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*Research article*

### **Conservation Induced Marginalisation: The Case of Two Tribal Communities of Assam, India**

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In India, the indigenous people designated as the scheduled tribes (STs) by the Indian constitution have been dependent on forests for their survival. However, with the declaration of protected areas, the conservation plans have mostly overlooked the dependence of these tribes on nature. This paper looks into the adverse impact of conservation on two tribes, the Karbi and Mising, residing on the areas adjacent to the Kaziranga National Park (KNP) of Assam, India. It points out that the case of KNP shows a marked deviation regarding support for conservation by the marginalised communities inspite of hardships. It shows how conservation efforts have further aggravated their conditions. The study was conducted through in-depth interviews with respondents of two villages – a Karbi village and Mising village located on the fringes of the KNP. This paper also takes a cursory glance on the community related initiatives undertaken on the fringes of the KNP for the betterment of the socio-economic conditions.

*Keywords:* Conservation, National Parks, tribes, marginalisation, Karbi, Mising

## Introduction

The tribal communities, known as indigenous communities, adivasis or scheduled tribes (STs) in Indian Constitution (Xaxa, 1999), have a symbiotic relationship with the forests and the resources therein. Out of a total of 300 million indigenous people in the world, 68 million people comprising of 573 tribal communities are residing in India (Pushpagandhan, 1994 cited in Rai and Nath, 2003). It has been observed that the tribal and the indigenous people mostly live in the proximity of rich biodiversity (Rai and Nath, 2003) and this has shaped most of their traditions, culture and lifestyle. They are dependent on the forest for their food, sustenance and livelihood needs. The tribes may indulge in settled agriculture or shifting cultivation for their food but derive their air, water, medicines, etc., from the forests apart from extracting minor forest produce like fodder and grasses, wax, cane and bamboo for shelter and different types of food such as wild leaves, roots, honey, fruits and nuts etc. Thus, forests are not only economically important for the tribals, but are also 'safety net in time of hardship' (Tiwari, Tynsong and Lynser, 2010: 329). At the same time, it is not only the forests and biodiversity that have shaped the tribal communities but also vice versa. With their rich knowledge about the ecosystems which form a part of their lives, they have not only survived in the hostile environments but also have managed the forests and its resources sustainably (Tiwari et al., 2010).

These areas with high biodiversity that see a high dependence of tribes for survival are also targeted upon by conservationists for protection measures. As a part of such measures, they are designated as protected areas under various regional, national and international laws. The rapid deforestation worldwide due to industrialisation and globalisation and the related extinction of species catapulted the need for protected areas as the sites of 'in-situ' conservation. The World Database on Protected Areas, as per the 2014 United Nations List of Protected Areas, records the presence of over 200,000 protected areas – both terrestrial and marine, covering more than 30 million sq. km. The total area covered under protected areas constitutes 3.41 per cent of marine protected areas and 14 per cent of terrestrial protected areas (Deguignet, Juffe-Bignoli, Harrison, Macsharry, Burgess and Kingston, 2014: 12). The need for global standardisation of definitions and categories of protected areas was felt which eventually led to the formation of six categories by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). These categories have now been adopted by a number of countries for the planning and management of their protected areas.

Despite the growing consensus on the need for protected areas, they have caught the attention of a section of policy makers, social scientists and academicians for their impact on communities. Protected areas are often established in areas with high biodiversity which are located mostly in remote and peripheral regions (Stone and Nyaupane, 2015; Woodhouse, Bedelian, Dawson and Barnes, 2018). These regions also incidentally imply the presence of forest dependent communities whose culture and lifestyle are inextricably linked with nature. Most of the established protected areas replicate the western conservation model that overlook the political, social and cultural issues (Andrade and Rhodes, 2012).

Kaziranga National Park (KNP) of Assam owes its origin to the steps taken by the British government to safeguard the wildlife for hunting. From its beginning as a game sanctuary in 1905 to a national park in 1974, World Heritage Site in 1985, and a tiger reserve in 2007, it has proved to be a conservation success which is evident in the increasing population of wildlife in the park. But like all other protected areas the history

of conservation in KNP has to be seen by taking the local communities in consideration. This is because, in meeting the conservation aims and objectives, the local communities have had a major role to play with their support and silent agreement to bear the adverse impacts of conservation.

