

On the Margins of the Plateau: Cultural Geographies and Environmental Adaptation of the Shadowed Marngar Community of Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

People living in peripheral zones, borders or transitional geographic spaces often experience socio-cultural and economic marginalization. They remain largely in the shadows in academic and developmental discourses. They are often found to negotiate between traditionality and development. In the northern foothills of the Khasi Plateau of Northeast India resides the lesser-known Marngar community, with distinctive cultural practices and rich indigenous knowledge. Drawing on cultural geography and the man-environment relationship, the study explores how the Marngars negotiate their livelihood and culture in relation to the environment and socio-spatial conditions.

To understand the life of the Marngars, books and reports were reviewed alongside intensive field investigation comprising household surveys and interactions with community members, village elders and traditional leaders for institutional information. The study also includes GIS-based analysis of land use/land cover and terrain characteristics.

The findings reveal that the Marngars possess a mixed cultural-linguistic character. They are a Scheduled Tribe situated within a Khasi-dominated administrative framework. Despite their peripheral location and identity, Marngars maintain strong socio-ecological resilience through customary institutions, traditional livelihood practices and community-based conservation such as the customary protection of aquatic fauna in Marngar Lake and sustainable resource management. The study also highlights that the community faces severe marginality, economic vulnerability to flooding and interstate border disruptions, and gradual erosion of culture and tradition. The paper argues that preservation of Marngar culture requires recognizing their customary governance, securing their identity, protecting their material culture, and integrating their indigenous ecological knowledge into participatory spatial planning for inclusive rural development.

Keywords: Marngar, Marginality, Cultural Geography, Man-Environment Relationship, Indigenous Knowledge, Livelihood

INTRODUCTION

Tribal and indigenous communities in India occupy a distinctive position within the nation's social and cultural landscape, with nature-based livelihood systems based on agriculture, forests and local natural resources. With time, many tribal societies in India have undergone various socio-cultural transformations and economic developments. Education have played a key role in these tribal societies, bringing development in their societies. However there are many lesser known tribes in India which are still living in socio-spatial marginalization. They exist at the margins of academic attention and development policies. This marginalization is evident among tribes and indigenous communities living in peripheral or transitional geographic spaces, such as remote borders. These conditions lead to their economic vulnerability, identity crisis and cultural erosion.

In Northeast India, there are more than 200 major tribes with distinct cultural identity and geographical spaces. Yet there are some tribes in the region whose identities are still undocumented. One such tribe is the Marngar tribe, who resides in the Northern foothills of the Khasi Plateau between the states of Assam and Meghalaya. Very little is documented about this tribe. Marngars, the Assamese-speaking Scheduled Tribe, occupy a unique socio-cultural niche in Meghalaya, the state mainly known as home of Khasis, Garos and Jaintias. While the Marngars share linguistic affinities with Assamese of Assam, the bordering state of Meghalaya, they conform to the customary laws of the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya.

This current study is on the socio-spatial dynamics of the Marngar Tribe, a marginalized communities of peripheries of Northeast India. The study draws upon the unique cultural characteristics of the lesser-known Marngar tribe of the Assam-Meghalaya border. The study is mainly conducted with an aim to bring out the identity of the Marngar tribe to the world outside and provide them a significant position among the major tribes of Northeast India. In this context, the current study examines (i) the cultural identity of the Marngars within the transitional geographies of two different states with contrasting socio-cultural characteristics. (ii) the livelihood pattern and resource utilization of the Marngars in response to environmental adaptations (iii) the customary laws and socio-ecological resilience of the Marngars (iv) socio-economic vulnerability and cultural erosions of the Marngars in their geographic space.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The cultural geography of peripheries and marginalized communities needs to be understood through a human-environment relationship approach to help analyze how space, livelihood, culture and customary laws of a cultural landscape are intrinsically related.

