Putting conservation in local hands
The politics of social inclusion and its shortcomings in the self-governed northeastern hills of India

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IRD/IFP
‘Political Ecology in Asia 2019
Chulalongkorn U., Bangkok
9-11 October 2019
1- India’s forest context & the specificity of the Northeast

**GENERAL CONTEXT:**

- Vast majority of forests since the colonial times under the direct control of state forest departments
- Led to numerous conflicts with forest communities
- State dominance over natural resources overrides the spirit of decentralized governance
- 2006: Forest Rights Act --- not fully implemented
- Overall issue of tenure insecurity, but no singular hegemonic state-led project, complexities of empirical contexts matter!
SPECIFICITY OF THE NORTHEAST:

- 6th Schedule of the Constitution: significant autonomy for many upland areas of the NE

- “the all-India lexicon of environmental protests does not apply in the Northeast (...) The main villain, the forest department, is not the all-powerful institution that it appears to be elsewhere in India. (...) it is people and not the forest department that officially own and manage most of the forest lands in the northeastern hills” (B. Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*)

- Less than 10% of the forests of Meghalaya are under the authority of the Forest Department
RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- How a green economy experiment, the ‘Khasi Hills community Redd+ project’ unfolds in the particular context of these frontier areas?

- What the situation does look like when the State is not fully in control, and forests are owned and managed by people? Can we assume that this difference in property arrangements benefits the management of the forest and the community to whom it belongs?

- Unpacking the consensus
2_ Building upon cultural difference

- Trope: “The area was chosen on the grounds of established Khasi traditions of forest conservation and legal right for natural resource management”.

- Main objective: To conserve existing forests and regenerate degraded forests by “strengthening traditional institutions and empowering communities as resource managers”
 Tradition, rituals, and respect for nature are intrinsic to the Khasi people of India’s Northeastern state of Meghalaya, the ‘Land of the clouds’ »...
« Sacred groves scattered throughout their land are a testimony to their traditions of forest conservation »...
« In the last few decades however, damaging extractive industrial practices and global climate change are taking their toll »...
In June 2011, the Khasi formed a Federation of ten indigenous kingdoms to unite their efforts to restore and protect their forests... 

= « Ethnic spatial fix » / standards of “radical alterity-as-virtue” (TM Li) ... popular strategy but which carries its own dilemmas
3_ Incentivizing green collective entrepreneurship

- “Environmentality”: environment internalized as a critical domain of thought and action by villagers

  ... how?

- Incentives to build up a green community of entrepreneurs by:
  - Strengthening traditional institutions
  - Environmental education
  - Financial incentives + disciplinary procedures
Strengthening indigenous institutions at the village level and the hima (‘native state’) level, through
→ the consent of the dorbar (‘council’).
→ the creation of an apex body composed by native kings called the synjuk (‘Federation’).
Massive campaign of environmental education orchestrated by the secretariat of the *Synjuk*, through trainings for the youth. Use of religious platforms

- Training of community facilitators
- Preaching
Financial incentives (individual grants, Self-Help Groups...) coupled to more disciplinary procedures of audit and accountability

Synjuk staff checking the good use of an individual grant (polyhouse)
4_ Faultlines

Disjunctions between the inclusive model that is promoted and its implementation:

- **Sovereign community** Figure of the green entrepreneur
- **Innovative dimension** Nature of ecodevelopment activities
- **Politics of inclusion** Structural social inequalities
Tension between the sovereign community versus the figure of the green entrepreneur

Tambor Lyngdoh was accorded the Eastern Himalayan Conservation Award for his contribution towards socio-economic development of forest fringe communities of Mawphlang, Meghalaya.
Tension between the new, « innovative » model *versus* the nature of ecodevelopment activities

A Self Help Group member receives a rice-cooker
Tension between the politics of inclusion *versus* structural social inequalities

Meeting with the *Hima dorbar* (native state council)

Meeting with landladies who accepted to give a piece of their private forests to the project