
Development Intervention and Ethnic Communities in Bangladesh and Thailand: A Critique

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Abstract: *This paper critically examines development interventions and their implications for ethnic communities within the framework of people-centered development in specific contexts of southeastern Bangladesh and northern Thailand. The development interventions did not contribute to poverty alleviation and they undermined viable alternative approaches to the livelihoods of the ethnic communities. Moreover, these development interventions failed to or did not recognize the psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of the concerned communities. It is suggested that development needs to be embedded in and based on local knowledge, culture and bio-physical environments.*

1. Introduction

Over the last four decades, the conventional growth-centered development (Korten, 1990) model has neglected diverse local economics and indigenous knowledge in order to modernize ethnic communities in the southeastern part of Bangladesh and northern Thailand. Such conventional interventions have been accelerated through the construction of dams, implementation of forestry programs, establishing land controls, and the framing of rules and regulations in the name of investment, growth and extension of market. This massive process was designed to regulate the lives of ethnic communities/minorities and hill tribes (e.g. the *Marma*, *Chakma*, *Issan-Lao* speaking people, and *Karen*) through centralized policies of development that undermined people's decision-making capacity, participation, creativity, knowledge, and livelihoods in the regions of Bangladesh and Thailand (Buergin, 2000; Dewan, 1993; Moshin, 2003; Poffenberger, 2006; Trakarnsuphakorn, 2007; Sato, 2000; Sudham, 2002, 2007; Tripura, 2000). Despite the huge

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extension of the growth model of development interventions, there has been increasing social and cultural resistance among the ethnic communities to revitalize their cultural knowledge, cultural rights and livelihoods through a participatory development approach (Barua in press, 2010; Barney, 2007; Buergin, 2000; Darlington, 1998, 2000; Sudham, 2002). Eventually, the proclamation of the World Decade for Cultural Development (WDCD) in the mid 1980s, the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1990 and the Earth Summit of Rio in 1995 also augmented consciousness among development actors to acknowledge the issues of indigenous culture, knowledge, and sustainable development within development interventions (UNESCO, 1995; United Nations, 1990). I believe it is important to value the perspective of the ethnic communities in the construction of knowledge within the process of development. If development planners and actors fail to design programs based on the local context, it is naturally geared towards failure. Thus, I concur with the observation that “a strongly holistic tradition and tendency to identify with the indigenous peoples (or ethnic communities) provide anthropologists (sociologists and development specialists), with a unique perspective on development process” (Wilson-Moore, 1997: 486)—one that needs to be seriously deployed in the interests of a more honest process of people-centered-development.

This paper attempts to critique conventional assumptions about development that dislocated ethnic communities, local knowledge, and livelihoods in the southeastern part of Bangladesh and northern Thailand. More importantly, I attempt to construct knowledge from the socio-cultural perspective of a Buddhist society as the people of these geographical regions practice *Theravada* Buddhism, which does not advocate *pseudo-desire* and *unbridled desire (tanha)* among the people (Barua, 2009; Goulet, 1993). The paper is based on my practical observation(s) and field research experience(s) (Barua and Wilson, 2005; Barua, 2007, 2009). The analytical perspective/ discourse of the Buddhist notion of development as it promotes an *eco-centric* development approach that nurtures diversity for sustainable livelihoods is what is deployed to assess dominant modernization-oriented development interventions in these regions (Barua and Wilson, 2005). The Buddhist

traditions, in fact, germinated as a spiritual power against social injustice and oppression (including oppression in the name of modern developmentalism) and emerged as a “movement of renouncers” in ancient India (Wijayartna, 1990: 1). The discussion here is limited to the issues and problematics raised by post-colonial development discourses/debates pertaining to peoples’ knowledge, dams, forests and livelihoods, development interventions, and socio-cultural aspects. For convenience of discussion, the terms ‘ethnic minorities’, ‘ethnic communities’, ‘Buddhists’ ‘forest communities’, and ‘hill tribes’ are used interchangeably in the paper. The terms ‘*modernization*’ and ‘*globalization*’ are also used interchangeably since they are deeply rooted in development discourse.