Human-environment relationship and its spatial dimensions have been the very foundation of human geography since ages. Previous approaches highlighted on how

environment determines human actions. Gradually the idea shifted to the thought of 'Possibilism' a pillar laid by Paul Vidal de la Blache in 1926 who gave the idea that nature provides endless opportunities to mankind but it's the choice, needs and culture of mankind that shape their adaptations, resilience and cultural landscape. This idea of Blache was formalized further by Carl o Sauer (1925) who described human culture is an agent that acts upon the natural environment which can be considered as a medium to produce a cultural landscape that we see. This cultural landscape is thus the product or outcome of the culture (agent) acting upon the natural environment (medium).

Sauer (1925) formalized this agency through the concept of the *cultural landscape*, arguing that culture acts as the agent, the natural area is the medium, and the cultural landscape is the result. Within this framework, landscapes are not merely physical backdrops but are dynamic palimpsests inscribed with social norms, cultural traditions, and settlement histories. This cultural landscape is not static. It is a continuous process of the dynamic interaction of human culture and environment shaping settlements, societies, history and customary laws and traditions.

Expanding the thought further, Steward (1955) propounded the theory of cultural ecology where he focused on adaptations of societies in response to the ecological conditions of the place they live. Julian Steward expressed his thought on human adaption to specific ecological niches which arise from functional utilisation of the space they live. He also further expressed that adaptation process is continuous and reciprocal where human beings continuously change the environment by activities such as agriculture, settlement, cultural practices while at the same time adapting to the environment they live.

Tuan (1977) highlighted on the concept of meaningful "place" (*topophilia*). According to Tuan indigenous communities are attached to their cultural space that comprises of sacred forests, cemeteries, ancestral homes etc., which serve as their emotional anchors that consists of collective memory and shared cultural space and their natural heritage. For them, it's a space against external pressures.

The greatest treasures of Indigenous or Tribal communities are their traditional ecological knowledge. Their societies are enriched by the common pool resource governance or shared resource governance such as community owned land, community conservation practices through their customary laws. Ostrom (1990) explains that communities can develop effective self-governing institution to manage Common Pool Resources (CPRs).

Northeastern Region of India is a home of multiple ethnicity with diverse socio-cultural background (Baruah, 1999; Karlsson, 2011). In the borders and spaces of transition , ethnicty often integrates leading to hybridity and liminality(Misra, 2000; McDuie-Ra,

2012). Indigenous communities of the transitional space often relies on cross- border commodity flows and markets(*haats*). As a result the local economies become highly vulnerable to interstate conflicts, climatic hazards such as floods , economic disruptions etc(Bhattacharjee, 2019; Das, 2021).

While dominant ethnic groups in Meghalaya (Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia) have been extensively documented (e.g., Gurdon, 1914; Bareh, 1985; Nongkynrih, 2002), smaller demographic pockets—such as the Assamese-speaking Marngar community in Ri-Bhoi—remain largely absent from mainstream academic literature. This study addresses this empirical and conceptual gap by examining how the Marngars navigate socio-spatial marginality, sustain customary ecological conservation, and adapt their livelihoods across a transitional foothill landscape.

Several scholarly articles in Meghalaya have highlighted the Khasis, Garos and Jaintias as the major tribes of Meghalaya and received academic attention so far Gurdon, 1914; Bareh, 1985; Nongkynrih, 2002). Marngar tribe has not received much academic attention so far. Hence the study current study tries to address this gap and studies the lives of the marginalized tribe of the peripheries.

METHODOLOGY

The current study is based on preliminary field observation and is an attempt to provide a first-hand understanding of the life of Marngars at the peripheries and their challenges. The study is mainly done with the conversation with the community members while trying to understand their day to day practices and associated challenges.

Secondary data were compiled from Census of India reports and reports on the Marngars. The Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM) terrain data and high-resolution Google Earth images were processed in ArcGIS to produce a land use and land cover (LULC) layer, drainage layer, slope layer, aspect and contour layers for the study area. Qualitative record was supplemented by photographic/ video documentation of everyday practices and festivals and resource use activities, providing a visual archive for later verification.

