



Poverty and Inequality in Development at Community Level: an Empirical Analysis in the context of the Tai-Ahoms of Assam, India

Pranjal Protim Buragohain

Department of Economics, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam, India
ppbecodu@gmail.com

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Abstract

Growing inequality has now been considered as one of the development problems. Rising income inequality shows that the benefit of growth is not shared evenly by all sections of the society- especially by the Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and other disadvantaged classes which are hindering the progress of the country. The lopsided development has also resulted incidence of insurgency, separatist movement, ethnic conflicts and a polarization of politics based on castes, clans, religion and region. The Tai-Ahoms is one of the backward communities of Assam who has been for a long time demanding the status of scheduled tribe to raise their socio-economic and political status. Based on primary level study, this paper is an attempt to study the degree of inequality at the community level. It is found from the study that the prevailing income inequality among the community is very high. There is also the variation in the level of income inequality across the districts. Further, inequalities have also been observed in the sphere of educational attainment and health attainment.

Keywords: Income inequality, Gini coefficient, Tai-Ahoms, literacy rate, Infant Mortality Rate.

Introduction

Poverty and growing income inequality has now been considered as the crux of all development problems. Rising income inequality shows that the benefit of growth is not shared evenly by all sections of the society- especially by the Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and other disadvantaged classes which are hindering the progress of the country. The lopsided development has also resulted incidence of insurgency, separatist movement, ethnic conflicts and a polarization of politics based on castes, clans, religion and region. The Tai-Ahoms is one of the backward communities of Assam who has been for a long time demanding the status of scheduled tribe to raise their socio-economic and political status. Based on primary level study, this paper is an attempt to study the degree of inequality and extent poverty at the community level.

About the community: The Tai-Ahoms who ruled Assam for about 600 years are one of the backward communities of the state of Assam. The population figure of the community is not available because the Government of India had not made a population Census categorized by Tai-Ahoms ethnicity since 1931 and updated population of Tai-Ahoms is not available since then.

The population figure as estimated by different Tai-Ahom organizations stood approximately at around 30 lakhs and the community is basically concentrated in the districts of Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dhemaji, Tinsukia and Lakhimpur and small pockets of Nagaon, Tezpur, Diphu, Goalpara and Guwahati.

Data Source: The study is based on both the primary and secondary source of information. For the primary source of information, 7 districts of Assam with a greater concentration of the Tai-Ahom population have been selected purposively. Then from each district two development blocks are selected randomly. Finally, on the basis of pilot survey, from each block at least two Tai-Ahoms villages are selected for household survey and from each village 15 per cent of the sample households have been collected randomly. The number of selected villages for the survey came to be 55 and the number of households as 941. The primary data are collected through well designed household interview schedule and through observation method. The secondary level of information has been collected from different books, government reports, journals, and research papers.

Methodology

Following Siegel and Swanson, Gini concentration ratio is calculated to quantify the extent of income inequality^{1,2}. Besides Gini concentration ratio, Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), literacy rate, per-capita monthly income and poverty rate have also been calculated. The paper is a descriptive one.

Results and Discussion

Per capita Income, Income Inequality and Poverty: Per capita income which is reflected in the Table-1 is calculated for each of the income earners of the households taking utmost caution. On the other hand, Gini's concentration ratio that lies between 0 and 1 has been used to measure the degree of income inequality. According to Todaro and Smith, Gini co-efficient for highly

unequal countries lie between 0.50 and 0.70, while for relatively equal countries lie between 0.20 to 0.35³. Therefore, Gini concentration ratio has been calculated to measure the extent of inequality prevailed among the sample population of the community in the different districts of Assam. The Gini concentration ratio has been calculated using the following formula due to Siegel and Swanson^{1,2}. Gini Ratio = $(\sum X_i Y_{i+1}) - (\sum X_{i+1} Y_i)$

Where, X_i is the cumulative proportion of number of households. Y_i is the cumulative proportion of income.

Based on the above formula, Gini concentration ratio has been calculated for seven sample districts and for the Tai-Ahoms as a whole which is reflected in the Table-1. Finally by considering the norm as laid down by the planning commission, poverty ratio has been calculated.

Table-1
Income inequality across Districts

Name of the District	Per Capita Income (in Rs.)	Gini Co-efficient	Poverty Rate
Dhemaji	19272	0.42	40.80
Dibrugarh	32184	0.46	21.52
Golaghat	28272	0.55	40.60
Jorhat	23076	0.52	35.06
Lakhimpur	15000	0.37	45.61
Sivasagar	32460	0.43	27.33
Tinsukia	18336	0.35	45.79
Tai-Ahoms	27197	0.49	35.60

Source: Calculated by the author

It appears from the above Table-1 that the per capita income of the Tai-Ahoms is estimated at Rs. 24804 per annum which is lower than both the State and the national average during 2009-10⁴. In three districts, viz., Golaghat (Rs. 28272), Dibrugarh (Rs. 32184) and Sivasagar (Rs. 32460), the per capita income of the Tai-Ahoms is higher than their over-all per capita income as well to the state average; while in other four districts, Dhemaji (Rs. 19272), Lakhimpur (Rs. 15000), Tinsukia (Rs. 18336) and Jorhat (Rs. 23076) the average is lower than both the overall (Rs. 24804) and State (Rs. 27197) level. Thus, it has been observed that variation in the income level across districts is very high (C.V. = 29.02), which ranges from Rs. 15000 to Rs. 32460.

