effect on India's complex socio-cultural matrix. The foothill region, commonly known as 'Dooars' played a significant role in admixture and separation of different ethnic groups and cultural traits coming from the hills and the plains. Thus it forms an ideal field for the spatial scientists to prognosis of the vanishing boundaries and the concerns of the 'Local'.*

The present paper is an empirical study of forest villages situated in and around the Chilapata forest range in the district of Alipurduar, located in the foothills of the Eastern Himalaya. These villages are inhabited by Rabha and Oraon tribes, who have lived almost in isolation from the outer world for long due to the physical barrier imposed by the dense forests and the dissected nature of the terrain. The absence of all-weather roads, lack of public transport and feeble means of communication added up to increase the isolated nature of these forest dwellers. This has somehow enabled the forest villagers to maintain their traditional socio-cultural traits and build up a strong kinship with the natural environment. But at the same time, it has deprived them of enjoying the 'virtues' of modern globalized life. In recent years, government as well as private initiatives have accelerated infrastructural development, improved communication and services and overall, engaged several market forces with the rural livelihood. At the same time, it has brought

the essentially traditional rural society face to face with the predominantly urban global world. Changes are happening in forest livelihood and appraisal of those changes is important.

This paper aims to identify the present socio-economic status of the people living in three forest villages within the Chilapata Forest Range of Alipurduar district; and changes in their livelihood and also aims to analyze the repercussions of those changes through SWOT Analysis.

Keywords: Globalization, Territories, Local, ethnic groups, Forest Livelihood, Infrastructural Development, SWOT Analysis.

Fulen Rava does not want people to come and visit his place. His elder brother, Bhupen, supports his brother and adds that he hates it when the tourists from 'big cities' (read Kolkata or Siliguri) come in large groups with all their 'showoffs'. Even Bharat-da, the booking clerk in the Chilapata forest range office supported the brothers in unison. Now, it was an awkward moment. Fulen runs a tea stall cum provision shop just opposite the Chilapata forest range office on Sonapur-Hasimara road and his brother Bhupen is a forest guide. Lion's share of their family income, by selling tea snacks to the tourists or taking tourists on a forest trip, is directly dependent on the influx of tourists who are essentially from the cities. Yet, they are against them. This became more intriguing after interviewing more and more residents of Kurmai, Bania and Andu forest villages and getting the same vibe underpinned by their responses. Looking precisely into the matter, it was clear that none of the respondents denied the importance of tourism in the local economy but refused to accept the vices, especially in the form of the 'cultural shock' it brings with it. As a spatial scientist, trained to believe in the binary of economic and social well-being, it was scope for examining the impacts of cultural imprints that the global-urban economy bears in the social spheres of an essentially 'local' indigenous population. The forest villages in and around Chilapata forest range, a part of the Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary in Alipurduar district, located at the Himalayan foothills, known as the *Dooars* region, situated in the northern part of the state of West Bengal, offered a perfect place for the said study. Much of the population living here, in forest villages like Andu, Kurmai or Bania belong to tribal groups of Rabha and Oraon, still living in a somewhat secluded manner from the outer world. The highly dissected terrain of the Dooars plain, the dense forest infested with wild animals and the absence of all-weather roads connecting the villages with the outside world until recently, helped them maintain their traditional practices in some form or other at household and community level. Surprisingly, the two tribes, while sharing the same resource base for centuries, refused to intermingle despite their proximity and semi-confined life in the forest villages. The presence of the Himalayas in the north, with their mighty slopes, deep-cut valleys and dense forest, played a limiting factor for the ethnic groups to extend their

territory further north of the Dooars region. On the contrary, the people of the hill, on several occasions ventured towards the plains but were restricted by the vast braided courses of rivers like Teesta, Torsa or Kaljani, just south of the foothills, their movement was confined along the Terai-Dooars region. The terrain in Terai-Dooars is characterized by undulated interfluves of numerous rivers and streams which descend the southern slopes of the Himalayas and cut across the region. These streams lose their strength of valley deepening or carrying their sediment load from the mountains as the regional slope drops down drastically. Thus they deposit much of their sediment load here and there to become extremely tortuous, which leads to recurrent seasonal flooding. In such an unforgiving physical environment, the ethnic groups living here, by large choose to live in the interfluves with relatively higher ground, that are free from seasonal flood and suitable for agriculture. These are the places where most of the towns in present-day Dooars stand. But here, one ethnic group had to share their territory with the others as there was competition for space and eventually the socio-cultural admixture led to the emergence of a mixed trait. The establishment of tea gardens in Dooars during the colonial period only added vigour to this process. On the other hand, the tribes who chose to live in segregation established their territories inside the deep forests or highly dissected lands in the Piedmont region. Some even choose to live in the newly emerged shoals on the river course and named as 'Chorua' (people of the 'Char' or shoal).