2. Development Discourses and Post-colonial Agendas: Toward Eurocentrism or People-Centered Development?

The post-colonial nation-state emerged with the hope and aspiration of attaining rapid economic growth similar to the west after the end of formal colonialism in Asia and Africa. In time, bilateral development agencies were established in the 1950s to continue to implement processes of colonial control and modernization, i.e., the Western-style development model in Asia, Africa and Caribbean Islands (Burkey, 1993).

Modernization theory emerged in the late 1930s with the initiatives of colonial administration (Parpart, Connelly and Barriteau, 2000). It became more dominant in the late 1950s and the early 1960s (Harrison, 1988; Learner, 1958; Parsons, 1971). The theory of modernization is deeply ingrained in the environment of western society and culture. In other words, it was fully constructed from within the milieu of western society. The central concern of the modernization model is that development is a natural, linear progression away from traditional socio-economic practices and toward economic growth. Socio-cultural values are seen as fatalistic and endemic to traditional societies. Additionally, the process of modernization was seen as creating a space for each individual for higher economic

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growth (Rostow, 1960). The model of modernization was adopted with the understanding that it would improve the standard of living of all people in the developing countries regardless of their gender and ethnic identity. The main focus was on economic growth through a process of industrialization and urbanization in order to ensure cultural and social change in society (Lerner, 1958).

The growth oriented modernization model was further supported by the “human capital” approach in order to develop human resources (Rathgerber, 1990; Schultz, 1961). In this effort, education and training have long been considered an essential precondition for the modernization of an economy through the introduction of technology and behavioral change (Hallack, 1990; Rahman, 1996). Modernization theory claims that economic, socio-cultural and political changes are mutual and coherent in their impacts with respect to change (Inglehart, 1997). Education is perceived as the provider of modern values, within the framework of modernization theory—an intervention to change the traditional values of people in developing countries (Barua, 2009). In most cases, this modernization theory favored the approach of a *transfer of technology* in order to diffuse the western values among the people in the rural societies, while following indigenous knowledge and culture was considered backward and irrational (Selener, 1997). Through this process, modernization theory ignored the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts of the societies seen to be in need of development. Traditional cultural practices and values were labeled as impediments to economic growth and social development. Over the post-independence years, the theory of modernization continued to influence the newly independent nation states in Africa and Asia. This modernization model was pushed forward by the western-dominated nation states after World War II, replicating the socio-cultural values of the corporate economy that eventually forced the post-colonial nation states to assimilate western values and traditions in a passive manner (Parpart, Connelly and Barriteau, 2000). As Pieterse (2001: 23) elaborates:

modernization is essentially social engineering from above and an operation of political containment rather

than democratization. American modernization projects such as community development and the Green Revolution exemplify this character of White revolution.

Modernization policies tend to destroy existing social capital and local economic resources for the sake of economic growth in order to construct artificial social fabrics through the application of liberal productivism in developing countries (Pieterse, 2001). Over the years, such an economic growth model has not improved the quality of life, but has created an environmental disaster and social and economic inequality within the social structure of developing countries.

Northern versus Southern Discourse

In the 1960s, social scientists in Latin America raised critical questions about modernization theory due to the continuing under-development of their society. Among these proponents, Frank (1969), Amin (1976) and Rodney (1982), rejected the Eurocentric model of modernization. They argued that underdevelopment was mainly the result of unequal and exploitative economic relations between the northern states and the southern states (Handelman, 2003; Parpart, Connelly and Barriteau, 2000). Dependency theory openly questioned the assumed mutual benefits of international trade and development stressed by European and American proponents of modernization and growth theories. The key argument of dependency theory was that socio-economic dependency (neo-colonialism) created underdevelopment within the rural peripheries in Latin American nations in the name of modernization (Burkey, 1993). The dependency theorists outwardly rejected the acceptance of the western model of development in southern countries. They argued that underdevelopment was caused by the capitalist system of the northern world. This process created an environment of dependency within the system of southern nation states (Handelman, 2003). Dependency theory criticized the modernization model for concealing the relationship between development and under-development, as if modernization happened independently in the developed

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world without exploitation (Pieterse, 2001). Frank (1969: 46) argued:

if the underdeveloped were really to follow the stages of growth of the now developed ones, they would have to find still other peoples to exploit into underdevelopment, as the now developed countries did before them.

