

Triumph of Community Spirit

A Case Study of development in Mengio, Arunachal Pradesh



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Cover Photo: Newly laid road at Silsango, a distant view

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I. Land and People of Mengio.

Location

The CD block of Mengio, the domain of Mengio Anchal Samiti (MAS), lies in the hilly part of the Papum Pare district of Arunachal Pradesh. The other parts of the district consist of foothills. Administratively Mengio comes under the Sagalee sub-division. The CD block occupies a geographical area of 602 sq. km which is about one-fifth of the district of Papum Pare (2875 sq. km). It is bounded by Kurung Kumey district on the north, Lower Subansiri district on the east, Parang Tehsil on the south and by East Kameng district on the west. Mengio, situated at about 1250 metres (4110 feet) above the sea level, is the highest human habitation of the district. It is located in between 28.1529 latitude and 94.12293 longitudes. Topographically Mengio is a collection of some hills and valleys of the Eastern Himalayas. Panior, one of the important rivers of the district of Papum Pare runs through the block.



[Map 1: Tahasil map of Papum Pare showing Mengio in red stripes]

Communication

Mengio is a remote place. It is 180 km away from the district head quarter Yupia and 204 km from state capital Itanagar. It takes about 7-8 hours to reach Mengio from Itanagar in a motor car. There is a car service from Sakiang, the block HQ of Mengio, to Naharlagun town which lies at the midpoint of capital city of Itanagar and district HQ Yupia. The car operates only once a day and that too if there are enough passengers. The one way fare from Sakiang to Naharlagun in this car service is Rs. 500. The fare is beyond the means of an average inhabitant of Mengio.

One uses the car service only in extreme need. The 58 km Yazali-Sakiang road is the only motorable road to Mengio. The road was un-surfaced about 5 years ago. During heavy rainfall and flood, Mengio used to be out of bound for outsiders. This road was turned into black



Photograph 2: A distant view of Mengio

topped recently with financial assistance from NABARD. However for other villages the 2-3 feet wide porter tracks, the hilly footways and rope bridges made by the local communities are the only means of 'communication'. It takes about 6 to 12 hours' trek up and down to reach the

Block Head HQ from any other village of the Block. These porter tracks and footways are called *Lampia* in the local dialect. The *Lampias* become non-usable during monsoon months due to flood and landslides.

People

Mengio is inhabited by the members of the *Nyishi* tribe. This tribe happens to be the largest tribe of the state and also constitutes the majority of the total population of Papum Pare district. It is claimed that Mengio was the ancestral home of almost all the Nyishis of the district of Papum Pare. Beside the Nyishis, there is another minor tribe called the Puroik at Mengio. Historically, the relation between the Nyishis and the Puroik was that of masters and bonded labour. The Puroiks were earlier called *Sulung* which indicates slavery. These traditional hunters and gatherers, who were semi-nomads, became bonded labourer of the other sedentary and powerful tribes of this part of the world including the Nyishis as a result of being entangled in usury. After the abolition of bonded labour practices in India they were renamed Puroik to rid them of the association around the word Sulung. The Puroik now-a-days are in a phase of transition from hunting-gathering economy to agricultural one. The Puroik form the poorest of the poor of the CD block of Mengio. Both the tribes belong to Indo-Mongoloid race and their languages belong to Tibeto-Burman dialects of Sino-Tibetan language family. They have no written scripts¹.

Administrative Institutions

There is no Post Office at Mengio. Letters to the addressees at Mengio would reach destination via Yazali under Lower Subansiri district. Nor is there any police station or police outpost at Mengio. The police administration for the CD block of Mengio operates from the Sagalee Police Station. Till today Mengio does not have a branch of any bank. Only one village of the block, namely Sakiang, the HQ village, is connected by regular electricity grid. The well-to-do houses of the remaining villages use solar light. Most of the villages of the block are out of reach of any

¹ For acquaintance with Niyshi language see P.T. Abraham (2005), *A Grammar of Nyishi language*, New Delhi.

mobile tower and hence mobile phones also do not work here. The BDO office however has a satellite phone. Mengio, thus, remains out of bound for all practical purposes.

Till 15th March, 2007 Mengio was only a Tehsil or an administrative circle under the Sagalee block. On 15 March, 2007 Mengio was upgraded as a block. Even though upgraded, Mengio Block has not yet been provided with the usual staffs that generally are sanctioned for a CD Block.

While all the Nyishis of the block profess Christianity as their religious faith, a few among the Puroik still profess their traditional religious faith, animism. There is a church at Mengio.

Mengio is a very thinly populated CD block. As per Census 2001, there lived about 3845 persons spread over 34 villages in 651 households. So far as the population size is concerned, almost all the census villages of the block in census 2001 were either small or tiny. There was only one village that accounted for more than 100 households. About 16 of the total census villages had households ranging from 10 to 19 only, 10 census villages were having households ranging between 22 and 41. The rest of the villages were having less than 10 households. Except the tiny habitats having less than 10 households, the sex ratio of other villages was always 1000+. The overall sex ratio of the block was 1052.72.