As mentioned earlier, the forest villages of Andu, Bania and Kurmai are inhabited by the Rabha and Oraon tribes. These villages are now connected by all-weather roads to their nearest towns i.e. Hasimara, Madarihata, Alipurduar or Cooch Behar. But the improvement of road connectivity is a relatively recent thing here. Before that, people living here had to walk a long distance to reach their nearest transport head on Sonapur-Hasimara road. Few managed to drive their cycle or motorcycle to the town but the majority of the residents were compelled to depend on the inadequate bus or jeep service plying along the route. There were no private cars owned by the villagers till that time due to bad road conditions. The earthen roads leading from the villages usually become hardly negotiable even barefoot after a good spell of rain, let alone the possibility of driving vehicles. Thus, for the monsoon months, the forest villages remained almost completely segregated from the outer world. After the construction of the black-top roads that connected these villages to their nearest bus or jeep route, the connectivity has increased at an exponential rate. Harvesting this potential, many of the village folk, essentially the younger generation, ventured out of their territory and started flocking into the towns of Hasimara, Alipurduar or Cooch Behar for education, healthcare and commerce. Some even used the railheads in Alipurduar and Cooch Behar to venture out of the region to big cities like Kolkata and Delhi. In almost no time, these people started adoring urban lifestyles in some way or another and deviated from the traditional ways. Thus a cultural gap within the forest-dwelling

communities started to widen with the development in communication.

Two thoroughly different factors added vigour to this transformation process inside the tribal society, which has preserved their cultural identities almost unthreatened for centuries. The first one is the invasion of the missionaries. The Christian missionaries started converting the tribal people of north Bengal at the dawn of the colonial rule in India, establishing Churches, schools and hospitals here and there. The village Kurmai, which is essentially dominated by the Rabha tribe has a Baptist missionary church. With the changes in the socio-political scenario of India in general and North Bengal in particular, Hindu missionaries started penetrating the forest-clad villages, converting many tribal families to Hinduism. Thus, adoring a religion that is non-tribal, essentially demands rejection of the tribal way of life, threatening the latter from the inside.

The second factor was the introduction of popular tourism in the region. As communication has developed, it attracted thousands of tourists every season who preferred to spend some time in the depths of the lush green forest of the Chilapata range, enjoying the sight of the wild animals or admiring the abundant natural beauty of the region. Many resorts and homestays had mushroomed around the forest villages to cater for the needs of these tourists. In most cases, they are owned and managed by some urban agencies who only care for their profits and want good returns from their investments in the region. Thus tourists, from different parts of the world started swarming in, and many of them, either unable or ignorant of the local customs and belief systems indulge in practices that are considered derogatory by the locals. Some of the local residents indeed started benefitting from the arrival of the tourists by providing goods and services or working in the resorts, but their number is negligible. On the contrary, the tourists, being a manifestation of the 'global urban' with all of their 'tantrums' and 'histrionics', certainly cast some sort of impact on the minds of the local people, particularly the youth that instil a sense of rejection to their traditional lifestyle. Thus the rural, traditional livelihoods of the ethnic people in the forest villages are now at a crossroads. The present work is an attempt to make a comprehensive appraisal of that change using the tool of 'SWOT analysis' as a technique to reveal the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats prevalent in the ethnic societies of the study area.

The Study Area:

Chilapata is a forest range of Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary located at the border of Cooch Behar and Alipurduar districts of North Bengal. It is close to Buxa Tiger Reserve and is administered by Cooch Behar Forest Division. Kurmai forest village is located at the south-eastern fringe of Chilapata, a couple of hundreds of meters away from the Sonapur – Hasimara road, geographical co-ordinate being 26°31' N and 89°22' E. The other two forest villages i.e. Andu and Bania are located some 2 and five kilometres east and southeast of Kurmai forest village respectively.

The region bears the features of Himalayan foothills and adjacent

Barind plains, typical to Duars. The landform is undulated in the north and gradually merges with rolling plains to the south. The entire region is highly dissected by numerous streams and rivers coming down the slopes of the Himalayas. Rivers tend to change course frequently and they flow through braided channels. Thus shifting river courses gives rise to huge marshy lands. On the other hand, frequent changes in sediment regimes lead to unpredictable accumulation of river deposits that are unconsolidated and assorted. Thus the soil type ranges from coarse sands to sandy loam (District Agri. Office, 2003). The climate is monsoonal with a cold and dry winter and hot and humid summer typical to the Himalayan sub-montane region. Most of the rainfall occurs in the months between June and September. This is one of the wettest places in West Bengal with an average rainfall of 3354 mm. (Directorate of Agri, GoWB, 2012). Average temperature varies from 37°C in summer to 5°C in winter. January is the coolest and June is the hottest month in Chilapata and adjacent districts (ibid). Hot and wet climate facilitated colossal growth of lush green vegetation that is the crown jewel of this part of the earth. Needless to say, once thick and abundant forests are now highly altered by human activities. The region experienced surges of human migration, forest clearing, land reclamation and establishment of new settlements in the last hundred years to such a great extent that the lands once infested by wild beasts are now transformed into bustling cities (Chowdhury, 1903).