The paper begins with a discussion on the relationship of the tribals with forests. It does not dwell with the argument between park-centric or human-centric approaches that has dominated conservation discourses (Sharma and Sarma 2013: 47). It goes on to enumerate the diametric relationship of protected areas with the tribes who are heavily forest reliant. In this context, it studies how the KNP has affected the Karbi or Mikir tribe and the Mising or Miri tribe residing on the fringes of the national park from the colonial times. It looks at the ways in which these marginalised communities negotiate with the protected area and the management while co-operating with the conservation efforts undertaken in the park at the same time. Finally, it speaks about the development activities undertaken by the park management, especially the formation of eco- development committees (EDCs) and raises the questions if the initiatives have been able to address the needs and requirements of the tribal population of the villages under study.

### **Tribals in Protected Areas**

The tribal (indigenous) population of the world is estimated to be around 250 million or four to five percent of the world's population spanning across 5000 to 6000 distinct groups of indigenous people living in more than 70 countries (Cohen, 1999). They are often seen to inhabit remote areas often rich in biodiversity due to which much of the land occupied by these tribes are demarcated as national parks or any other forms of protected areas (Beltran, 2000:14). Cohen borrows from van de Fliert (1994) and further says that-

While it may be true that indigenous peoples share a close attachment to their land, commonly lack statehood, are subject to economic and political marginalization, and are the objects of cultural and ethnic discrimination, they exhibit wide diversity in lifestyles, cultures, social organization, histories, and political realities (1999: 7).

Beltran's (2000: 25-26) study on 11 protected areas<sup>1</sup>, both marine and terrestrial, located in different parts of the world showed the existence of the indigenous, traditional or tribal people who had a strong dependence on nature. All the cases studied therein displayed that there were strong conflicts between the people and the conservation authorities on various issues. The most prominent ones were: ownership of land and sea within protected areas, access to the land and coastal/marine resources and granting concessions to commercial companies to extract benefits from the protected areas.

While the above situation reflects a global picture pertaining to protected areas and the tribal or indigenous people, the state of affair is more or less the same in the context of India. A report of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2013) states that the tribal population of India according to the census of 2011 stands at 10.43 crores which constitutes 8.6 percent of the total population of the country. Of this, approximately 89.97 per cent of the tribal population reside in the rural areas (GOI, 2013). On the other hand, according to the

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<sup>1</sup> The 11 case studies presented in the study were Kaa-Iya del Gran Chaco National Park and Integrated Management Natural Area, Bolivia; Cayos Miskitos and Franja Costera Marine Biological Reserve, Nicaragua; Sarstoon Temash National Park, Belize; Wood Buffalo National Park, Canada; the Lapponian Area, Sweden; Simen Mountain National Park, Ethiopia; Sagarmatha National Park, Nepal; Doi Inthanon National Park, Thailand; Xishuangbanna Nature Reserve, China; Kytalyk Resource Reserve, Russian Federation and Kakadu National Park, Australia.

National Wildlife Database maintained by the Wildlife Institute of India, 104 national parks of India encompass an area of 40501.13 sq. km. which constitutes 1.23 per cent of the total geographical area of the country<sup>11</sup>. Thus, it can be understood that most of the tribal population residing in the rural areas share their boundary with one form of protected area or the other. The relation of tribes with forests was acknowledged with the promulgation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act in 2006, commonly known as Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. It finally came into force in 2008 due to the sustained efforts of tribal rights activists and aimed at 'improving the quality of the marginalised forest-dwellers, particularly the tribals' (Shahabuddin and Bhamidipati, 2014: 124).

The Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes mentioned that the highest concentration of scheduled tribes is in Central India and the states of North-East India. The population of STs in each of the north eastern state of India form a substantial portion in comparison to the total population of each state. Mizoram ranks first with the highest ST population with 94.43 per cent, followed by Nagaland with 86.48 per cent, Meghalaya with 86.15 per cent, Arunachal Pradesh with 68.79 per cent, Manipur with 35.12 (excluding three sub- divisions of Senapati District), Tripura with 31.76 per cent and Assam with 12.45 per cent (GOI, 2013). Even during the colonial rule, with the exception of Assam, these states were more or less left undisturbed by the British officers due to the considerable presence of tribal population and the unfamiliar terrain.

Table 1 shows the concentration of the tribal population in various states of Central and North-East India along with the number of national parks in the given states. It gives a comprehensive idea of the connection between forests or biodiversity, tribes and protected areas or national parks in this case. It is seen that Madhya Pradesh has the highest concentration of tribal population in Central India with 14.69 per cent along with the highest number of national parks. Also, it is seen that there is not a single state in North East India that does not have at least one national park.

**Table 1: Indian States with percentage of tribal population and number of national parks**

Sl. No	States	ST population in the states to total ST population in India (in %)	Number of national parks
1	Andhra Pradesh	5.7	3
2	Arunachal Pradesh	0.91	2
3	Assam	3.72	5
4	Chhatisgarh	7.5	3
5	Gujarat	8.55	4

<sup>11</sup> Apart from national parks, there are also other forms of protected areas in India like the wildlife sanctuaries, conservation reserves or community reserves. However, the national parks are the most strictly protected areas with wildlife sanctuaries being the next.

6	Jharkhand	8.29	1
7	Madhya Pradesh	14.69	10
8	Maharashtra	10.08	6
9	Manipur	0.87	1
10	Meghalaya	2.45	2
11	Mizoram	0.99	2
12	Nagaland	1.64	1
13	Orissa	9.2	2
14	Rajasthan	8.86	5
15	Tripura	1.12	2

Source: Compiled from Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India 2013 - Ministry of Tribal Affairs Statistical Division, GOI, and ENVIS Centre on Wildlife and Protected Area, Wildlife Institute of India, Dehra Dun (<http://wiienviis.nic.in/Database/npa8231.aspx>)

Assam is home to 3.72 per cent of the tribal population in India and has five national parks<sup>III</sup>. The population around most of these national parks consists a sizeable amount of tribal people. For example, the Misings or Miris and the Karbis or Mikirs in the vicinity of Kaziranga National Park, the Bodos in the boundary of the Manas National Park, the Misings or Miris in Dibru Saikhowa National Park, etc.

When such areas are designated as protected areas or national parks, they become fortified with legal sanctions. Most of the times, they are designated without taking into consideration the local or tribal communities and their means of survival. This leads to an instant separation of the tribes from the forests and the activities of the tribal people through which they derived their livelihood and sustenance deemed illegal. At the same time, if they inhabit any portion of the protected area, they are labelled as encroachers. Such actions on the part of the state authorities deprive the tribes of their land, livelihood and means of survival, and thereby further relegating them into the margins.

### Study Area and Methodology

The study has been conducted in the fringe villages of KNP which lies between 26°34' N to 26°46' N latitudes and 93°08' E to 93°36' E longitudes. The KNP has been declared as a tiger reserve in 2007. The park spreads across the three districts of Nagaon in the east, Golaghat in the west and Biswanath in the north. The entire park is divided into five ranges which are the Burapahar range, the Bagori or Western Range, Kohora or Central Range, Agoratoli or Eastern Range and the Biswanath or the Northern Range.

For the purpose of the study, two fringe villages, namely, Kakojuri village and Borbeel Mising village were selected. The Kakojuri village, also locally known as Kakojuri Karbi Gaon, located near the Panbari Reserved Forest, to the south of the National Highway (NH) no. 37 also the Asian Highway (AH) no. 1 and on the foothills of the Karbi Anglong hills is mostly inhabited by the people of the Karbi tribe. This village is located near the Panbari Reserved Forest under Bokakhat Mouza with approximately 142 households a per 2011 census<sup>IV</sup>. This village falls in the elephant corridor that connects KNP with the Karbi

<sup>III</sup> Kaziranga National Park, Manas National Park, Dibru Saikhowa National Park, Orang National Park and Nameri National Park

<sup>IV</sup> Census of India 2011, Assam-District Census Handbook, Golaghat. Directorate of Census Operations, Assam.