Table 1: Showing distribution of villages by size-class of total households, total and average population, male-female divide and sex ratio

Size-class of total house-hold	Number of villages	Total house -hold	Average number of households	Population		Male		Female		Sex ratio
				total	average	total	average	Total	average	
2-9	7	38	5.43	225	32.14	115	16.43	110	15.71	9565.52
10-19	16	229	14.31	1425	89.06	696	43.5	729	45.56	1047.41
22-41	10	272	27.2	1638	163.8	786	78.6	852	85.2	1083.94
100+	1	112	112.00	567	567	281	281	286	286	1017.79
All	34	651	19.15	3855	113.38	1878	55.24	1977	58.15	1052.72

Source: Census 2001

Census 2011 population for the block (5757) indicates a decennial growth of about 49.34%. (This figure has been taken from the member-secretary of Anchal Samiti, as official 2011 census figures below the district level are not yet available.) Present population density of Mengio is

about 10 persons per sq. km whereas for the district as a whole it is 61. The overall literacy rate of the CD block is 51.5%.

An interesting finding of Census 2011 is that there is a 26.47 % growth in the number of total census villages. In 2001, there were only 34 villages, while the numbers of villages in 2011 are 43. This, as indicated by the Member Secretary, is natural for the habitat pattern of this area. When one village finds it difficult to accommodate its growing population, some families take initiative to clear up jungle of a suitable location nearby and set up a new village there. The nine new villages have grown in this manner between 2001 and 2011.

Dual Homes

The educated and rich persons among the Nyishis of the Mengio CD block have dual habitats. The ancestral one is at the Mengio block and another one is at Itanagar, the state capital. One at the Mengio is their permanent address where they have their farm lands and livestock. This creamy section of the Nyishi population of the block set up residence at Itanagar, the state capital, to pursue non-farming economic activities, such as, service or business, including execution of government projects on contract basis. However they visit their ancestral homes quite frequently and remain registered citizens of their ancestral villages. They are the most vocal people among the inhabitants of Mengio and also get elected to various tiers of PRI.

Economy

In terms of economic development, Mengio is one of the most backward CD blocks of the district. Even now, its economy revolves round the primary sector which includes agriculture, horticulture and rearing of animals and birds. Main crops grown are paddy, maize, pulses, vegetables and ginger. In addition a number of medicinal herbs and plants are grown at Mengio. The orchard crops are orange, banana, bamboo, broom stick and cardamom. The agricultural and orchard lands of Mengio are located principally at hill tops, slopes and valleys.

To cultivate agricultural lands on the hill tops and rather steep hill slopes the cultivators of Mengio follow the terrace farming method². The landless among the cultivators, however, opt for shifting hill cultivation or *Jhum Kheti*³ as it is called in local dialect. No animal or mechanical device is used to till soil of the terrace farms. The *Haluahs*, the farm labourers drawn from both sexes, do the job of tilling the soil manually. The implements they use for tilling soil are spades and weeding-spades.



Photograph-- 3: Terrace Cultivation

² In agriculture, a terrace is a piece of sloped plane that has been cut into a series of successively receding flat surfaces or platforms, which resemble steps, for the purpose of more effective farming. This type of landscaping, therefore, is called terracing. These graduated steps are commonly used to farm on hilly or mountain terrain. Such terraced fields decrease soil erosion and water runoff.

³ *Jhum Kheti* (Shifting Hill Cultivation) is the most primitive form of subsistence agriculture invented in the Neolithic period. This practice involves clearing vegetative/forest cover on land /slopes of hills, drying and burning it before onset of monsoon and cropping on it thereafter. The ashes of burnt vegetative cover act as manure to the crops sown there. After harvest, this land is left fallow and vegetative regeneration is allowed on it till the plot becomes reusable for same purpose in a cycle.

Though market economy has spread in Mengio, in the absence of road communication and market network, the agriculture in this rather isolated region remain predominantly at subsistence level. Traders from the plains of Assam visit Mengio to buy the agricultural and orchard surpluses, if any. The price they give to the farmers of Mengio is sometimes even less than one-tenth of the market price.

Virtually there is no land-less family at any village of Mengio. Each and every family possesses some cultivable land. “He who takes initiative to clear any part of the natural forest on the hill top or on the slopes and adopt *Jhum* method of cultivation, eventually becomes owner of the land cultivated by him”, said the Member Secretary of Anchal Panchayat.



Photograph-- 4: A mother Mithun with calf being taken to its owner's home

Animal husbandry and poultry are also important components of local economy. Cow, goat, sheep and pig are common domestic animals of Mengio. In addition there is 'Mithun' (Bos Frontails), a semi domesticated and semi-wild animal. Mithun has religious significance and intimate relation with socio-cultural life of tribal people of this region. Traditionally Mithun is a unit of wealth and is allowed to move freely in the forest till it is either used for food in festive

occasions or in marriage feasts, or for barter. Each and every Mithun has an owner. The number of Mithuns one owns is often considered as an indicator of one's status in society. The poor families do not own Mithuns.

Though endowed with rich natural resources, majority of the people of the CD block, as has been indicated by the Member Secretary of the MAS, are poor. There exists no data on BPL households at the block office. However summary information of the BPL census 2002 of the block is available on internet.