Chilapata forest has a dense canopy density of about 40 percent or above in most of the core parts of the forest area. The forest is less dense in the peripheral zones and near the forest villages. The vegetal complex is mostly comprised of Northern Sal, Simul, Khair, Tunn, Moyna, Chap, Arjun, Amlaki, Boyra, Chalta, Amra, Chhatim etc. Tick and Eucalyptus are visible in the peripheral zones where they were planted by the forest department and altered the succession by replacing local varieties. Apart from trees, there are numerous species of shrubs, creepers and climbers that grow in abundance and give the forest a formidable look. Wild animals like Indian elephants, Gaur, Sambar and other herbivores from the deer family are abundant here. Predators like leopards, foxes and jackals are common while birds like peacocks, jungle fowls, parrots and hornbills add visual as well as symphonic grandeur to the forest.

There are five forest villages i.e. Andu, Bong, Kurmai, Bania and North Mendabari that surround the Chilapata forest range. All of these villages are home to tribal communities who are to some extent isolated from other parts of the district. The survey revealed that Rabha is the dominant tribal community in those villages while there is a considerable presence of the Oraon community also. Most of the villages have both communities living in segregation while some villages like Andu are resided exclusively by the Rabha tribe. Among the five villages, Kurmai, Andu and Bania are selected for the present case study. The region is home to both Rabha and Oraon tribes with the former being predominant in population size.

Local Ethnic Groups and their Forest Livelihood:

- i) **Rabha:** Rabhas, presently found in the states of Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal, have a Mongolian origin whose language falls under the greater Bodo linguistic group (Allen et al. 1909). They have often been associated with Kachari and Garo tribes, but Gait (Census Report of Assam 1891) has identified them as an ethnically and culturally distinct tribe.

Rabhas are divided into eight (8) endogenous sections, namely- '*Rongadani*', '*Maitori*', '*Pati*', '*Koch*' etc., among which the Koch Rabhas were inhabitants of the northern bank of river Brahmaputra who later migrated west and settled in Jalpaiguri and Kochbihar regions of Bengal. Koch Rabhas again consider themselves as descendants of the Koch people which is evident from the facts that they introduce themselves as *Ang-Kocha* ("Myself Koch"), their language is also called *Kocha-Crau* ("Koch language") and so on (Rabha S. 2009). In 1911 Census of India first reported 722 resident Rabhas of West Bengal who were living in the Himalayan foothills, practising cultivation and maintaining their distinct social and cultural norms despite living with neighbouring Bengalis and Rajbanshis for ages. These Indo-Mongoloid people had a close connection with the Koch kingdom in Cooch Behar (Mitra 1953). This Rabha population, living in West Bengal, has now increased to 27820 (Census of India 2011) out of which almost 95% live in rural settings within the natural boundary of the Terai-Dooars region in three districts of Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar.

Rabha tribe was historically dependent on the forest as they practiced shifting cultivation in small groups along the sub-Himalayan region apart from fishing, weaving and forest-based activities. They used to be traditional hunters, but are now found to be rearing pet animals like cows, pigs, goats and poultry birds (Biswas 2014). With the introduction of forest laws in colonial times and those continuing even after independence, the association of Rabhas with their surrounding forests has somehow been limited. The changing socio-political scenario of the foothills has forced them to adapt to the changing landscape and emerge as a partly agricultural-partly forest-dwelling tribe (Karlsson 2000).

Traditional Rabha language falls in the Tibeto-Burman sub-family within the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. There are three (3) principal dialects of *Rongadani*, *Maitori* and *Kocha* spoken among Rabha speakers across India. The language lacks its own script and the written tradition of Rabha literature started only in the early twentieth century using Roman, Bengali and Assamese script (Basumatary 2010). In West Bengal, the *Kocha* dialect of Rabha language is spoken whereas Bengali and Sadri are used as lingua franca for communication with neighbouring communities.