Anglong landscape. This is a revenue village that has been included under the third addition of the KNP.

On the other hand, the Borbeel Mising village is located near the Hatikhuli Tea Estate in between the KNP and the National Highway (NH) no. 37 also the Asian Highway (AH) no. 1. Though this village consists of a mixed population of the tea tribe<sup>v</sup> and the Mising tribe, a majority of the population belong to the Mising tribal community. This area also is now under the second addition of the KNP. Figure 1 shows the addition areas of KNP that had been notified from time to time for expansion of the national park to accommodate the increasing wildlife population. A total of six areas have been notified to be added to the existing national park which are: First addition – Burapahar, Second addition – Sildubi, Third addition – Panbari Reserved Forest, Fourth addition – Kanchanjuri, Fifth addition – Haldibari, Sixth addition – Panpur Reserved forest and stretch of Brahmaputra on the north. Out of these additions, the second, third and fifth additions have not yet been added to the park due to pending legal, administrative and financial reasons (Kaziranga Management Plan, 2002).



Source: Eastern Assam Wildlife Division (EAWL), Bokakhat, Assam

Qualitative method was used to collect information from the field. In-depth interviews were conducted with respondents. The interviews were mostly recorded, and wherever denied field notes were taken. Secondary data has been extensively used which has been collected from journals, newspapers and data collected from the office of the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) located at Bokakhat, Kaziranga.

### The Karbi and the Mising tribes of Kaziranga

The Karbis and Misings are two of the major tribes of Assam. As per the 2011 census, the Karbis constitute 11.1 per cent and the Misings constitute 17.52 per cent of the total tribal population of the state of Assam. The Karbis, who are mentioned as Mikirs in the Constitution Order, Government of Assam, is an indigenous community. They are basically a hill dwelling tribe but are also found in the plain regions of Assam. Apart from

<sup>v</sup> Tea tribes were brought by the British to the area to work in tea gardens, and they are not recognised as STs in Indian Constitution.

Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC)<sup>VI</sup>, the Karbi tribes are spread over the districts of Nagaon, Kamrup, Morigaon, North Cachar and the Sonitpur districts of Assam. Though there are no proper accounts regarding the history, migration and settlement of the tribe, their folklores indicate that they used to inhabit the banks of the Kolong<sup>VII</sup> and the Kopili<sup>VIII</sup> rivers and the entire Kaziranga area. The presence of the Karbi tribe in the vicinity of Kaziranga is so strong that it is even assumed that the word Kaziranga has its origin in the Karbi language where *kazi* means 'goat' and *rangai* means 'red' meaning 'the land of red goats (deer)' (Vasu, 2003: 1). The forests have an important role to play in shaping the lifestyle, food habits, livelihood and culture of the Karbi tribe. The Karbis mainly practice *jhum* (slash and burn) cultivation in the hills and settled agriculture in the plains. Their food includes a wide variety of forest produce ranging from roots, spices and meat (Teron, 2009). Their dependence on the forests for their nutritional requirements has also led them to be adept in hunting and gathering.

On the other hand, the Misings who are also known as Miris by the Indian government and recognised as a ST generally inhabit the floodplains of the Brahmaputra. They have therefore accumulated extensive knowledge regarding the abundant biodiversity and the ecosystems of the Brahmaputra wetlands that have led them to devise various adaptive strategies for survival (Cremin, 2012). At present, they are found to be inhabiting in the riverine island of Majuli located near to Jorhat and on the north and south banks of the Brahmaputra in Upper Assam. A small concentration of the Mising tribe is also found in the Bokakhat Subdivision near the KNP. Unlike the Mikirs or the Karbis who are predominantly a hill dwelling tribe, the cultural identity of the Misings have been shaped by the river.