Table 2: GP wise distribution of BPL households of Mengio CD block

Name of GP	No. of villages	Total households	Total population of the GP			Total BPL households & percentage
			male	Female	Total	
Pai	4	106	257	297	554	96 (90.57%)
Puyu	2	80	206	225	431	78 (97.50%)
Bada	3	90	230	211	441	75 (83.33%)
Sakiang	5	94	245	238	483	92 (97.87%)
Pan	2	69	137	165	302	69 (100.00%)
Paki	7	120	306	302	609	114 (95.00%)
Old Mengio	4	95	196	242	439	95 (100.00%)
Kamrung	3	57	156	1565	312	54 (94.74%)
Megang	3	124	270	283	558	90 (72.58%)
Total	33	835	2003	2119	4122	763 (91.38%)

Source: Block Level Abstract of BPL Census 2002 (Abstract-III)

The findings of BPL census 2002 for the CD block of Mengio appear somewhat doubtful. However, to eke out a living, the poor of the CD block work as *Haluahs*, i.e., farm labourers in well-to-do households' farm lands. Side by side they also cultivate their own farm lands. The small and poor farmers of the area practice mutual exchange of labour while cultivating their lands. They save their excess earning in the form of domestic animals (cow, goat, sheep and pig). Some time they also invest their savings in Mithun too. To invest in Mithuns is common among the rich. During marriage the groom has to give a certain number of Mithuns to the father of the bride as bride price. The extended family and community members often contribute to the bride price if the groom is not in a position to pay the price entirely. People in Arunachal Pradesh invest in Mithuns during marriage of daughters the same way the families in other parts of India invest in gold on the same occasion.

Market

There is no permanent market either daily or weekly, in any of the villages of Mengio. But there are some shops in almost every village which cater to the daily needs of the local people. These shops procure their provisions from the Yazali market which is about 60 km away from Sakiang.

Health Care

Mainly due to its difficult terrains and highly dispersed human habitations, the primary health care delivery system in Arunachal Pradesh is very weak. Mengio is no exception. Qualified doctors are reluctant to serve such places. The following quote from a website document of the India Friends Association (2012), a stake holder of the primary health care delivery system in Mengio, depicts the scenario rather aptly:

“Mengio is an area where 40 villages have no proper roads, have intermittent electricity, and no reliable means of communication. A doctor in Mengio, Arunachal Pradesh, has to walk 7 hours to get to some of the villages, when it is not raining, and the roads have not been swept away by the floods. Routine health care in rural India remains a distant luxury.”

To cope with situation of primary health care delivery system in the difficult terrains of the state the GoAP had resolved in 2005 to handover 16 remote most PHCs, one in each of the 16 districts to four non-profit organizations under Public Private Partnership model. One of those four NGOs was Karuna Trust of Karnataka which was entrusted with the responsibility of running 9 PHCs, including Mengio. Under the contract GoAP provides 90% of the total expenditure of the PHCs and the remaining 10 % is to be fetched by the NGOs themselves. In the case of the Mengio PHC 10 % of the total cost comes from the India Friends Association (IFA).

The Mengio PHC is situated at Sakiang, the HQ village of the CD block. It is an 8 bedded health centre. The beds are equally divided between male and female patients. Arrangements are there in the PHC to treat all common ailments including malaria and dengue. Deliveries are also conducted at the PHC. It implements all the national health programmes including NRHM. The PHC is manned by a qualified homeopath and some nurses and technicians. The homeopath is the BHO (H). He also conducts minor operations, including child deliveries. He prescribes



Photograph-- 5: Doctor & other staff in front of Mengio PHC

Allopathic medicines to the both in and out-patients of the PHC. The state health department conducts refresher courses from time to time to educate homeopaths like him on the use of allopathic medicines and also on minor surgery and child deliveries. “No qualified allopath will stay at places like Mengio more than 7 days”, said the BHO (H). He is serving the Mengio PHC for the last 3 years. None of the technical staff including the BMO (H) himself is a native of Mengio. They all have come from other parts of the state. There are 3 Health Sub-centers under the PHC at Kamrung, Nyopang and Pilla. These health Sub-centers are manned by the ANMs who are also employed by the Karuna Trust. Very recently one more health sub-centre has been approved. But it is not yet operational.

Braving the heavy odds, performance of the PHC and the Sub-centres in respect of reproductive and child health care delivery services in 2012-13 was commendable, as can be seen from table 3.

Table 3: Performance of Mengio PHC in Reproductive and Child Health Services in 2012-13

Reproductive and Child health services	Achievement
Universal Immunization (< 6 yrs.)	100.00%
Ante Natal Care	100.00%
Post Natal Care	100.00%
Total ANC cases (number)	80
Institutional Delivery (number)	37 (46.25%)
JSY beneficiaries	37

Source: Mengio PHC

But for sick persons living in distant villages to come to Mengio PHC for treatment is no easy job. They mostly depend on the traditional tribal healing methods provided by the village elders and the *Gaon Buras*. In most of the cases a very sick person of a distant location has to be carried on shoulders of other persons. To carry one to the PHC, the person has to be put in a *Jhula* (swing) two ends of which are tied to a bamboo pole and two healthy persons carry the same on their shoulders. Another two persons accompany them as reserve persons. To trek up and down along the narrow hilly pathways is difficult, painstaking and dangerous. The persons carrying patient in this way may sometimes slip down causing injury. It takes about 8-12 hours to transport a patient on *Jhula* to the PHC. But during night and rainy days and at dark night such a venture is out of question. On such occasions they take the help of their traditional healing methods and pray to Isa Messiah. But to treat a critically ill person they go to the government hospital at Yazali which is 58 km away from Sakiang, the block HQ village.