Traditionally Rabhas were animistic, but over time they have embraced Hinduism to get greater access to the resources and gain social status in the Hindu majoritarian regions of Assam and West Bengal. In some places, like the Kurmai village in the present study area, they have converted to Christianity as a result of initiatives taken by the Christian missionaries

since the colonial era (Mandal & Roy 2013). Traditional Rabhas worship *Rishi* or *Mahakal*, which, after Sanskritization, is regarded as a transformation of the great Hindu God, *Lord Shiva*. But unlike the Hindu religious text, where Lord Shiva is regarded as the destroyer of evil, in Rabha folklore Mahakal is depicted as the supreme creator of the World. Among other deities, Goddess *Rungtuk* and *Basek* are worshipped as household deities whereas Goddess *Baikho* is worshipped in the jungle (Sarkar & Mistri 2018). Traditionally Rabhas have been nature worshippers; have superstitious beliefs revolving around spirits, demons and deities; practice certain rituals before agricultural activities, hunting, and fishing and for treating diseases; attribute life to inanimate objects and natural phenomena. Thus they believe that the harmony in nature must be restrained in order to sustain human life in a healthy way (ibid.).

Traditionally Rabhas have been a matrilineal society where a newborn gets the *Hosuk* or *Gotra* ("clan") of his/her mother and women have enjoyed property rights of their father. People from the same '*Hosuk*' are not allowed to marry each other. A woman's role in Rabha household and society remains important where a family or '*Nok*' is generally headed by a female member. Social and religious rituals are mostly performed by women and they actively take part in agricultural activities and fishing. Rabha women have traditionally been fine weavers and prepare their traditional dresses using handlooms in their households.

In the distant past, Rabhas had their own tribal *Kocha Raja* ("Koch King"). Those living in the foothills of North Bengal had subsequently been under the rule of the Bhutanese kingdom, then under the British Monarchy and finally under the rule of Bengalis. There was growing discontent among Rabhas with hegemonic Bengali rule, represented by ethnically Bengali Forest Department officials (Karlsson, 2000), until 2013, when the incorporation of forest villages within local self-governance bodies (Panchayats) eventually enabled forest dwellers to represent themselves politically.

- ii) Oraon:** Peoples of the Oraon community are presently found in the Indian states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Odisha and Maharashtra. Oraons of Himalayan foothills in Northern Bengal and Assam had their origin in Chhotanagpur region, presently Jharkhand (Ghosh 2000; Biswas 2001; Ganguly 2003; Debnath 2014). Indian Anthropological Association identifies the Konkan region of Maharashtra as the region of origin of the Kurukh tribe, to whom Oraons owe their root (Purkayastha 2018). Early Oraon livelihood depended upon the forest resources, but forest laws of the colonial era took away their ancestral rights on land and forest in that region and the hardworking Oraon community was forced to immigrate to the Himalayan foothill regions in search of jobs as labourers in the newly established tea gardens in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Grunning 1911; Basu 2001). Oraon population in the state of West Bengal has increased from 240483 in 1941 to 643510 in 2011

(Census of India). In the Himalayan foothill region of Northern Bengal, they are mostly found in Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Uttar Dinajpur Districts as well as in the Siliguri plains of Darjeeling District.

Oraon society is patriarchal where the head of the society is called 'Mondal' or 'Mahato' who generally rules over an Oraon village or community. They are divided into different totemic clans that consider different natural objects like- plants, rivers, animals birds etc. as their totems and take their surnames accordingly. For example- *Ekka* ("Tortoise"), *Lakra* ("Tiger"), *Minz* ("Fish"), *Nag* ("Snake"), *Kujur* ("Climber Plant"), *Toppo* ("Bird"), *Kerketta* ("Bird") etc. are major Oraon clans in North Bengal. Oraons are exogamous communities where marriage is not allowed within the same clan. Dowry is to be paid at the time of marriage to a bride's family by the groom's family. Oraons allow divorce between a couple and also remarriage of a widow. Social and religious rituals are mostly performed by a *Pahan* ('Oraon Priest'). Oraons believe in the existence of spirits and perform different rituals to please various spirits. Though superstitious activities like witch hunting were practiced by Oraons in the past (Grunning 1911), now these activities are hardly observed among them (Biswas 2001). The ritual of the last rite for an Oraon person is an interesting one as it involves the dual process of burying and cremation (Nath 2011).

The traditional Oraon language is called '*Kurukh*' which is written in '*Taranga Siki*' script (Debnath 2014). They like their neighbouring tea garden tribes of Munda, Kharia etc. speak '*Sadri*' as lingua franca and use *Devnagari* or *Bengali* script (Basu 2001).

Historically Oraons were hunter-gatherers. But after immigrating to the Himalayan foothills they have been working as daily wage labourers in tea estates while many of them have settled as farmers across the Dooars region over the years (Ganguly 2003; Debnath 2014).