STUDY AREA: THE MARNGAR INHABITED REGION

The study focusses on the Marngar inhabited area of Umpling in the Ribhoi district of Meghalaya close to the borders of Assam. The study area extends between 25°15'N–26°15'N and 91°45'E–92°15'E which is a transitional geography of the Khasi hills and the Assam plains. The circle extends over approximately 5,915 hectares (59.15 sq. km) and comprises sixteen recorded revenue villages, namely Barkhatsari, Borgang, Himpala, Khmar, Lalumpam, Mawphrew, Mawryngkang, Nalapara, Nangagang, Parangang, Purdua, Sarikhushi, Tamonpo Anglong, Umtham, Umwang Nongbah and Umwangthem, together

with two newly emerging settlements whose formation reflects the continuing mobility of population within the circle. The 2016 Gram Sevak Circle demographic profile records 790 households and a population of 4,936 persons, comprising 2,431 males and 2,505 females, with 3,369 literates against 1,567 illiterates.

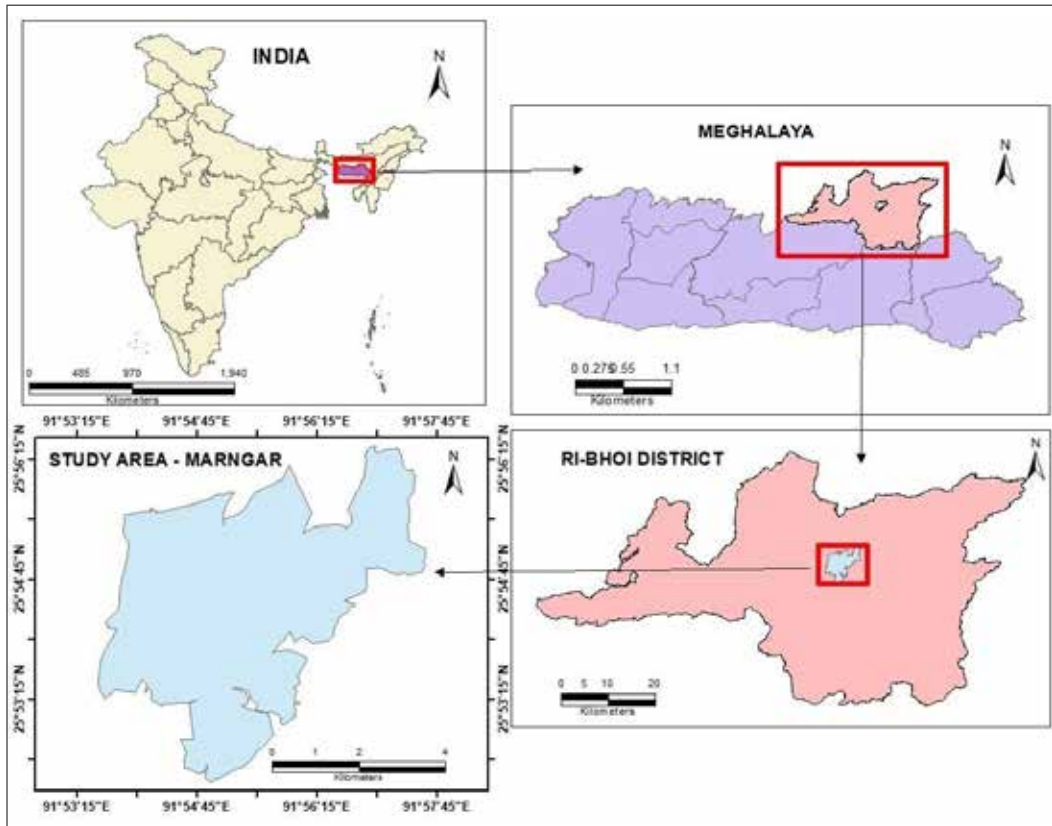


Fig. 1: Location map of Marngar Inhabited Area

The economy of this region is largely rainfall dependent agricultural that sustains paddy cultivation alongside broom grass, pineapple and vegetable farming on the gently sloping and low lying tracts, while the steeper and forested terrain remains comparatively less utilised and are a source of forest produce. The proximity of Marngar inhabited area to the Assam border, and particularly to Khanapara and its adjoining markets, is open for cross border trade. Hence climate and terrain controlled agricultural practises, forest produce, agriculture mainly conventional in nature and market at the borders makes the Marngar circle a suitable setting to examine the interaction between physical environment, customary laws and livelihood adaptation.