### Impact of KNP on the Karbi and Mising Tribes

These indigenous communities have always been dependent on the forests and developed expert hunting skills. Their hunting skills and familiarity with the forests caught the attention on the British officers due to which they considered the members of the Karbi tribe as deterrents to their conservation plans. It is important to note that during that time, the Britishers were concerned about safeguarding the wildlife of Kaziranga only for ensuring a continued supply of game for hunting in the sanctuary. A news article that appeared on the Times of Assam on 10<sup>th</sup> August, 1913 attracted the attention of the British officers towards indiscriminate hunting of animals referred to as 'game'. The author of the article wrote extensively on the hunting or *shikar*<sup>IX</sup> propensities of the Mikir (Karbi) tribe in the following words -

As I happen to live at no great distance from Kaziranga, I know the *shikaring* propensities of the Mikir people around these parts well. The wanton destruction done by them to all kinds of game is appalling; no discrimination whatever is made by them as to male and female, mature or immature, or any attention paid to the

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<sup>VI</sup> The foundation for The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) was laid when the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district was formed in 1951. It was bifurcated into Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills District in 1970. The Mikir Hills district was renamed as Karbi Anglong District in 1976 and finally rechristened as KAAC in 1996. It enjoys autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

<sup>VII</sup> This river is a tributary of the Brahmaputra that flows through Nagaon and Morigaon districts and meets the Brahmaputra in Chandrapur area of Guwahati.

<sup>VIII</sup> This river originates in the Meghalaya plateau and drains the districts of Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao, Kamrup and Nagaon in Assam.

<sup>IX</sup> The vernacular word *shikar* was used extensively by the Britishers to mean hunting.

close season...As an example of wanton destruction done to *shikar* by Mikirs, I quote the following occurrence...On making enquiries I found this buffalo had been shot by a Mikir *shikari*, and next day was cut up and carried off by Mikirs who came down from the hills<sup>x</sup>.

This news article which particularly targeted the Mikirs or the Karbis was used to give momentum to the proposal for extension of the then Kaziranga game sanctuary which was finally notified in 1914 vide notification No. 1813R, dated the 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1914. Before the notification appeared, the land proposed for adding into the Kaziranga game sanctuary was surveyed and it was found that the northern boundary of the park was inhabited by the Miri or Misings. It was found that there was one Mising village with 89 houses amounting to 412 persons on the northern boundary when the extension was proposed<sup>xi</sup>. The British officers unanimously opined that the Mikirs and the Miris did great damage to the *game* and their entry in to the game reserve was to be strictly regulated for the protection of the animals.

Regarding the Miris or the Mising tribe, they held the general opinion that the tribe was 'a shifting race' or 'nomadic' and that they were also 'poachers' like the Mikirs or the Karbis. The shifting nature of the Mising people was taken as a condition that the expansion of the protected area would not cause any major problem for the tribe. On the other hand, the hunting skills and the food habit of the Karbi tribe which they acquired due to prolonged habitation in forest areas became a reason for being adjudged as a tribe that killed wildlife indiscriminately. This is a poignant example of the fact that the tribes that had unlimited access to the forests and depended on the wildlife for meeting their nutritional requirements, were labelled as 'poachers'. It did not necessarily mean that these tribes killed the wildlife for any kind of illegal economic gain during that time. The various measures undertaken during the colonial times for the protection of forests and wildlife continued even after independence.

The Karbis and the Misings practice settled or shifting cultivation depending on their place of residence. Rice is the staple food for them like most of the other tribal and non-tribal population residing in the state of Assam. As most of the Karbi and the Mising population residing in the vicinity of the KNP practice farming, they have agricultural lands on the boundary of the park. A Karbi elder living in the Karbi Anglong foothills said,

We have lands on the other side of the highway but we can hardly expect to reap a good harvest due to animals of the park that come out and destroy our crops. Most of the people in our village have stopped farming altogether. They have gradually diverted towards other forms of livelihood like manual labour in some other establishments etc...But our tribe is not used to such kind of work. Time has changed (interview conducted on 22.07.2016).