Traditionally Oraons are animistic in their belief and have faith in the existence of *Sarna* ('Divine Soul') in every natural being. All the religious activities involving a '*Sarna*' are performed beneath sacred groves (Ghosh 2003). For example in the biggest Oraon festival of '*Sarhul*', celebrated during March-April, *Sal* Tree ('*Shorea robusta*') is worshipped as *Sarna*. Their almighty god is '*Dharam*' or '*Dharmesh*' and they also worship *Biri* ('Sun'), *Chando* ('Moon') and *Dharti Aayo* ('Mother Earth'). Since independence Oraons in North Bengal have converted to Hinduism or Christianity and many have left their traditional customs and rituals. But all of them still maintain their traditional clan system and never cause harm to the totems of their respective clans (Nath 2011). While Christian Oraons are found to be offering prayer in churches; Hindu Oraons worship *Kali*, *Mahadeb*, *Hari*, *Durga* etc. (Barman 2011). The ritual of '*Danda Kata*' is one of the important religious rituals among all non-Christian Oraons and it is performed before all occasions to cast away bad spirits. Unmarried girls perform *Kadam* ('*Nauclea parvifolia*') *puja*, while married women perform *Jitiya* ('*Ficus infectoria*') *puja* at home. Apart from '*Sarhul*' another traditional community

festival of Oraons is '*Sohrai*' (Debnath 2014) which is celebrated the next day of *Diwali*. *Haria* ('Rice Beer') is an important part of Oraon Culture in North Bengal and it is served on almost every occasion in their society.

Though Oraons have historically been a peaceful and cheerful community, they famously staged a civil disobedience movement known as '*Tana Bhagat Movement*' (1914-19) with their Munda and Tana Bhagat compatriots. It started in the Chhotanagpur region against *Zamindars* ('Landlords'), *Banias* ('Moneylenders') and British officials in the region. A wave of this movement had also reached the tea gardens of the Himalayan foothills (Das 2001) and led to religious and cultural reformation. Presently Oraon community is living here in harmony with the majority Bengali, native tribes of Rabha, Mech etc. and other immigrant tribes of Santhal, Munda, Ho etc. Both Oraon men and women have equally taken part in self-governance through the Panchayati Raj system in Oraon majority villages. Kumargram constituent assembly, now in Alipurduar district, has been won by an Oraon candidate since 1982.

Impact of Globalization on Forest Livelihood in the Study Area:

Globalization has often been related to forest depletion (Wang et al., 2021; Menotti, 1998). India is no different as it has experienced large-scale depletion and conversion of native forest land into plantations, croplands etc. since colonial times. Arguably the most populous state in the world hardly had any alternative to accommodate and feed its billion-plus population. Keeping aside the loss of environmental resources, the victim has been the marginal aboriginal people who had been living in these forests since time immemorial. The Dooars, one of India's densest forest regions, has been through similar transformations over time starting from massive deforestation, boom in tea and timber plantation and afforestation through social forestry in recent times. The different tribes living here in the forest villages have also been through such transformations which have brought their isolated livelihood face-to-face with modern global living. The Rabha and Oraon tribes from the present study area are no different in their experiences.

Both communities have switched over to sedentary cultivation and have started working as plantation labourers living behind their traditional hunter-gatherer livelihood. Strict forest laws and sincere appeals from the government have been able to discourage them even from their annual hunting festival. But government policies are not the only factors responsible in this regard.

Missionaries from both Christian and Hindu religions have made quite an in-road in the socio-religious lives of both Oraon and Rabha tribes. Most of them now introduce themselves as either Christian or Hindu, though they have also carried forward their earlier traditional rituals. All these have resulted in a blend of animistic and other religious rituals in Rabha and Oraon religious practices. Hindu Oraons and Rabhas in West Bengal celebrate *Durga Puja*, *Kali Puja*, *Shiv Ratri* and other Hindu festivals; whereas

the Christians religiously attend *Sunday prayers* and celebrate the festivals of *Good Friday*, *Christmas* etc. But religion does not restrict them from participating in each other's festivities.

The intrusion of majority culture has brought some changes to the social outlooks of these forest villagers. Among Rabhas, earlier the bride's family used to receive dowry from the groom before marriage or he had to remain as househusband at the girl's house and give labour. But with the spread of the government norm of taking the family name of one's father, a woman's role in Rabha society has also diminished in recent times. Now the groom's family demands dowry before marriage and issues of women's property rights have also come under question. Oraons have also experienced this reversal of roles between a bride's and a groom's family concerning dowry. Oraon society, in the study area, has experienced a loss of their ancestral language over time. In the year 1901, 8% population in the district of Jalpaiguri used to speak *Kurukh* (Grunning 1911). But over time both these languages and scripts have lost usage among Oraons in North Bengal with only 2.6% of people speaking in *Kurukh* in Jalpaiguri in 2001 (District Census Handbook 2011).