Dependency theory emphasized the issue of un/equal distribution of wealth and social in/justice and predicted that the economic modernization model could only help a minority of the population in the developing countries. It redefined the notion of economic development for the benefit of impoverished populations (Handelman, 2003). In the words of Pieterse (2001: 61-62):

dependency theory—which serves by and large as the political economy of Third World nationalism—is stretched to apply to culture: protectionism, dissociation, endogenous development are prescribed for national culture as they have been for the national economy.

Despite its critical contribution to the development debate, dependency theory has failed to offer any meaningful clarification as to why, how and under what circumstances underdevelopment and development transpire. Furthermore, this theory failed to speak of the issue of interaction between power and income within and outside the home. Interestingly, both “modernization theory and Marxism, development thinking and dependency theory have in common is economism, centrism, and teleology” (Pieterse, 2001: 25). Similarly, the dependency theory ignores the issues of the internal dynamics of clan, race, ethnic oppression, and gender at the community level. It also disregards the question/place for non-capitalist modes of production.

Over the years, both theories have not addressed the contribution of people’s knowledge, science and culture to the national development process (Barua, 2009). By and large, the Eurocentric model of economic development

engendered and discouraged people-centered development in the developing countries (e.g. Bangladesh and Thailand). Shiva (2000: vii) clearly mentioned that, “the priorities of scientific development and R&D (rural development) efforts, guided by a western bias, transformed the plurality of knowledge systems into a hierarchy of knowledge systems”. Rather, the growth model of economic development created dependency within cultures on the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. In fact, economic development based on the Eurocentric model could not address the economic crisis of the Asian tigers in the 1990s, despite its ambitious goals for high economic growth (Laird, 2000; Sudham, 2002).

As the growth model created a crisis in Asia in 1997, it raised critical questions for local thinkers and development planners regarding the survival of rural economy and culture on the Asian continent (Barua, 2009). Despite this fact, the King of Thailand in his annual address stated, “we have to go backwards, have to be careful and have to return to unsophisticated business ... We need to go back so that we can go forward” (The Nation, 1997). Despite this, the so-called developed nation states have become more arrogant in an effort to transplant their knowledge and model without acknowledging ‘local-specific knowledge’ and ‘cultural context’ in the developing countries (Norberg-Hodge, 1991). If development is not designed within the context of existing socio-cultural perspectives, it will be impossible to implement eco-centric and people-centered development for a community (Barua and Wilson, 2005). This is especially true for Buddhist societies in the southeastern part of Bangladesh and northern Thailand. “To ignore people’s knowledge (and culture) is almost to ensure failure in development” (Agrawal, 1995: 2). Thus, development must be orientated towards the social, cultural, spiritual and political conditions of people. Freire (1970: 4) explicitly mentioned that “ideas coming from another part of the world cannot simply be transplanted”. In truth, external impositions are not acceptable in ideal Buddhist societies.