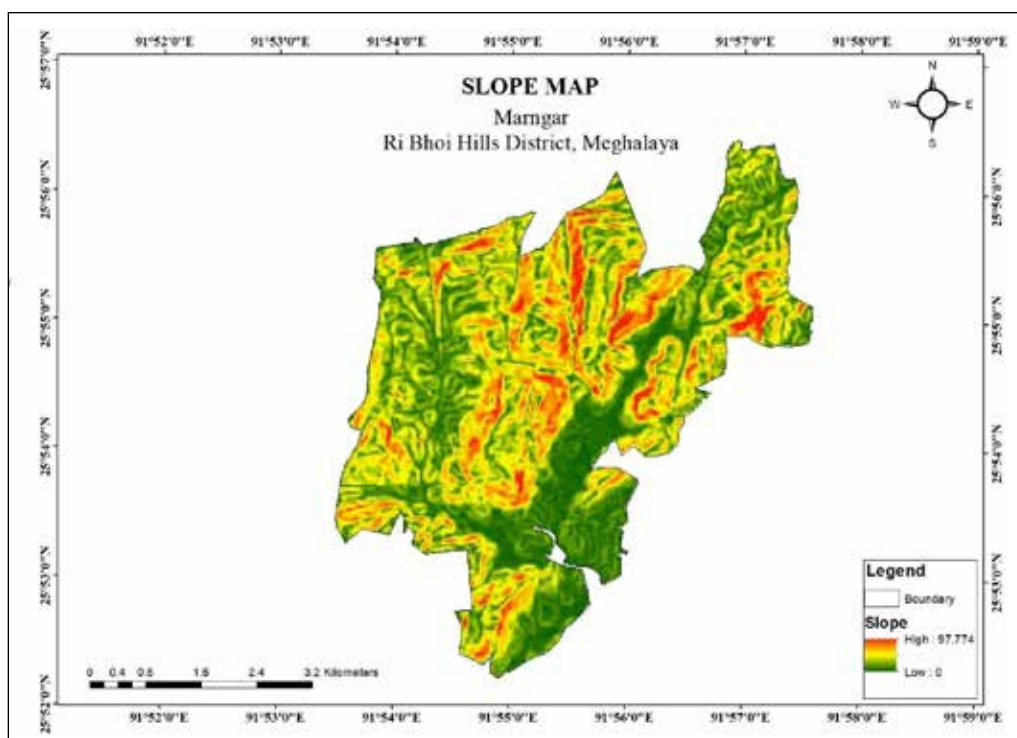


Fig. 2: Landuse/Landcover Map of Marngar Inhabited Area

Source: Digitized in Google Earth Pro and processed in ArcGis

The above cover map highlights the following pattern of Landuse Land cover in the Marngar inhabited region as per Table 1.

Table 1: Shows the Area in Hectares of the Landuse/Landcover Map Marngar

LULC	Area (Ha)
Cropland	539.20
Marngar Lake	3.47
Moderately Dense Forest	595.18
Open Forest	910.18
Paddy Cultivtion	351.81
Road	17.46
Settlement	18.15
Water body	35.66

Source: Derived from Land Use Land Cover Map analysis

The Marngar inhabited area has a very challenging terrain which reflects their challenge of environmental adaptation in their livelihood.

