Digital Injot (Light): Tea Tribe & Adivasi Community Empowerment in Assam (India) in A Digital Age

Organised by: Council for Social and Digital Development (CSDD), Digital Empowerment Foundation, Centre for Labour Studies & Social Protection (TISS Guwahati Off Campus) and the North East Development Foundation.

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@2023

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CONTENT

Summary 4

1. Introduction & Background 5
2. The Consultation 6
   2.1 Objectives 6
   2.2 Themes of Consultation 7
   2.3 Consultation Highlights 7
   2.4 Suggestions / Recommendations 15

Annexure 17

• The Programme
• List of Stakeholders
Summary

1. The purpose of the discussion was to look into the impact of digital technology and access on the Tea Tribe and Adivasi communities in Assam, India, and explore how technology can be leveraged to empower the community.

2. The Tea Tribe and Adivasi community (TTAC) have historically faced social, economic, and political marginalization in Assam, and now have been left behind in this digital age.

3. The digital exclusion challenges faced by the community is a complete one — including lack of access to devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy and skills.

4. There has not been any focus on digital mainstreaming of the community, comprising 20 % of the State’s population at public and private levels in promoting digital inclusion and empowering the TTAC communities.

5. Measures like a collaborative platform can be created at the district level where the administration, service providers, other stakeholders can connect and engage on digital inclusion and empowerment needs of the community for effective coordination, collaboration and community action.

6. Lower level of education and literacy has been a stumbling block for the community’s access to digital skills, knowledge, capacities for their development and empowerment.

7. Apart from formal education, digital and computer education and certification also plays a vital role for job placement for the youths of the community. Looking into the financial condition of the community it becomes impossible for them afford the high costs of getting digital education and skills training.

8. Every stakeholder engaged with and in the community have to play their part in terms of bringing in additional funds, creating resources and putting effort at their own capacities. The government can play the most effective role in this.

9. In order to bring about a larger and notable impact all the stakeholders have to come together and engage the government to adopt and expand initiatives like the Building Opportunity, Leveraging Technology (BOLT) supported ‘Digital Internet Roshni’ project. This initiative can serve a better outcome and impact, in digital development of the community within the tea garden ecosystems.

10. The BOLT Internet Roshni project is a unique example for the community. The fifty Community Internet Libraries (CILs) have come in handy in a much-needed context. The project can be strengthened further including continuous training of the CIL team for wider involvement and engagement of the community in gardens.

11. The number of CILs should be increased along with expansion of new project areas in order to reach out to large community. There is so much need for internet and digital empowerment for the locals.

12. The youths, young boys and girls and women should be engaged better to be part of the digital society and take benefits of digital services.

13. Overall, the consultation concluded that digital technology has the potential to empower marginalized communities in Assam, but it requires a concerted effort from government, civil society organizations, and the private sector to ensure that these communities have access to the necessary resources and support to fully benefit from the digital age.
1. Introduction & Background

The Tea Tribe & Adivasi community residing in the tea gardens constitute 20% of Assam’s population in India. They have been brought to Assam during the colonial rule. Today, the community produces 53% of India’s total tea production, and is the country’s second largest tea producing state. The community in the Tea Gardens have been facing challenges in accessing better living conditions, better heath infrastructure, minimum and equal wages and better education infrastructure. In this fast developing world digitalization has become the utmost priority. The recent COVID pandemic added new dimensions to the paradigm shift from a manual world to digital world. The community which already is facing political, social and economic exclusion, now faces a new exclusion – Digital Exclusion. Access to internet and digital information is becoming a major challenge for the community.

As the gardens are very remotely located the community is facing the lowest internet & digital access and coverage. For the telecom and internet service providers too this regions are of their lowest priority, looking at the high cost of setting up of infrastructure for internet services. Considering the low and adverse economic and social conditions of the community, community network solutions too is difficult due to its cost and sustainability.

Towards this, a stakeholder’s discussion was organised on ‘Digital INJOT (Light): Tea Tribe & Adivasi Empowerment in Assam in a Digital Age’. It was organised in Dibrugarh District of Upper Assam, the hub of political and development focus of the tea tribe and Adivasi community in the State. The discussion background has been the utter need for improving ‘Access to Information, Public Schemes, Entitlements, Social Protection & Opportunities for the Tea Adivasi Community in Assam in a Post Covid Digital Age’. To address the above issues the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) initiated the Project ‘Internet Roshni’ in 2022-2023, under the aegis of Internet Society Foundation’ BOLT initiative. Through this project, 50 Community Internet Libraries (CILs) were set up in 5 target districts for the pilot phase. This 50 CILs are run by 50 youths from within the garden and are called Soochnapreneurs (Information Entrepreneurs). Through this CILs the limited mobile data networks in the garden is being leveraged through LTE devices, data boosted by boosters and are being channelled through CILs with access to network, information and resources.
2. The Consultation

2.1. Objectives

The objective of the consultation was to bring the stakeholders, community representatives and intellectuals from and of the community under one roof to have a brainstorming discussion around:

- Digital empowerment of the Tea Tribe & Adivasi community.
- To assess the lack of internet and digital access and the major issues emerging due to this and impact the community.
- To discuss strategies and steps to be followed in order to make internet and digital meaningfully accessible for the community.
- To review and appraise on the pilot activities and progress of Internet Roshni with the representatives.