People-Centered Development: Towards a People’s Science and Knowledge

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The people-centered development model is grounded in the principles of social justice, inclusiveness and eco-centric development. It places emphasis on local knowledge, local economics, people's participation, spirituality and the self-reliance of the community (Barua, 2009; Barua and Wilson, 2005; Korten, 1990; Rahman, 1994). "People-centered development does not look into international charity (aid) as the answer to poverty. It seeks the productive use of local resources to meet local needs"¹ (Korten, 1990: 18) and it avoids massive expansion, high growth and profit. "There is no self-reliant way of development without primary reliance on peoples' resources including their own knowledge" (Rahman, 1994: 70). More importantly, people-centered development encourages people's knowledge, organization, and promotes participatory decision-making processes for achieving sustainable development and biodiversity. Its vision is quite relevant to the Buddhist notion of *eco-centric* development based on simplicity and the preservation of natural resources and towards the promotion of self-reliance and local cultural values. In an ideal Buddhist society, poverty is undesirable. More importantly, it does not propose to create *pseudo-desires* in order to create delusion within the society (Barua, 2009; Barua and Wilson, 2005). The Buddhist practice of economic development is very different from growth-centered development. It emphasizes liberation and refinement of human quality in order to control materialistic desires and greed in society for the welfare of all, without discrimination and disparity. The production of local resources for local needs is the most appropriate mode of economic life in a Buddhist society. Dependence on imports from a great distance and exports to unknown destinations are uneconomical from the Buddhist point of view. Buddhist economy stresses minimum consumption of natural resources in order to maintain harmony with nature and society. The minimum utilization of resources also helps

¹ For further clarification, see 'The Manila Declaration on People's Participation and Sustainable Development' (A statement of the participants in the Inter-Regional Consultation on People's Participation in Environmentally Sustainable Development sponsored by the Asian NGO Coalition (ANGOC), Manila, Philippines and the Environmental Liaison Center International, Nairobi, Kenya).

to sustain a locally self-sufficient economy and to protect the natural environment. It confronts commodification of knowledge, science and the consumer paradigm (Jones, 1988; Norberg-Hodge, 1991; Schumacher, 1973; Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel, 1993). Schumacher (1973: 49) further contends that:

people who live in highly self-sufficient local communities are less likely to get involved in large-scale violence than people whose existence depends on world-wide systems of trade.

In this perspective, the theory of development must be of practical relevance to the local context and environment based on compassion for the benefit of the community (Ariyaratne, 1996; Barua, 2009; Sivaraksa, 1990). In other words, local knowledge, social values and wisdom are considered to be the key elements to the success of development in Buddhist societies. From this perspective, equitable distribution of resources within a community is the central theme of development (Barua and Wilson, 2005). There is no question of property or individual ownership even for the Buddhist monk according to the *Vinaya Pitak* (Niyogi, 1980). It advocates for the equality of all people in a society. Buddhist notion of development is “based on unity and mutual interdependence” (Matthiessen, 1991: xvi) in order to preserve “natural balance, appropriate technology, community life, and economic self-reliance” for eco-centric and people-centered development (Barua and Wilson, 2005: 238). It does not take life out of the context of its social, political and economic aspects of the people (Rahula, 1994). It is deeply rooted in the notion of *ahimsa* or non-injury for the welfare of all (Barua, 2003; Barua and Wilson, 2005). In explaining the Buddhist notion of development, Macy (1994: 149) states that “development is waking up – waking up to our true wealth and true potential as persons and as a society”. In this process, development cannot be separated from lands, plants and rivers (Kabilishing, 1990; Macy, 1990; Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel, 1997; Swearer, 1997). More importantly, the “knowledge gained through spiritual means can serve economic as well as the

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psychological (social, cultural and political) needs” (Castellano, 2000: 24) of people.

Having considered some of the major differences between northern modernist discourses and practices of development and a people-centered Buddhist discourse and related practices of development, the following sections take up lived realities pertaining to development interventions around dams and forest-based livelihoods in Bangladesh and Thailand to substantiate the critique of the former and to propose the need for/viability of the later approach to development discourse and practice in these contexts.