Education

Educated persons in the age-group of 45-50 years seem to be the first generation literates of the Mengio CD block. Mr. Taw Nikam (48), an ex-ASM (Anchal Samiti Member) of MAS is one among the first literates of the CD block. One teacher (*Masterji*) from Bihar was posted at his village. He used to teach the boys and girls of the area. But now-a-days there exists about 26 educational institutions at Mengio CD Block. The break up is as follows:

Govt. free primary schools	17
Govt. free middle schools	8
Secondary school	1

Total enrollment in the primary and middle schools come about to 1734 (I-IV 1477 and VI-VIII 257). Medium of instruction in schools at Mengio is English. Besides these regular schools there are 47 Anganwari centres at Mengio.

II. Panchayati Raj institutions of Mengio

Villages, Gram Panchayats and Anchal Samiti

For Mengio CD Block, there is one Anchal Samiti (MAS). As mentioned there are 43 villages within Mengio CD block. These villages are divided into 9 Gram Panchayats, as per details given in table 4. .

Table 4: Showing the composition of Mengio Anchal Samiti and of the Gram Panchayat under it

Name of Anchal Samiti	Name of Gram Panchayat	Constituting villages	No. of GP members	No. of ASM
Mengio Anchal Samiti	Bada	Kusuk, Kusuk II and Mate = 3	3	1
	Kamrung	Bong and Kamrung = 2	3	1
	Megang	Kidding, Paga, Heying and Tapo = 4	5	1
	Old Mengio	Heying, Kidding II, lower Mengio, Mengio, Pame, Rego and Sotung = 7	3	1
	Pai	Arug, New Nyopang, Nyopang, Rugo, Sarchgai, Silsango & Silsango II = 7	5	1
	Pakhi	Damisiram, Jajing Tapo, Gari, Lamte, Maching, Nargang, New Damisiram & Tagi = 8	5	1
	Pan	Pan and Tacha = 2	3	1
	Puyu	Nakar, Pilla, Pilla I & Pilla II = 4	4	1
	Sakiang	Lekang, Lengik, Lower Lengik, Pacho, Pinte & Sakiang = 6	5	1
	9 GPs	43 villages	36	9

ASM = Anchal Samiti Members

There are a total of 36 elected GP members in 9 GPs under Mengio Anchal Samiti. The Anchal Samiti has 9 elected ASMs. The profiles of the GP and Anchal Samiti members of Mengio for the last term (2008-13) were as follows:

Table 5: Sex and Community composition of the ASMs and GPMs during last term (2008-13) at Mengio

Panchayat Tier	Sex Division		Community		Total
	Male	Female	ST	others	
Gram Panchayat	24	12	36	Nil	36
Anchal Samiti	6	3	9	Nil	9

Source: Member Secretary

In the last term the Chairperson of the Mengio Anchal Samiti was a woman who was elected from the Megang segment of the Anchal Samiti. All the GP and Anchal Samiti members in the last term were from one political party, namely INC.

The PRI and Devolution of Power

The three tiers of PRI in Arunachal Pradesh are still in infancy. The new Panchayati Raj Act of the state came into force in November 2001. The first elections to different tiers of PRI were held on 2nd April 2003. The current term (2013-18) of the PRIs is their 3rd term. Financial and administrative devolution of power to PRIs does not appear to have been done as yet. This will be evident if one looks at the functioning of the Gram Panchayats and Anchal Samitis of the state.

None of the 9 GPs of Mengio has any secretariat staff to run their offices. Of the 9 GPs only 2 have own offices and the remaining 7 still have no office premises where the members can meet or from where official functions can be discharged. Neither the Mengio Anchal Samiti nor any of the GPs under it gets any development fund from the state government. They get funds under centrally sponsored schemes and also from the grants awarded by the Central Finance Commission. None of these local government units has any authority to generate their own resources through tax or non-tax sources, as is the case in other parts of the country.

The chief functionary of the PRIs of Mengio – not only of the Anchal Panchayat, but also of all the 9 GPs - appears to be the Member Secretary of Mengio Anchal Samiti, who also happens to be the BDO of the CD Block. All financial and executive powers of the Anchal Samiti are vested with the Member Secretary. The Member Secretary, of course, takes all her decisions in consultation with all the members of the GP and AS.

Duties of the Member Secretary and the Role of Elected PRI Members

The CD block of Mengio receives development funds under four heads: (i) MGNREGA, (ii) Indira Abash Yojana (IAY), (iii) Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) and (iv) Central Finance Commission grants.