This view of the respondent gives a picture of the condition of the tribal people inhabiting the fringes of a famed national park. The effective implementation of the protectionist measures has undoubtedly a significant role to play in conservation success of the park, but without taking into account the situation of the tribe's dependent on the forests. Their alienation from the forests led them to search for other means of livelihood that has affected their social and psychological wellbeing. It has been observed from the

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<sup>x</sup> 'Extension of the Kaziranga Game Reserve in the Sibsagar District' Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, May 1914, No. 37. Assam State Archives

<sup>xi</sup> Letter no 3487 R&F., dated Gauhati, the 10th October 1913 from Lieutenant Colonel D. Herbert, Commissioner, Assam Valley District to the Second Secretary to the Hon'ble the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Assam Secretariat Proceedings.

field that, due to the inability to engage in agriculture like earlier times, tribes living in these villages have been exploring the livelihood opportunities in other avenues like stone quarries<sup>xii</sup> or other form of manual labour as wage earners. Further, because of restriction in entering the forests for meeting the fodder needs for their cattle, they do procure fodder through the payment of money at times that has also led to the people selling most of their cattle. The empirical evidence also indicates that tribes have been caught amidst paying the cost for conservation at one hand and their own sustenance on the other. The tribal population of these villages is also under constant fear of being displaced as their village has been included under addition areas for KNP for the extension of the park. They view this as a threat to their survival. They expressed their lack of trust in the state agency to take into account their present condition despite their co-operation in conservation efforts.

On the other hand, the residents of the Borbeel Mising Gaon, located also on the boundary of the KNP face a similar situation. One of the respondents said,

Everything is a matter of survival for us now. We have been moving from one place to another. The river (Brahmaputra) eroded our village and we were given land to settle down. Now even this land is under the addition area of Kaziranga national park...we have heard that people will be compensated but we are not sure. What will we do with the money? Where is the land for us? (Interview conducted on 1.5.2018).

The anxiety generated by the respondent gives an insight into the deep-rooted fear in the minds of the people. The Mising tribal population now residing in Borbeel village were given the permission to settle when their village near the Brahmaputra river in Bokakhat was eroded by the river in the early part of 1970s. At that time, 52 Mising families were offered settlement which have presently increased to approximately 100 families as informed by the respondent. This land bordering KNP has also been included in the second addition area for further expansion of the KNP. Though arrangements have been made for compensating the people for their respective lands, they are reluctant to accept it. The respondent further informed that while collecting information about the compensation package drawn for them from the offices, they have realised that not every family is likely to be compensated as per government rules. This has only added to their worries with their main concern being land for resettlement and agriculture to continue their existence. Recollecting the time when the rules were flexible, a respondent said,

We used to go into the forests for collecting our requirements like firewood, materials for constructing houses, fishes from the beels and rivers, etc. But now all such things are illegal. So, we have had also to cope with the changes and look for alternate means. If we go into forests now, we will be considered as poachers and may get shot. We will be no different from the real poachers though we have always co-operated for conservation (Interview taken on 2.5.2018).

The information collected from the field indicates that due to strict conservation rules and regulations, goods that were available easily for the tribes from the forests and hills have become scarce. Instead of the forests, they have to rely on the markets for their needs that adds to their economic burden. These situations also affect their psychological wellbeing and they feel alienated from the signs of development occurring around them. At the same time, they have developed a resentment towards the state mechanism and allege that they are in no better position than refugees, encroachers or migrants in their own lands. Smadja (2011) observed that the Mising tribe have not only been excluded from

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<sup>xii</sup> At present, the stone mining and quarrying activities have completely stopped following the Supreme Court order banning the activities passed in April 2019.

their own land but those having land also suffer continuous depredations from the animals of the park. She asserts,

Moreover, not only have they been excluded from the park area, they are now also being excluded from the *saporis*, but those who still own land in the park's surrounding area regularly suffer depredations from the park's wild animals... They have become poachers and encroachers on what they consider their own territory. Indeed, some accept ₹ 500 a head from mafia groups to kill rhinoceroses whose horns are then exported to Myanmar. Their relations with park authority often end in conflict (2011: 253).