3. Dams, Development, and Displacement of Ethnic Minorities

While promoting development interventions in developing countries, about 300,000 dams were built by 1997 in order to accelerate the process of industrialization through the scheme of hydropower for more economic growth and development out of which more than 45,000 were large dams. Such projects led to large-scale displacement of rural and indigenous people from their native lands. In Asia the construction of such large dams, in the name of economic development and modernization, mainly affected ethnic minorities (Carino, 1999; Hirsch, 1999). For example, the building of *Kaptai Hydro Power Dam* in southeastern Bangladesh in the 1960s displaced the *Chakma* and the *Marma* communities in the hills (Dewan, 1990; Moshin and Ahmed, 1996; Sopher, 1963; Zaman, 1996), including the inundation of some 10 square miles of reserved forest, 54,000 acres of cultivable land, and the displacement of approximately 100,000 ethnic communities of the hills (Bangladesh District Gazetteers, 1975; B.P. Barua, 2001; Samad 1994, 2000). Furthermore, Moshin and Ahmed (1996: 279) state:

The construction of the dam had far-reaching consequences for the tribal (ethnic communities) people. ... It made nearly 10,000 *Chakma* ploughing families having proprietary rights, and 8,000 *Chakma jhumia* families comprising more than 10,000 *Chakma*

persons landless and homeless. It also affected...1,000 *Marmas*.

This dam was constructed in 1964 with the financial assistance of international donor agencies, submerging 250 square miles of prime farming land in the hilly districts, which account for 40 percent of the total cultivable land belonging to ethnic communities. Such dislocation changed the ecology, geography and livelihoods of the people (Barua and Wilson, 2005). Because of this dislocation, some members of the *Chakma* and the *Marma* communities are forced to practice *jum* or shifting cultivation due to the scarcity of land in the valley even though many had earlier embraced plough cultivation. Such scarcity resulted mainly from the construction of Kaptai dam for hydropower. The dam itself may become useless because of sedimentation of the Kaptai Lake. Although the dam was supposed to produce 230 MW, it currently generates 50 to 100MW for industry (Gain, 1998).

Similarly, *Park Moon Dam* project of *Ubonrachathani* displaced and dislocated the ethnic minorities in northeast Thailand. Over five million people were relocated by force and thousands of Lao-speaking Isan people have been moved out due to the construction of the dam (Sudham, 2002; Walsh, undated). The dam was built in 1994 with the financial support of the World Bank. Although the dam was built to produce 316 megawatts of electricity, it produces only 40.93 megawatts (World Commission on Dams [WCD], 2000). Sudham (2007: 4) explicitly states:

The Dam has been proven to be a disastrous flop since it could not generate sufficient electricity as purported at the expenses of human sufferings and ecological disaster while the World Bank continues to make a handsome return from the loan.

The dam has seriously displaced local communities whose livelihoods traditionally relied on fishing in the Mun River.¹ Moreover, the numbers of fish species and

¹ Despite the protests, the dam was completed. Moreover, the Electricity Authority of Thailand (EGT) had also sought to build the Nam Choam on

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populations have declined. Since the construction of the dam the livelihoods of the people have been adversely affected (Lohmann, 1998; Walsh, undated). Although compensation was offered by the government agencies to the people to relocate, this was seen by the affected communities as being economically unfeasible. Such development interventions have been implemented with the support of multilateral donors, projects that have destroyed forests, trees, and contaminated rivers in the name of development of rural communities (B.P. Barua, 2001; Barney, 2007; Kripakorn, 2007; Dewan, 1993; Moshin, 2003). Such rehabilitation program for the non-ethnic communities created more precarious conditions for the Hill people and instigated problems of land disputes in the area (Haque, 1990; Mohsin, 1997). Amar (cited in Barua, 2010 in press), a member of Chakma community reflects:

We became refugees in our own land. Our cultivable lands were submerged under water. ... Moreover, the outside people were rehabilitated in our lands. We constantly encounter problems from the settlers.

Similarly, Kiang of northeastern Thailand expresses (cited in Sudham, 2002:106):

The dammed dam could not generate electricity in the summer months due to insufficient flow of water. As a result it is left to rust and for taxpayers to pay the debt plus interest, despite immeasurable human suffering and the damage done to the people and the ecology.