MGNREGA: In the beginning of each financial year each of the 9 Gram Panchayats prepares its plan for MGNREGA and sends it to the Member Secretary. After receiving the plans from all the GPs, the Member Secretary calls a joint meeting of all GPs and Anchal Samiti to prepare and finalize the Annual Plan of MGNREGA for the block as a whole by consolidating the GP plans together through consensus. The Annual Plan is then sent to the Project Director, District Rural Development Cell (DRDC), Papum Pare.

When the MGNREGA funds are made available in the Block, the Member Secretary again convenes a joint meeting of all GPs and Anchal Samiti to work out an action plan. After this, work starts. The selection of the beneficiary from the pool of job card holders and supervision and monitoring of work are done by the GPs under the stewardship of the respective Chairpersons. The technical aspects of the work are managed by the EORE (Extension Officer Rural Engineering). Wage payment of MGNREGA at Mengio is made in cash as Mengio is a no bank block.

Central Finance Commission grants: The Central Finance Commission (CFC) grants for the PRIs of the Block are allocated by the District Panchayat Development Officer (DPDO). After receiving any fund under CFC, the Member Secretary calls a general meeting of all GP and Anchal Samiti members to select the works to be done with such funds. The two GP offices had

been built from CFC funds. Supervision at work under such funds is done by the elected PRI members and the BDO or the Member-Secretary of AP, who also gives the utilization certificate.

Indira Awas Yojana (IAY): The IAY allotment to the block is sanctioned by the PD, DRDC Papum Pare. The beneficiaries of the scheme are selected by the respective PRIs. The Member Secretary of Anchal Samiti calls a general meeting of all GP and Anchal Samiti members after receiving any grant under IAY. The beneficiaries of IAY are selected through such meetings. The selection of IAY beneficiary is the domain of PRI. The money is handed over to beneficiary by the Member Secretary as the BDO.

SGSY: The SGSY allotment to the block is also being sanctioned by the PD, DRDC Papum Pare. It comes to the BDO. Selection of beneficiary is the domain of the GPs. The GPs do it in consultation with the Anchal Samiti. This is being done in a general meeting of GPs and Anchal Samiti called by the Member Secretary.

The gram sabha meeting at Mengio is called issue wise/ problem wise. In the year 2012-13, altogether 5 such meetings were held.

Performances of MGNREGS

There are 1272 MGNREGA job card holders at Mengio CD block. The average person-days generated under MGNREGA schemes in 2012-13 was 28. Thus the total person-days generated were 35616. The Mengio Anchal Samiti, under the Member Secretary had implemented a number of schemes under four general heads: (i) Micro Irrigation Channel, (ii) CC Footpath, (iii) Porter Track and (iv) Plantation of Large Cardamom.

Micro Irrigation Channel: Altogether 19 micro irrigation channel schemes were implemented in 19 villages in 2011-12. Total length of these micro irrigation channels come about to 3528 meter.

CC Footpath: Four such schemes were implemented at 4 different villages, viz., Sakiang-I, Sakiang-II, Silsango and Nyopang-I. Total length of these footpaths is 230 metres.

Porter Track: Four schemes of porter track were implemented at 4 villages: Pilla-III, Tacha-II, Rugo and Old Mengio. These newly laid porter tracks cover a total length of 4071 metres.

Large Cardamom Plantation: Two large cardamom plantation schemes were implemented at Mengio in 2011-12. One scheme was implemented at Kussuk village and the other one at Mate village. The one at Kussuk village covers an area of 0.70 hectare while the other at Mate village 0.55 hectare. Both these lands are community lands of the two villages. These two large cardamom plantations have now become the community property of the two villages respectively. The communities will manage the plantation and will also share the yield jointly. According to the Secretary of Anchal Samiti, there will be no misappropriation of the crops of the plantation or no misunderstanding among the villagers for managing the same. In the tribal society no one wants to lose his/her self respect.

Co-existence of Modern and Traditional System

The elected PRI members have to discharge another important responsibility in addition to their roles described above. For getting death certificate or the certificate of proof of one's address or the certificate of belongingness to scheduled tribe, an application has to be submitted to the local Circle Officer. This application has to carry the recommendation of the PRI member. The members have to share this responsibility with the **Gaon Buras**. Each village of Mengio has a *Gaon Bura*. *Gaon Bura* is the village headman of the traditional village council that existed at Arunachal Pradesh prior to the introduction of present elected PRI. Though the traditional village council was done away with, the institution of *Gaon Bura* has been retained. Now-a-days the *Gaon Buras* are appointed by the government in consultation with the villagers. The *Gaon Buras* are also the judicial authority at the grass root level on behalf of the state. In lieu of their service they receive an honorarium from the government.

III. Community Initiatives

In a very remote, almost isolated and scarcely populated human habitation like Mengio in the border state of Arunachal Pradesh the government initiative in development of road communication and building other infrastructures of public utility is not adequate. It has already been noted that the people living in various constituent villages of Mengio CD block or Anchal Samiti has it in their tradition to build their own *lampias* (un-surfaced village pathways and porter tracks), small and tiny rope bridges, school houses, teachers' quarters and even accommodation for government offices etc with community contribution and voluntary labour.