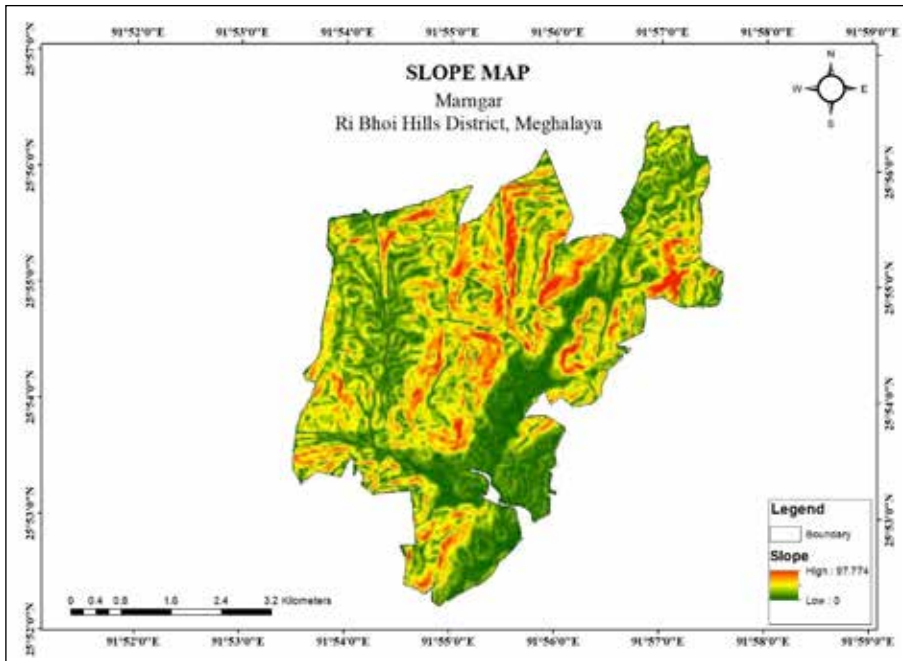


Fig. 3: Slope Map of Marngar Inhabited Region

Source: SRTM DEM 30m Resolution, USGS

The slope map of Marngar inhabited region shows significant variation in the terrain from gentle slopes to moderately steep and steep hill slopes. The terrain of the region is highly undulating. The lower slope areas, shown in green shades, are found mainly in the southern and some central portions of the village. These areas are comparatively more suitable for settlement and agricultural activities, particularly paddy cultivation, because of easier accessibility, better soil retention, and lower risk of erosion. Many of the inhabited areas and cultivated lands are concentrated in the gentle slope.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Marngars: Historical Background

It is believed that Marngars have been living in the region for ages. Many generations have lived in and shaped the cultural space in the northern peripheries of the Khasi Hills. However their origin can be recorded from the oral traditions and local narratives. Due to lack of written records, it is difficult to trace their exact migration pattern and historical origin. Moreover, the current population do not have any trace of written documentations on their historical roots.

Due to proper records, the community remained one of the least known tribe of Northeast India and less addressed in academic discourses. In 1992, Marngar region got a socio-cultural recognition in June 1992 when Ribhoi district carved out of East Khasi Hill District. This helped the Marngars receive identity in their cultural space.

Marngars today possess a strong sense belongingness to their native space. Despite the challenges of economic peripheries and transitional cultural space, Marngars exhibit a strong cultural bond within themselves and an example of strong resilience. They speak mostly Khasis, Assamese, Nagamese and reflect a blend of linguistic features due to their inhabitation in the cultural peripheries of Assam and Meghalaya. The Marngars have their own cultural festivals, attires, food habits, customary laws and beliefs which has built a strong resilience in the tribe to cope with changing time, economy and developmental processes.

Ethno-Linguistic and Cultural Identity

Marngars reflect a cultural blend of Khasis and Assamese. There is integration between the culture of Meghalaya, where they live, and that of Assam, which is less than 3 kilometers away from their inhabited area. Ramirez (2011) highlighted that the Marngar tribe of Meghalaya has distinct socio-cultural characteristics. They officially are scheduled tribe of Meghalaya but their culture reflect a distinct socio-cultural character within the region. They largely exhibit Mongoloid features which is common to all Himalayan and Northeastern tribes, indicating their ethnic linkages to Mongolia and other parts of Southeast Asia.