Predictably, these destructive development projects triggered violence in southeastern Bangladesh and northern Thailand.¹ Such developmental structural violence (Kripakorn,

the upper Kwai River. The Nam Choan dam destroyed Thung Yai reserve and the forced to relocate the Karen minority. Despite the protests, Nam Chon Dam project was abandoned. (See Kripakorn, 2007)

¹ When Thailand stepped into a development process in accordance with the various five-year National Development Plan starting in the late 1950s onward, all natural resources were monopolized by the state for the benefit of economic expansion on its terms. The state did not consider the

2007) has displaced several ethnic communities and destroyed their self-sufficient local economies.¹ The people of these regions have lost access to common property resources and right of entry to grazing lands for cattle. More importantly, it has dehumanized and undermined people's aspiration, local science and knowledge. These culturally-biased mega projects (Shiva, 1989) are destroying the sustainable livelihoods and lifestyles of ethnic communities. In other words, the construction of *dams* neither offered sustainable livelihoods to the ethnic minorities of southeastern Bangladesh and northern Thailand nor has it been ecologically sustainable. Rather, western science-based development projects, in the quest for universalization in the name of progress and development has disregarded people's science and knowledge. On other hand, the primary quest of a people's science and knowledge is to search and look in to the nature of human beings as being an inseparable part of nature – a search for sustainable development (Barua in press, 2010). Despite these revelations, western science has been engaged in the promotion of industrial exploitation for growth and profit alone (Ariyaratne, 1996; Norberg-Hodge, 1991). Furthermore, development programs financed by international donors have neither rehabilitated nor addressed the needs and demands of rural ethnic communities in their homeland. Moreover, these development interventions also encouraged migration and settlement of non-ethnic communities/low land people in the lands of ethnic communities, favoring the settlers over the local inhabitants who have, as a result been marginalized even further in their own territories². Consequently, the ethnic communities became isolated as the settlers dominate

aspirations of the people whose way of life is one with nature (see Kripakorn, 2007).

¹ Cultural resistance to these developments in southeastern Bangladesh and northern Thailand by these groups is commonplace (for examples, see Brown, 2006; Darlington, 1998, 2000; Kripakorn, 2007; Moshin, 2003).

² The institutionalization of development was a strategic intervention as a counter-measure against insurgency of the hill people of northern Thailand and southeastern Bangladesh. Development agencies did not include the local people while implementing these projects and programs (see Sato, 2000; Tripura, 2000).

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on their lands (Brown, 1992; Dewan, 1993; Haque, 1990; Kripakorn, 2007; Moshin 1997; Zaman, 1984).

4. Development, Forests and Livelihoods of Ethnic Communities

The enclosure, encroachment, and reservation of forests and lands were introduced with the assistance of the British colonial administration in southeastern Bangladesh and northern Thailand¹ to commercialize timber and teak (Brown, 1992; Darlington, 1998; Mustafa, 2002; Royal Forest Department, 2001; Sato, 2000). In other words, these encroachments of forests and lands were initiated in the name of scientific management in order to cultivate cash crops and practice commercial farming in these countries. While introducing market driven strategies and policies in the hills of southeastern Bangladesh and northern Thailand, ethnic minorities have not only been sidelined and alienated in the process of economic development; their traditional customary rights have been overlooked (Barney, 2007; Mustafa, 2002; Sato, 2000). While introducing these regulations, in these countries, the European colonizers never realized that the Buddha was born, became enlightened and died under these very trees in the forest. In Buddhist cultures and societies of South and Southeast Asia, trees, rivers, and forests are valued, honored and worshipped as the Buddha generated his knowledge in this diverse natural setting through meditation (Barua and Wilson, 2005; Sivaraksa, 1992; Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel, 1993). In other words, the natural environment of the forests and rivers have helped the intellectual evolution that energizes and promotes South and Southeast Asian

¹ Although Thailand was able to resist the physical colonization processes of the Europeans (British and French), it could not avoid the adoption of a western-styled property system and development model. Additionally, the Bowring Treaty signed between the United Kingdom and Siam (Thailand) on April 18, 1855 accelerated the western development agenda in Thailand. The British model of forestry was initiated in Thailand with the assistance of British Government for production of mainly timber and teak as cash crops. (See Sato, 2000; Sivarraksa, 1990)

Buddhist culture (Barua and Wilson, 2005; Macy, 1990; Panya and Sirisai, 2003).