But all such previous community efforts were on a moderate scale which required mostly voluntary labour and small amount of fund. But what the village communities of the 10 odd villages in and around Silsango, the newly formed Circle under the CD block of Mengio did in 2011-12 was quite unprecedented. While building quite a number of school class rooms, hostel rooms, teachers' quarters and office accommodation of the Silsango Circle office, they also had cut a number of hills to do the earthwork of a 25 km long and about 15 feet road from Ambam (in Yazali of Lower Subansiri District) to Silsango. These exemplary stories of self-reliance and communitarian activities of several village communities are described in some detail in the next two subsections.

Case 1

Village Communities Build a Road

How the Idea took shape

As mentioned, only two villages of the block, viz., Sakiang and Mengio are connected to the outer world by all-season motorable road. The other villages are connected to each other and to HQ by hilly pathways and porter tracks which become almost unusable during monsoon. The

conditions of the constituent villages of three Gram Panchayats of Bada, Pai and Puyu which now come under the newly formed Silsango Circle are particularly bad. The villages that come under these three GPs (Kusuk, Kusuk II, Mate, Arug, New Nyopang, Nyopang, Rugo, Sarchgai, Silsango, Silsango II, Nakar, Pilla, Pilla I and Pilla II) are furthest from the block HQ. The inhabitants of these villages have to trek up and down on the narrow hilly pathways and porter tracks of 2-3 feet wide for about 10-12 hours to reach block HQ at Sakiang during dry season.



Photograph-- 6: Newly laid Ambam-Silsango Road

During monsoon these tracks become treacherous and dangerous to walk on and, as a result, these villages remain isolated from each other and also from block HQ. A critically ill person, irrespective of the season, is taken to block HQ Sakiang in a *Jhula* made of nylon ropes two ends of which are tied to a bamboo pole. Two strongly built men carry the patient laid in the Jhula on their shoulders braving odds on these narrow porter tracks. Two or more equally strong men accompany them as reserve. At Sakiang the patient is either admitted to the PHC or taken to the government hospitals at Yazali or Itanagar.

Incidences of falling from the porter tracks while carrying a patient in *Jhula* are not uncommon. It also happened to Taw Nikam, a former Anchal Samiti member of Mengio, about 8-10 years back when his wife Taw Yajik became seriously ill and had to be taken to Itanagar via Sakiang. Along with others, Nikam was carrying his sick wife in *Jhula* on his shoulder. At about the middle point of his way to Sakiang, he suddenly slipped and fell about 10 feet down the hill slope. Luckily nothing happened to his sick wife or to himself, but it could have been fatal for his wife who was seriously ill. The incident haunted him whenever he trekked on these porter tracks. This terrible experience induced Nikam to start dreaming about having a motorable road built to connect his village at Pai GP to some place from where access to hospital and other facilities would be easier.

Nikam's dream started taking concrete shape when in 2008 he was elected from the Pai segment as an Anchal Samiti Member (ASM) and his wife became the Chairperson of Pai GP. He started sharing his dream with the elected GP members and other important persons of the 7 constituent villages (Arug, New Nyopang, Nyopang, Rugo, Sarchgai, Silsango and Silsango II) of Pai GP first. Meanwhile in April 2009, the construction of the 140 feet long and about 10 feet wide bridge over the river Paninor was completed. This bridge provided connectivity of the villages of the three above-mentioned remote GPs with Ambam on the eastern bank of the river Paninor from where a 35 KM long metalled road to Yazali town in Lower Subansiri district existed. Again from Yazali town to Itanagar, the state capital, there existed a motorable road.

Thus for the villages of the three remotest GPs what was required was a road from Ambam to Silsango in Pai GP. Such a road would not only end their isolation from the outer world, it would also shorten the distance substantially between these villages and nearest towns including the capital city of the state where various modern facilities are available.

Soon the idea of having a road from Silsango to Ambam attracted the attention of an informal group of persons that had grown around Taw Nikam. The group planned to build this road from Ambam on the eastern bank of the river Panior to Silsango. It was to be a 25 km long road, so

that one may reach Yazali or Itanagar directly from Silsango area of Pai GP through an all-season motorable road without taking a longer route via Mengio-Sakiang.



Photograph-- 7: Ambam-Silsango Road built by local Community

After achieving consensus on the idea, the informal group led by Nikam started reaching out to other elected ASMs and GP members and also to the common villagers of other two GPs of Bada and Puyu. It took about one and a half year for this informal collective to make the dwellers of all the 10 odd villages of the 3 neighbouring GPs believe that this was not a daydream and could be translated into a reality if they worked together. Finally a public meeting of the dwellers of the 3 GPs was convened at Silsango on the first week of January 2010. The meeting had unanimously decided that all the villagers to be benefitted by the proposed road should lend support in the work of building the road and those who were well off should contribute financially to meet the cost of the project. The meeting also resolved that the villagers would carry forward the project of building the road, even if no grant from the government was forthcoming.