There also have been many positives with the spread of globalization and modern social outlooks in these forest villages. There has been real growth in institutional learning among both communities. Government schools along with those run by missionaries have ensured that most of the young members from both Oraon and Rabha families have basic education. Medical facilities, though meagrely available, have entrusted tribal people in the study area with modern medicines. Witchcraft to treat an ill person is hardly visible here. More and more youths are going to near and far urban areas in search of higher education and better earnings. There have been significant improvements in girl education and women's work participation in the last decade. Spread of mainstream media, through television and the internet, have reduced the mental distance between the isolated forest villages and global cities. Almost all households in the three villages owned a smartphone with an internet connection during the time of the survey. An Oraon or a Rabha kid from these forest villages has already overcome the language barrier, technology has reduced their cultural distance from an urban child and the government policies are now ensuring them equal opportunities to participate in modern living as a global citizen.

Now it is to see if these impacts of globalization have been beneficial or not toward these forest villagers from the overall perspectives. There lies the importance of SWOT analysis as a qualitative measure.

SWOT Analysis:

Being a tool of the 'Business World', SWOT Analysis helps individuals and/or organizations in decision-making at various levels. Though sometimes criticized for its tendency of oversimplification, this tool has been well adopted by geographers for social and cultural analysis. It is hypothesized that 'Strengths' and 'Weaknesses' are found in the internal

environment of a society, while 'Opportunities' and 'Threats' come from the external environment (Fig.1).



Fig.1: Conceptualizing the SWOT Analysis

1. Strengths: It is the internal positive factors and characteristics of an individual or the concerned community or a system that give it some advantages over the others. These are the positive tangible and intangible attributes, internal to a society, organization or individual. The following are the features observed in the above-mentioned forest villages which can be considered as strengths to that forest living society-

- a. Abundant natural resources in terms of fertile land, abundant water supply from nearby snow-fed streams and high ground water table, forest supplies of food, fodder and firewood, and fresh and pollution-free environment.
- b. Strong kinship within a community, living together and practising their native aboriginal culture with little mixing with the outside urban world, have kept the tribal social and cultural traits intact.
- c. Living within an environment with little to no pollution, a society free of stress found in busy urban living, a simple down-to-earth lifestyle lets the inhabitants cooperate and coexist peacefully without exerting any considerable pressure on the surrounding forest.
- d. Strong man-nature relationship and co-existence of humans and wildlife for centuries.
- e. Traditional knowledge and wisdom of the villagers are being practiced in their farming, animal husbandry, handicrafts medicinal uses of local herbs and plants etc.

2. Weakness: Weakness, here refers to various internal factors or characteristics of an individual or a community or a place that put it in a disadvantageous position. These are the factors that limit the subject's ability to attain its potential growth or goal. These are also the features of the subject that fail to meet their desired standard. Following are the weaknesses identified in the study area of present discussion-

- a. The remote, isolated location of the forest villages kept them backwards for long in terms of infrastructure, education, health

facilities and civic amenities.

- b. Education is a matter of grave concern in the forest villages (FV) of the Chilapata Range. While Andu and Bania villages have primary schools (*Sishu Siksha Kendra*) to provide their children with basic education, children in Kurmai FV have to walk long out of their village to the nearby Mathura Tea Estate School for their education. None of these villages have a single secondary school or options for higher education. The only Secondary School is located at Mathura Tea Estate which is far away from Bania FV. This results in a high level of school drop-outs and minimal training of students in all these villages.

The scope for female education is narrower in these FVs, as girls are discouraged from going to school in most families and they are engaged in household work and are married off at a very young age.

Another problem is the language barrier. Even in the available educational institutions, the medium of instruction is either Bengali or Hindi. Thus the tribal children lack the scope of getting primary education in their vernacular. They rather have to overcome the language barrier first to understand whatever they were instructed to in school. That makes them vulnerable to school dropouts.

- c. All three villages have Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) for mothers and infants, but those are very poorly maintained. Those AWCs fail to meet the hygienic standards and also fail to provide nutritional requirements of the beneficiaries.
- d. There is a real crisis of healthcare facilities in all three forest villages in the study area. The only facility is the Primary health sub-centre, located at Andu FV. The nearest Primary health centre hospital or even a medicine shop is located in the urban centre of Sonapur which is around 12-15 K.M. away from these villages. Thus the inhabitants of the FVs live in a condition that is vulnerable to any kind of medical emergencies.

The low rate of institutional delivery is another concern in the study area. Early marriage for girls leads to early motherhood which eventually takes a toll on the health of the mothers. In the absence of a proper Labour room in the primary health sub-centre at Andu, most child deliveries occur following outdated rudimentary techniques. This results in increasing maternal and infant mortality rates.