On the other hand, it has been observed from the calculation that the level of inequality for the Tai-Ahoms is estimated at 0.49 which is on the higher side of the distribution that reflects higher degree of income inequality. On the other hand, the Gini value for

the districts ranges from 0.35 for Tinsukia to a higher level of 0.55 for Golaghat district that represents a variation in the distribution of income across districts (C.V. = 16.58). Moreover, Mahanta estimates Gini co-efficient for the Mishings at 0.40 which is also quite high⁵. At the same time, the estimated Gini co-efficient for the country is 0.36 (HDR, 2010) which is lower than the both Tai-Ahoms and the Mishings^{5,6}.

Following the norm as lay down by the Planning Commission; poverty ratio has been calculated and finds that the overall ratio for the community is 35.60 which is higher than the state average 31.98 and the national average 21.92 as on September 2013⁷. On the other hand, wide variation across districts with regard to the poverty rate has also been noticed and found that this rate is lowest for Dibrugarh (21.52) and highest for Tinsukia (45.79). Thus, it has been found that poverty is widespread among the community with huge inequality. This is in fact, not all good for the development of the community and may be the reason why often the leaders from the community are demanding the Schedule Tribe status.

Infant Mortality Rate: Although life expectancy at birth is a better indicator to reflect the overall well-being of the mankind, yet Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) is considered for the study to reflect health attainment among the Tai-Ahoms. The child mortality, maternal mortality and disease prevalence rates can also represent the health status. But due to lack of sufficient data these indicators cannot be considered for the analysis. Therefore, an attempt has been made here to analyze district level variation in the level of infant mortality only. It has been observed that the infant mortality of the Tai-Ahoms is 33.96 per thousand live births. The following Table-2 gives an idea about district-wise variations in infant mortality.

Table-2
Infant Mortality Rate across Districts

Name of the District	Infant Mortality Rate
Dhemaji	48.78
Dibrugarh	10.48
Golaghat	27.78
Jorhat	19.61
Lakhimpur	30.30
Sivasagar	33.33
Tinsukia	43.48
Tai-Ahoms	33.96
Assam*	54

Source: Field Survey, * SRS Report

It has been observed from the Table-2 that in five districts infant mortality is lower than the IMR for the community. Dhemaji district records infant mortality 48.78 per thousand live-births

which is much higher than the community. It is however, below the State (54) and National average (39)⁸. Infant mortality for Dibrugarh is estimated at 10.42; Jorhat at 19.61; Golaghat at 27.78; Lakhimpur at 30.30; Sivasagar at 33.33 and Tinsukia at 43.48. Thus, there is a wide variation (C.V is 43.12) in infant mortality among the community in different districts. The infant mortality of Dhemaji is high in the study area may be due to poor means of transport and communication (regular flood disrupted the communication) as well as lack of proper health care infrastructure.

Literacy Rate: The literacy rate across districts has been calculated for the Tai-Ahom sample households. The Table-3 depicts the literacy rate among the sample population across Districts in 2009-2010.

Table-3
Literacy rate across Districts

Name of the District	Literacy Rate
Dhemaji	98.70
Dibrugarh	99.65
Golaghat	96.09
Jorhat	96.25
Lakhimpur	98.13
Sivasagar	99.04
Tinsukia	98.72
Tai-Ahoms	98.07
Assam*	72.19

Source: Field Study, * Census of India, 2011.

It has been observed that highest literacy rate is observed in Dibrugarh district with literacy rate 99.65 per cent; while in Jorhat it is lowest (95.01) among the community. The over-all literacy rate of the Tai-Ahoms is estimated at 97.80 which is reasonably high and much higher than the state (72.19 per cent) and the national average (74.04 per cent)⁹. On the other hand, in two sample districts Jorhat and Golaghat, the literacy rate of the community is estimated at lower than the over-all literacy rate. However, it is observed that variation of literacy among the districts is very less (C.V. = 1.74).

Conclusion

It appears from the above discussion that there is inequality in various aspects relating to human development indicators for the Tai-Ahom community across districts under study. The positive sides are the high literacy rate and low infant mortality rate. On the other hand, the negative aspects of development are low per capita income, very high poverty ratio and high income inequality at aggregate level of the community as well as within the Tai-

Ahom community. Thus, it is need of the hour to address the issues of high level of poverty, high inequality both at the aggregate and district level and low per capita income across districts. In fact, without reduction in poverty, inequality and unemployment and an increase in per capita income development is impossible. Thus, it is the right time to take initiatives on the part of the government of Assam to provide employment opportunities among the youth of the community by imparting skills and providing self-employment opportunities and thereby reduction in discontent among the people from the community. It is to be mentioned here that the government of Assam has already formed a development body as Tai-Ahom Development Council for the Tai-Ahom community which is a right step towards the development of the community socially, economically and politically. Thus, Tai-Ahom Development Council may be considered as the nodal agency for the upliftment of the community and entrusted the responsibility for the development of the same with adequate power to take and execute different developmental schemes. However, sufficient funds are to be provided until and unless that the goal of setting up of the council is futile.

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