The Plan

The vision of the village communities of these 3 isolated GPs was to do the earth work of the 25 km hilly road from Ambam to Silsango. Being an enlisted contractor of PWD of the government of Arunachal Pradesh, Nikam had clear ideas of what they would have to do to. He knew that this was not possible through manual labour. It required hiring of huge machines to cut earth and rocks along the hills. A large sum of money was required to hire such machines. This required contribution from all the village communities to be benefitted by the proposed road. Nikam and his colleagues devised a plan to enlist community participation. It was decided that the work was to be divided into phases equal to the number of main villages along the planned road. There were 10 main villages. The first main village that came on the way of the road from Ambam was to bear the cost of construction of earthen road from Ambam to that village. Any satellite village that had grown out of a bigger village was to be considered as the part of the main village. The cost of earthen road from that village to next main village on the way would be borne by the latter village and so on.



Photograph-- 8: (From left) BDO, Ex. Chairperson of Pai GP Mrs. Taw Yajik, Mr. Taw Nikam (EX. ASM of Mengio) & Mr. Nabam Sera, newly elected Chairman of Mengio Anchal Samiti

Raising the Fund

The meeting also had decided to raise contribution from each of the households of the constituent villages of the three GPs excluding the poor households. It was also decided that all earning members of a household which had more than one earning members should contribute to the road fund. The minimum contribution was fixed at INR 5000/-, while the maximum was INR 100,000. Since Mengio block does not have a bank, people of the area rarely possess liquid cash. They invest their surplus earning, if there is any, in livestock, domestic or otherwise, viz., cow, goat, sheep and Mithuns. Hence in order to acquire the required amount of contribution for the road fund, the villagers sold some of their domestic animals and Mithuns. However there are a number of educated persons among the residents of different villages of Silsango area who are either holding high positions in the state bureaucracy or doing business at Itanagar and other places. They also contributed to the road fund generously. The present Member Secretary of Mengio Anchal Samiti and her husband, a district level officer in Fisheries department, also come under this elite group. Taw Nikam informed the research team that an estimated amount of INR 1 Crore (10 million) was collected and spent for constructing the 25 KM long earthen road. Of the total amount thus collected, a sum of INR 30, 00,000 is reported to have been contributed by Nikam. For this he borrowed a sum of INR 15, 00,000. However no written and audited accounts were available, as the contributions were collected and also spent village wise in an informal manner.

Execution of Plan

The execution of the plan of cutting hill tops and constructing road started at the end of January 2010. First the foot tracks (pathways and porter tracks) along which the proposed road was to be constructed were marked. After this, 6 machines (JCB earth cutting machine and Poking earth removal machine) were hired from Itanagar. The rental was INR 3, 00,000 per machine/month. There were 4 personnel for each machine: Machine operator or Driver, Handle-man, Supervisor and Cook. While the operator and handle-man came with the machine, the supervisor and cook were employed by the village community of each village. Actually both



Photograph-- 9: Ambam-Silsango Road

these locally engaged persons were performing the roles of supervisor and cook in rotation. When the road construction work reached the domain of another village the supervisor and cook were changed. They were chosen from among the educated young persons of the communities. While the JCB cutting machines were cutting earth and rocks along the foot tracks, the poking machines were removing the accumulated earth and rocks from the way. Work remained suspended during the period of April to August due to monsoon. Monsoon in this part of the world visits early. It had started again in September 2010. The road was completed at the end of 2011 with a break of 4 months (April-September) in between during the monsoon.

The dwellers of the once isolated villages of Kujuk, Kujuk II, Mate, Arug, New Nyopang, Nyopang, Rugo, Sarchgai, Silsango, Silsango II, Nakar, Pilla I, Pilla II and Pilla III can now boast of having a public road, which is un-surfaced, but motorable during dry seasons.

One can now use the road during the winter months (September to March). During other times it becomes almost impossible for any motor vehicle to run on this newly laid road because of knee-deep mud and frequent landslides.



Photograph-- 10: Ambam-Silsango Road in monsoon

Good Work of Community being Recognised by the Government

Nabam Tuki, then minister of PWD & UD of GoAP, came to Silsango in January 2011 on an official visit. There he was briefed about the peoples' initiative in constructing road from Ambam to Silsango and was requested to sanction fund for upgradation of the road. He promised to look into the matter favourably. Incidentally, the CD block of Mengio falls within his assembly constituency of Sagalee. The minister also promised that the community would be paid back the amount they had contributed for constructing the un-surfaced road. In keeping with his promise, the minister had sanctioned an amount of INR 7 Crores (70 million) in 2012 towards the construction of Ambam-Silsango road. However the work has not yet started,

because it is customary in this highly landslide-prone hilly region to leave any newly laid road as it is for about 3 years after the completion of earth work in order to enable it to attain stability. Once this surface stabilizing period is over, the remaining work of road construction from Ambam to Silsango will begin and the people of the three GPs of Pai, Bada and Puyu will have their dream realized - an all season blacktopped road from their villages to the towns of Yazali and Itanagar. When completed, the road will be there as a standing testimony of the triumph of the self-reliance and communitarian spirit of the people of Pai, Bada and Puyu GPs and Anchal Samiti of Mengio.