- e. Employment and income generation, particularly for the youth, is a growing concern for the villagers. Expanding population, a large number of young men and women, restricted by the poor transportation facility and isolated location of the FVs, almost compelled to engage themselves in traditional agriculture which leads to pseudo-employment and low return from agriculture, trapping the villagers inside the vicious cycle of low income, poverty and malnourishment. MGNREGA works are not equitably distributed and remain completely at the mercy of local Panchayat

members. There is an absence of heavy industries in North Bengal in general, so employment in the secondary sector is not possible. Only a handful number of villagers in these three FVs are engaged in weaving handloom as a secondary option for earning. But in the absence of marketing facilities, they don't get a price for their products and their production has a very limited sale within their community or village.

- f. Farming practices in all three villages are limited to paddy cultivation only as rice is the staple food for the villagers. Pulses and vegetables are not produced by the villagers for fear of an invasion of wild animals from the surrounding forest. This practice of mono-crop cultivation and the absence of crop diversity reduces soil fertility and villagers are unaware of this fact.
- g. No fair-price ration shop was found in any of the three villages. So for other food and day-to-day products, apart from rice, villagers have to depend on the handful number of groceries in their villages or on hawkers coming from nearby Alipurduar or Pundibari. As a result, these poor villagers have to spend more on food items and other goods of daily requirements.
- h. The absence or bare minimal presence of all-weather roads in all three villages until recently, made it tough for the dwellers to commute in and out of those villages. The public transport facility was also very poor as only four buses were plying once a day along the State Highway, connecting the villages. So commuting to the outer world for educational, medical or emergency purposes was very challenging.

All three villages have minimal presence of street electrification and the available street lights are generally solar lamps which are not regularly maintained. In this scenario, commuting in the evening or night becomes very challenging and the risk of anti-social activities increases. Surveyors were advised by the local inhabitants to leave the area before evening.

- i. Limited access to opportunities leaves the youth idle and often results in them falling prey to the habit of intoxication and participation in unlawful activities like poaching or illegal fishing. Some of them migrate to cities in search of better employment opportunities. In most cases, lack of training ends them up taking up odd jobs as labourers in construction sites or road repairing projects, which doesn't pay them off any better life than their counterparts in the villages but still inflicts a sense of adoring individualistic pseudo-urban lifestyle that is thoroughly in contrast with their traditional clannish lifestyle back in the villages. As these people are coming back to their villages riding the virtues of improved roads and communication, now they can spend some spare time during the monsoon months when there is no such construction work going on in the cities and they can help their family members in the fields, they are bringing with them the

pseudo-urban culture that seems alien for the rest of the villagers in many ways. Thus a cultural gap within the tribal society is gradually widening facilitating the dilation of cultural territories from inside.

- j. There is a visible segregation between tribal groups living within a village sharing the same natural resource pool. The FVs of Kurmai and Bania are inhabited by both Rabha and Oraon people. These two tribes live in separate distant locations in both of these villages. There is limited to no social and cultural exchanges between the tribes. There is also a disparity in the economic and social status of the Rabha and Oraon tribes. Rabhas, a more dominant tribe in this region, enjoy more social and political privileges and are visibly well off than their neighbours. Thus the socio-cultural gap is not only brewing within the community but also between the communities in the Chilapata forest region.

3. Opportunities:

These are the external attractive factors that represent reasons for a community to prosper. These can be regarded as the chances available to make greater profits from the environment and the society itself to make greater benefits. Opportunity also lies in recognizing the possibilities, grasping them when they arise and utilizing those in the best possible manner. The opportunities identified in the present study may be listed as follows-

- a. Located in the midst of lush greeneries, Calm Rivers and beautiful landscape the study area have huge opportunities for the growth of tourism. There is scope for promoting eco-tourism and developing nature observatories, and amusement parks in and around the three forest villages. Some private resorts have already come up, but government initiatives involving the local people will be more effective. This will usher in infrastructural development and improve employment opportunities.

There is a spot, by the Bania river at the entrance of Bania FV, famous for shooting the National award-winning Bengali movie '*Moner Manush*' (2010). This spot is very famous as a picnic spot and has the potential to be developed as an iconic tourist spot in the Alipurduar district.