Fig. 4: Community Participation in Pulao Mara Festival

Marngars are deep worshippers of nature, and this continues. Their reverence for nature is highly reflected in their customary laws of conservation and indigenous ecological practices. Despite modernity has touched the Marngar land, they continue to follow many traditional systems and customs and thereby preserving their cultural identity till date. Most of the Marngars practice Christianity today. They celebrate festivals such as Shad Lukhmi, Pom Blang, Tong Dohkha, Pulao Mara, Beh Huleng and Domahi.

Economic Structure and Literacy

The traditional livelihood practice of the Marngars is paddy cultivation, vegetable farming, pine apple cultivation. Agriculture forms the backbone of the economy of the Marngars. Nature has gifted the land abundantly with fertile soil, network of rivers and conducive climatic conditions. Although the terrain is hilly, the Marngars have very suitably resorted to sustainable agricultural practices combined with their traditional beliefs and customary practices. Agricultural Census 2021-22 data of Umling Block shows clear spatial variation in agricultural practices within the Marngar inhabited areas of Ri Bhoi District. These variations are due to terrain and vegetation of the region.



Fig. 5: Traditional Wooden Handlooms Operated by Local Weavers in Marngar Village

Another interesting finding of the study is that women involvement is livelihood practice is quite high. This underscores the matrilineal society akin to the Khasis of Meghalaya. Women of Marngars are found to be more active in livelihood and in fact women cultivators of paddy are higher than men. The study also finds that apart from cultivation women are engaged in forestry, weaving, livestock, and household management.

Livelihood diversification is clearly visible in the economy of Marngars today. Tourism, vegetable vending, and government employment are other source of income in the area. Literacy rates for the Marngar G.S. Circle (3,369 literates against 1,567 illiterates) ref comparatively encouraging educational progress.

The economic structure of the Marngar tribe is gradually diversifying. While agriculture continues to dominate, some members of the community are employed in modern professions such as teaching, nursing, engineering, medicine, and professorship. Others are engaged in transportation-related occupations including taxi driving, sumo driving, and auto-rickshaw driving. Small-scale trade and market activities are also common among the people. Many individuals, especially women, sell vegetables and local produce in nearby markets to generate income for their households.

Customary Laws, Indigenous Knowledge and Ecological Resilience

Traditionally, villages of Marngars were administered by the village chief called '*Syiem*', and a *Myntri* (minister) who looks after the implementation of the rules and regulations in the village as per the direction of the *Syiem*. This customary law reflects a strong self-governance (Lyngwa,1993).

Customary laws related to Land ownership in Marngar society involves clan land and community land. Land was considered as *Ri Raid*, or community land. Every member of the community had the right to utilize community land as per the customary laws of Marngars. Land is never considered private property that can be freely bought or sold. This practice is still prevalent among the Marngars, which reflects the community bonding with the tribe.

In regard to laws of inheritance, the Marngars reflect a mixed practice of Khasis and Assamese. The Khasis are matrilineal in nature, while Assamese societies are patrilineal. Being inhabited in a transitional space, Marngars are found to follow both matrilineal and patrilineal norms in their societies. The inheritance law among the matrilineal ones follows property inheritance through the female line, with the largest share of property being inherited by the youngest daughter. On the other those following the patrilineal norms follows the inheritance practice to the male heirs.

Marngars have Customary laws of social behaviours and community participation too violation of which may lead to penalties and punishments. For example a Marngar if refuses to cooperate in communal activities such as community harvesting and construction of house are required to face the due penalties. These reflects a strong governance and social responsibility among the Marngars.