Though the above statement was made in the context of the Mising (Miri) tribe in the vicinity of the KNP, the observation made regarding the consequences faced by them due to the top-down conservation approach reflects the situation of any tribe residing in the fringes of most of the protected areas of the world. It reflects how sometimes the conservation efforts can push members of the tribes into taking dire steps for their livelihood and survival.

### **Developmental activities undertaken by KNP authority**

Tribal communities living in the fringe areas of KNP have also extended their coordination and cooperation towards conservation efforts. This testifies the larger concern of the tribal communities towards the conservation of forest resources. With the emerging concept of the vital role played by the local communities in supporting conservation efforts, the conservation authorities have also devised various ways to garner the support of the local communities residing on the fringes of the KNP. The KNP authority initiated the formation of eco-development committees (EDCs) in 2002 which is considered as 'Entry point activity' into the communities by the KNP authority. They aim at development of the socio-economic condition of the fringe communities by allocating funds to the committees formed for the villages. However, even such a step undertaken by the KNP authority for the benefit of the communities have not proved fruitful for bettering the conditions of the villages under study. During the field study, one of the respondents from Kakojuri village said,

It has been more than a decade that such a committee (eco-development committee) was formed and I was also a member. But there has been no work done under that. I have heard that other committees in other villages have received fund but we have not received... The people of this village work with the management during floods for saving animals, inform them when animals stray into the village from the park and do not kill but we have never received any benefit from the authority (interview conducted on 20.07.2017).

Another respondent from the other village remarked-

I have heard that such a committee exists but we are not members of such committee and neither have I heard anyone belonging to our village being a member. These committees are headed by influential people who have good relations with the (forest) department. (interview conducted on 01.05.2018).

Such opinions are common across most of the members of the tribal people. Some even accuse the authority of being biased and partial. These responses bring to light that initiatives aimed at socio-economic development of the people have not been able to achieve the aims. However, there are also instances where the EDCs formed in other villages with significant tribal population have been reported to be functioning well. The reasons for the differences or the disparity will need a detailed study and analysis. Meanwhile, non-allocation of funds to eco-development committees without informing the members of the reason in some places and exclusion of members from the tribal population might only deepen the feeling of resentment and alienation.

### Conclusion

The KNP is globally renowned as a successful story of conservation. From its first inception as a reserve forest in 1905, various measures have been implemented that has led to the success of conservation till the present times. However, before the areas came under legal protection, there were local and tribal people that had used the forests as their own. In the present times, although conservation of wildlife and nature is of paramount importance, the fate of the tribal people that have been historically dependent on forests for survival cannot be overlooked. The traditional conservation discourses that have mostly viewed human interaction with nature with doubt failed to consider the adverse effects on the forest dependent communities or chose not to. Similarly, Karbi and Mising tribes that have been traditionally dependent on the forests have mostly been left out of the picture in the context of KNP. However, efforts to help them to adopt alternate means for their traditional expression without totally depending on forests in some other villages cannot be negated.

During the colonial times, their presence inside and around the environs of the protected area was eyed with utmost suspicion. They were always considered in the light of poachers and illegal entrants to the protected areas with little consideration to the traditional practices. At this point, it becomes imperative to mention that the condition of these tribes have not improved much in the post-independent period. Though they have been recognised as STs by the Indian constitution and some of them have received separate councils or districts with some degree of autonomy under the Sixth Schedule<sup>XIII</sup> of the constitution, the condition of the tribes in the surroundings of the KNP will need a different approach. The relegation of these tribes into the periphery that occurred during the colonial times has not yet been contained. On the contrary, the approach of the conservation efforts undertaken after independence has further marginalised these communities. As these tribes bear their own cultural identity and ethnicity, a properly planned initiative to uplift their socio-economic condition while making them partners in conservation can play a vital role in strengthening their relation with the national park and the authority.

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<sup>XIII</sup> It deals with the administration of tribal areas in the four north eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram whereby autonomous districts or councils may be formed.

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