Case 2

Village Communities Build school infrastructure

In keeping with their tradition the people of different villages under the leadership of PRI members had constructed a number of additional school class rooms, teachers' quarters and even the accommodation of newly formed Silsango Circle Office house during the year 2011-2012 with community contribution and voluntary labour.

⊖ **Construction of Additional Class Rooms:** Additional class rooms were constructed with community contribution and voluntary labour for the following schools:

- (i) Nyopang Residential School (Govt.). It is a middle school. Three class rooms were constructed to accommodate additional students.
- (ii) Silsango Upper Primary School (Govt.): The old school building became dilapidated and needed thorough repair. This was not possible without closing the school. The villagers under the leadership of PRI members came to the rescue. They built an altogether new school accommodation by the side of old one with community contribution and voluntary labour. This was an accommodation of 8 rooms. The rooms were, however, made with locally available material, such as, bamboo for the walls of the rooms and wild banana leaves for the roof. The wild banana leaves

are strong in texture and can withstand sun and rain for 2/3 seasons. The community contribution came in the form of materials.

- (iii) Silsango Primary School (Govt.): All the rooms of this school were almost destroyed and the classes were being held in the open. The village community under the leadership of PRI members had constructed 5 rooms using bamboo and banana leaves before the onset of monsoon. One of these 5 rooms was the teachers' common room-cum-office room.

Ø Construction of Teacher's Quarter: There was a shortage of a teacher quarter in the Sakiang Secondary School. The village community of Sakiang came to the rescue. With local contribution and voluntary labour they built a teacher's quarter of OBT (Ordinary basa type) structure (A structure made of cement flooring, bamboo-made walls and roof of corrugated tin sheet).



Photograph - 11: Teacher's quarter built by the community

Construction of Silsango Circle Office Accommodation: The office and the quarter of the Circle Officer of the newly formed Silsango Circle were also constructed with community contribution. The village communities of Pai GP under the leadership of the PRI members had built these structures of bamboo walls and corrugated tin roofs with voluntary labour and local contribution.

IV LESSONS LEARNT

It is difficult to find a place for the special problems of some of the north-eastern states in the mainstream discourse on development. The difficult terrain conditions, highly dispersed habitations, isolation of the inhabitants from the outer world, non-modern cultural practices of people, vulnerability of people for being located in border areas – all these characteristics of some parts of the north-east baffle the mainstream development planner. One cannot think of development of these areas without resorting to decentralization and giving powers at the hands of the local communities for making decisions. Jawharlal Nehru was, indeed, right when he said “We should not over-administer these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We would rather work through, and not in rivalry to, their own social and cultural institutions.”⁴ Mengio’s story reinforces the strength of the logic contained in this statement.

As observed in the present study, the tribal communities have a strong sense of self-reliance. They will not be dependent on government for addressing needs that they themselves can fulfill. Mengio has given ample proof of this. They also have a strong inclination for communitarian values and may come forward to make positive interventions in order to fill up a gap caused by government failure. In other words, though backward in many respects, these communities seem to have a great asset, namely, existence of a kind of community governance

⁴ Foreword to second edition to Verrier Elwin’s book ‘A Philosophy for NEFA’, quoted in Kusum Nair, (1964), *Blossoms in the Dust*, Gerald Duckworth, London, P 129.

that may reduce the loss caused, at least in some circumstances, by the failure of the agencies of the state.

As noted, the institutions of panchayat in Arunachal Pradesh are still very weak. Neither the Anchal Samiti nor the GPs enjoy any worthwhile financial and executive power. Moreover the development funds that come to panchayats are too meager compared to the vastness and problems of the region. On the other hand one notices numerous examples of community initiatives, an account of which has been given in the present document. These initiatives could have found better ways of expression if the institutions of panchayat could be strengthened by devolution of adequate administrative and fiscal powers.

By any standard, the construction of the 25 KM road through community initiatives is an extraordinary event and deserves to be celebrated. In planning and executing this project, the formal institutions of panchayats joined with the informal structure of community governance to bring the people of three gram panchayats under one umbrella. The leadership was given by a member of the Anchal Samiti. There was no official involvement of PRIs, because they did not have the mandate of getting involved in this kind of work. But as elected representatives of people they gave leadership in their individual capacity in the road project as well as in other works under community initiative described in this document. This strength of the local community needs to be taken into account in designing and strategizing future decentralizing reforms of the state. That is the most important lesson that one may learn from the case study of Mengio.

Persons interviewed

Ms Tana Yaho, Member Secretary, Mengio Anchal Samiti

Shree A G Ligu, Nodal Officer (PEAIS)' Assistant Director (PR), GoAP

Shree Taw Nikam, Ex. Anchal Samiti Member (2008-13)

Smt. Taw Yajik, Ex. Chairperson of Pai GP (2008-13)

Shree Nabam Sera, newly elected Chairman of Mengio Anchal Samiti

Vijay Kumar Sharma, Deputy Director, SIRD, Itanagar

Dr. Bijit Gogoi, in charge of Mengio PHC and staff nurses

Staffs of Mengio Circle Office

Extension Officer, Rural Engineering, Mengio

Villagers in Sakiang village, Mengio

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