Marngars are also rich in indigenous ecological knowledge and conservation practices. The Marngars lake in R ibhoi district is the soul of Marngar society. Conservation of the

ecosystem in Marngar lake and the lives therein are done by the Marngars as customary practice. This is now growing as a centre of tourism in Ribhoi. Marngars exhibit a very close relation with nature and their intrinsic bond.



Fig. 6: Traditional house of the Marngars

Marngars reflect a strong socio-ecological resilience due to the presence of strong customary practices and governance. Despite residing at the remote peripheries with minimal exposure to the outside world, Marngars exhibit a strong socio-ecological resilience. Community conservation practices at the Marngar Lake, shared resource utilisation, community owned land and sustainable resource management provide a strong base for resilience of the Marngars. Apart from that gender roles show how women play substantial roles in economy.

Socio-Economic Vulnerability and Community Resilience

Despite being resilient in socio-ecological aspects, Marngars are found to be economically vulnerable as their agriculture is still traditional in practice. They have no exposure to advanced mechanisms to enhance their production. The Marngar cultivators sale their produce in the nearest market of Nongpoh by vending in the streets. They are heavily dependent on buyers of Nongpoh or travellers of Assam and neighbouring states. They lack fixed market space and shops. Such an informal structure of economy has largely led to economic vulnerability to the tribe. However, irregular monsoons, border conflicts, tourist lean season often leads to reduction of sale; thus causing economic vulnerability.

Alongside economic vulnerability, Marngars also exhibit a socio-cultural vulnerability due to modernization, westernization and changing mindset of the youths. Young generations often do migrate for better economic opportunities and thus show less affinity towards their customary practices. This has caused tremendous vulnerability to the Marngar culture.

Westernization has also influenced the Marngar community through changes in clothing styles, religious practices, education systems, and patterns of living. Christian missionary influence, modern education, and exposure to urban lifestyles have introduced new cultural values and practices. Many traditional rituals are no longer practiced in the society as the new generations are now more involved in Church activities. However the core cultural festivals, traditional livelihood practices, customary laws have remained unchanged reflecting a strong resilience of the Marngars in fast-changing times of modernization and westernization.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The case study of Marngar community is a representative of the socio spatial marginality experienced by small and border adjacent indigenous community in North East India. Marngars are members of the Assamese-speaking ST group living in a region dominated by the majority of Khasi tribe. They live in the peripheries of two states. Culturally and linguistically different from the Khasis, they have remained largely underdeveloped and unattended in academic and developmental discourses. This peripheral position however, helped them build a strong resilience. The challenges of living in peripheries, economic vulnerability, border disputes, hilly terrain have led to marginalization of the tribe. However the community's customary law, community based conservation practices, and sustainable management of local resources represent the story of human-nature harmony and a strong socio-ecological resilience.

Hence the study therefore recommends that:

- i. Customary laws of Marngar must be strengthened and be given formal recognition in local governance as it plays an important role in sustainable management of natural resources.
- ii. Preserve and secure the cultural identities of Marngars through documentation of their customary laws, rituals, traditional ecological knowledge, folklore and tangible cultures, language, and festivals.
- iii. Protect and properly conserve the ecological resources of the Marngar inhabited area and promote sustainable tourism development for livelihood diversification and economic development of the area. However proper care must be given towards any negative impact on the culture and economy.

- iv. Enhance the agri-economy of the Marngars by facilitating their market access and thereby reduce economic vulnerability. Government intervention in weaving and cultivation-based livelihoods will help the Marngars to overcome the challenge of economic distress.
- v. The indigenous knowledge system of the Marngars must be duly recognized and must receive a place in policymaking and developmental policies.
- vi. Empower women by capacity building, skill enhancement and access to education to diversify livelihood opportunities.

This study underscores the importance of studying peripheral geographies and the journey of resilience of the tribes of peripheries. Marngars must receive a proper recognition in academic discourses. In-depth research on their cultural landscape transformation, indigenous knowledge systems and comparative studies with neighbouring communities would enrich understanding of this peripheral tribal community of Northeast India.

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