The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life, which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. (Tagore,¹ cited in Shiva, 1989: 55)

Local knowledge on forest science did not perceive trees as merely wood and market commodities. Rather, it focused on diversity of form and function as the survival of the human species was dependent on the continuation of natural forests (Shiva, 1989). For this reason, the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPE) adopted the element 1.3 program for the development of forests:

Consistent with the terms of the Convention on Biological Diversity...encourages countries to consider ways and means for the effective protection and use of traditional forest-related knowledge, innovations and practices of forest-dwellers, Indigenous people and local communities, as well as fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from such knowledge, innovations and practices. (Battiste and Henderson, 2000: 260)

Despite this, forest policies have been modified and re-organized in order to displace local forest-dwellers for industrial growth and modernization. The process of modernization and industrialization led to intense deforestation in these regions through the building of dams and the plantations of fast-growing eucalyptus trees, rubber plants, timber or teak for markets and cash that effectively undermined natural forests. As a result, plant life has turned into a nonrenewable resource. Diverse varieties of

¹ The Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore was noted for his deep respect for Buddhism. He built the Visva-Bharti University in West Bengal on the model of the Buddhist monasteries of ancient India. The Visva-Bharati University is well known for its education and community orientated programs (see Banerjee, 1973).

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trees have been replaced by mono-crop cultivation in the forests of northeast/northern Thailand and southeastern Bangladesh (Barua and Wilson, 2005; Barney, 2007; Gain, 2000; Mohammud, 2005; Poffenberger, 2006; Sudham, 2007; Taylor, 1993; Trakarnsuphakorn, 2007). Aung (cited in Barua 2010, in press), a member of the *Marma* community explicitly mentions:

In the past, villagers lead s simple life through the *jhum* cultivation (swidden agriculture) and plough cultivation. Our economy was deeply rooted in the forest and land. Unfortunately, the state authority restricted our access to the forest and land. Hence, our livelihoods have been dislocated. Money economy has become dominant. Now people are struggling to survive in our lands.

Likewise, Kiang (cited in Sudham, 2002:104), a member of Lao-speaking Issan community states:

Some of these wealthy and influential people have awesome power to log the forests, force millions of powerless beings off the land ...to plants the harmful and fast growing eucalyputs trees in order to feed pulp and paper mills and exploit us to get rich fast. It is sherr greed that makes them do this.

The extension of commercial plantation has not only restricted community access to the forests, it has also driven away the hill people from their livelihoods (e.g. swidden agriculture/slash-and-burn, raising livestock and natural gardening). Moreover, this commercialization process has facilitated private ownership by the non-ethnic communities from low land areas for the production of cash crops. This commercialization practically displaced the natural forests in which more than fifty natural species of plants used to grow. Two or three types of trees that were destroyed used to provide fruit or lumber for people while a few other plants protected the surface soil and its fertility (Barney, 2007; Brown, 1992; Khemchalem, 1988). Moreover, the destruction of the forest created economic and environmental hardship for five million forest-dwellers in

Thailand (Asian Forest Network, undated). In other words, these development policies initiated the process of “detrribalization of tribal lands and forests” through such development encroachments in to tribal areas (Kapoor, 2007: 17). Additionally, western-style development interventions also disconnected the ethnic communities from the environment of nature and *siladhamma*.¹ In the view of Pongsak (1992: 90), a Thai forest Monk:

The balance of nature is achieved and regulated by the functions of the forest. So, the survival of the forest is essential to the survival of *siladhamma* and our environment. It’s all interdependent. When we protect our forest, we protect the world. When we destroy the forest, we destroy that balance, causing drastic changes in global weather and soil condition, causing severe hardships to the people.