- b. Handloom products are very popular among city dwellers and state-wide handloom fairs are being organized each year in major cities. Dresses produced in the household handloom mills of the forest villages; namely- 'Nufun' (skirt), 'Kambang' (upper wear) and 'Fakchek' (dupatta) -the traditional dress of Rabha women; are unique in their material and style and can be hugely popular if properly marketed. This can establish the handloom industry as a dependable employment option among villagers, as well as will encourage the tribal art and culture practiced by Rabhas and Oraons of Kurmai, Andu and Bania FVs.
- c. For the purpose of saving the surrounding forest and its biota without hampering the hereditary right of the forest dwellers on the

forest resources and to ensure their traditional livelihood, a meaningful joint mechanism involving the forest department and forest villagers of Chilapata Forest Range is needed of the hour. The Forest Rights Act of 2008 has given the opportunity to forest dwellers who long due, rights on their land. If implemented judiciously, it can create a huge opportunity for employment and income generation through community management of the forest and getting revenue from the forest products.

4. Threats:

External elements in the natural or social environment which could cause trouble for an organization, a system or a society is regarded as 'Threat'. In spite of many opportunities, the study area and its people are suffering from many external threats as mentioned below–

- a. The biggest challenge, as stated by the villagers, is found to be attacks of wild animals (mainly deer, elephants and gaurs) into their farmland in search of food. Sometimes carnivores (leopards) visit the villages in search of easy prey in the form of domestic animals. These herds of animals often destroy the households of the villagers. All these have resulted in an increased number of struggles between villagers and wild animals. Villagers also complained about the unnecessary delay in receiving ex-gratia amount from the local forest department. On the contrary, the forest officials complain that villagers are often found grazing cattle inside the forest which leads to forest destruction and increase the number of encounters with the wild animals.
- b. A small investigation into the above-mentioned issue shed light on the problem of poaching and timber smuggling happening within the Chilapata forest range. The valuable Sal and Segun forest of Chilapata Range is getting cut down illegally for profitable timber business. Poachers are very active in this area. The local forest office, with its limited number of employees, is fighting hard against these miscreants, but that is not enough to stop them. Often these miscreants take refuge in these forest villages and in that process drag innocent villagers into the troubled waters as forest guards suspect villagers of the crime done by the others. In this process, both the common villagers and the forest officers and guards consider one another as their foes.
- c. The primary or secondary schools in the study area teach students in Bengali or Hindi medium, while the nearby private schools teach in English medium. So the indigenous languages (Rabha, Sadri, Adibasi etc.) of Rabha and Oraon people have turned out to be spoken languages only in this region. So there is a threat of losing valuable and unique literary resources, of those languages, developed here.
- d. The survey observed an alarming and brewing religious tension among the villagers. With the invasion of modern society and

majoritarian culture and religion into the animistic tribes of Rabha and Oraon, Christianity and Hinduism are being increasingly accepted by forest dwellers. This on one hand threatens the extinction of aboriginal and traditional tribal culture, on the other hand increases the otherization among forest dwellers themselves.

- e. Another non-explicit but major trouble is brewing in the region that is concerned with the recent boom of popular tourism in the region. Many tourist resorts have popped up in and around the forest in Chilapata lately. These resorts are on tribal lands but owned and managed by persons or agencies who are based in the cities. They cater for the urban tourists and provide them with every possible comfort of the city life in a remote forest land they import almost all products and services except the cheap labour from the cities. The flow of easy money started a kind of 'tourism slavery' in the region where the young boys and girls and the tribal women in particular were the prime victims. No concept of minimum wages is maintained here as the supply of labour is abundant.

The tourist itself is acting as a player of cultural change in the region, mostly unknowingly. Most of the lot come here without much knowledge about the local tribal cultural heritage. For them the 'tribal culture' is confined to the paid group dances performed inside the resorts as part of the 'entertainment package' and no one cares about them. Thus a dance that is meant for the harvest festival is being performed on chilly winter nights and the song for welcoming newborns is being played at the tea party. It is evident from the perception of the local people that a sense of dejection is looming at large regarding this popular tourism practice within the tribal society.

The study finds that the tribal communities living in and around the Chilapata forest are facing a problem that is multifaceted and has multiple implications at the personal, community and social levels. Here 'development' in its present context, represented by the construction of roads, augmented access to urban facilities and growth of tourism, comes with a price of decadence within the tribal communities. Although the wave of change is nothing new for these people as they are transforming with the changing socio-political and economic scenario of the region for the last several centuries, their interrelation with the forested landscape has never been threatened like before. The slow but unabated infiltration of an essentially cosmopolitan 'global' culture within the territory of the tribal livelihood is creating a sharp divide within the local community where the traditional people are facing the threat of authorisation and getting even more marginalized within an already marginalized society. The recent boom of popular tourism is adding vigour to this process by appreciating only some selected traits, here the dance for example, and completely ignoring the others. Thus, selective patronization creates a divide between privileged and non-privileged within the local community. Nobody could deny the need for a better lifestyle, easy access to services and facilities and scope for

economic growth, both on personal and community levels. But it seems, at least for the present, the toll is quite high if the perception of the local communities is taken into account.

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