Similarly, the loss of natural forests and encroachments of lands has further exacerbated the decline of the Buddhist ethical practice of the *dhutanga* (ascetic) of monks and Buddhist ethnic communities in the southeastern part of Bangladesh that provided the foundation for contemplative learning and knowledge in order to help build healthy communities without greed (Barua and Wilson, 2005)². A similar situation was also observed in Northeastern Thailand due to the influx of timber export business. While reflecting on the condition of Thailand, Taylor (1993: 169) states, “since the rapid expansion of cash-cropping and corresponding deforestation in the 1960s many of the traditional *dhutanga* sites in the northeast have disappeared”. This ascetic practice used to provide reflective education for the ordinary members of the community. They were educated to nurture the simple life

¹ *Sila* refers to morality/ethics and *Dhamma* refers to truth or justice or teaching.

² The Santi Asoka Buddhist ecological movement has been actively engaged in Thailand for forest preservation in northern Thailand. Such ecological movements are not active in the southeastern part of Bangladesh. (See Darlington, 1998, 2000; Barua and Wilson, 2005)

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and preserve the forest for the well being of all creatures without discrimination.

As a result, the balance of the natural environment and the spiritual peace of people were lost to economic growth. In Buddhist culture, nature was considered sanctified and sacred (Aariyaratne and Macy, 1992; Sivaraksa, 1992). When nature is degraded, people tend to suffer. Kabilsingh (1990: 8) says that, “when we abuse nature, we abuse ourselves”. A human being is likely to make rightful use of nature so that he or she can grow above nature and realize his or her intrinsic spiritual potential. Buddhism promotes a calm and non-violent attitude toward nature. “Nature is the manifestation of truth and of the teachings. ... when we protect nature, we protect the truth and teachings” (Pongsak, 1992: 99). For Buddhists, the forest is the sacred place where the Buddha was enlightened. The Buddha lived with the wild animals in the forest. The preservation of forests and trees always has a place in Buddhist texts. In Buddhist education, nature is not separated from all living beings (Ariyaratne and Macy, 1992; Nash, 1987; Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel, 1997; Swearer, 1997; UNESCO, 1995). Plants, animals and human beings were considered to have the same inheritance. In other words, the forest is not a place for destruction or plundering but it is for animals and plants to live, and where human beings can live with animals and plants for ascetic practice (Bloom, 1970; De-Silva, 1992; Gomez, 1992).

Today, what we see in this region is the aggressive way of modern economic development and a disregard of local spiritual and ethical values. For Buddhists, it is not a question of choosing between “modern growth” and the “traditional way of life” – it is a question of finding the right path of development, the middle way between materialistic illusions and a nonviolent means for achieving the right livelihood in society (Barua and Wilson, 2005). In his famous *Mongal Suttas* (Blessing discourse), the Buddha speaks of the “happiness of living in an appropriate environment” (*Patirupa des vasoca*) (Aariyaratne and Macy, 1992: 80). In the Buddhist view, the natural environment should not be destroyed. It must be beautified and preserved for the benefit of all living beings in the world without disturbing the flora, fauna and rhythm of life (Barua and Wilson, 2005).

5. Concluding Reflections

In this paper, I have critically examined modern development interventions and its impact on the livelihoods of ethnic communities utilizing the discursive framework of Buddhist oriented people-centered development, cultural knowledge and politics in southeastern Bangladesh and northern Thailand. It has been argued that development policies and programs have followed the path of the colonial legacy and market driven model promoting centralized control through the process of imposition and domination. Dams and large-scale plantation schemes have not contributed to poverty alleviation – they have undermined viable alternative approaches and livelihoods of local communities. Moreover, these development interventions failed to recognize the psychological, social, cultural and spiritual aspects of local ethnic communities in the region. In other words, this development model disregarded the local knowledge, culture and natural environment. Conventional development actors are neither promoting *people-centered development* nor *nurturing cultural knowledge* for sustainable livelihood of ethnic communities in the hills and forests of Bangladesh and Thailand. Rather, all development interventions tend to promote the *trickle-down approach* to economic growth and progress, which continues to fail the communities in these regions in the name of development.

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