2.2. Themes of Consultation:

The consultation was based on the following four thematic areas/questions:

1. How much is the Tea Tribe & Adivasi community digitally empowered?
2. What are the major issues the community is facing due to the lack of internet and digital access?
3. What could be done to make internet and digital meaningfully accessible for the community?
4. How has the BOLT Internet Roshni pilot project helped the community?
2.3. Consultation Highlights

The consultation was attended by the representatives from the government, civil society, student's organization, village level administration, stakeholders and individuals from the community along with representatives from the organisers – Council for Social and Digital Development (CSDD), the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and the BOLT project funder organization, the Internet Society Foundation (ISOC).

At the very onset of the meeting all the participants were welcomed and the objective of the meet was shared. The participants introduced themselves citing their role and responsibility and position and where they had come from and shared their expectations from the meeting and their area of expertise. Ms. Maiko Nakagaki, Program Officer from ISOC briefed about the Foundation’s association with DEF and the project. Maiko shared the overall objective and the work ISOC has been doing globally.
She shared her experiences from the field visit and the work DEF had done in the past one year in the project tea gardens. She expressed her expectations from the meeting especially on the behavioral change of the community after having access to internet. She also wanted the representatives to throw light on the next phase how they look at the growth of the project and what they expect to be implemented on the ground.

The agenda of the meeting was discussed with the participants: To digitally empower the Tea Tribe & Adivasi community. The post COVID affected the common people especially the community residing in the tea gardens in terms of accessing the rights and entitlements, information, schemes. In taking the discussion forward the thematic areas of discussion was shared among the participants:

- How much is the Tea Tribe & Adivasi community digitally empowered?
- What are the major issues the community is facing due to the lack of internet and digital access?
- What could be done to make internet and digital meaningfully accessible for the community?
- How has the BOLT Internet Roshni pilot project helped the community?

The moderator then explained to the participants what is expected to be discussed keeping in mind the thematic areas. The moderator also shared that keeping in mind the next phase of the project, the participants were also expected to share their experiences on the project activities, what went well, what is needed to be corrected.

The flow of the consultation was one to one sharing about their experiences around the thematic areas, suggestions, thoughts and views.
The **FIRST SPEAKER** representing Socio-Educational Welfare Association (SEWA), a not-for-profit society, based out of Dibrugarh district in Assam, shared his experience of working with community. He highlighted the GENDER aspect that needs to be considered and look into while talking about digital empowerment. Since the tea industry has 70% to 80% female workforce, the GENDER INCLUSION if not considered then it might not be possible to achieve the desired goal. The speaker also talked about the stress level of the female workforce how they have to manage all the household chores and then report to work early in the morning at 7-7.30 am daily, and after toiling for the whole day and also considering the remoteness of the gardens, how can she manage to think about filling up any form related to govt. schemes or entitlements. He expressed that if the garden management fully supports the BOLT project, then it can be win-win situation for both the management and the community. The number of absentees can be curbed as the workers need not go out of the vicinity of the garden to fulfil their entitlements and digital needs as since the centers are located inside the gardens. They can access the centers now even after work hours.

He shared about the various challenges while working with the community. He said that in order to take this project forward there is a need for COLLABORATION, not only with the garden management and the garden community. A COLLABORATIVE PLATFORM can be created at the district level where the administration, service providers, the center in charges of CILs can come in for meetings and discussions from time to time about the activities of the project and reflect on the progress, which will definitely help to leverage on the BOLT project centres.
The **SECOND SPEAKER** one of the stakeholder from Jorhat and representing the All Adivasi Women Association (AAWA) appreciated the initiative taken through the project to create CILs in the project garden. She shared her experience about being involved with the project for about a year now. She said that the centers are located in such a way that the community especially the women after completing their daily duties can access the center for their digital needs. She even said that since the center is located inside the garden and is being run by the local youths, the community in times of need gets the work done on credit, which is understood by both ends. She said that the center doesn’t have a fixed opening and closing time and this has helped immensely as the community whenever they feel the need to access the center they are able to do so. The community now can get their digital works done with very minimum charges in the centers. She said that, in her garden now, after the project intervention, all application to the management is being submitted digitally. There is change in approach and behavior that can be seen in the community.

Since, the good work of the project is being appreciated at various levels still there is a need of awareness building among the community on the part of the center in charges / Soochnapreneurs. The center in charges has to have a rapport building and good connection with the panchayat and block offices. The activities, benefits from the center needs to be highlighted more among the community.

The **THIRD SPEAKER** representing the Assam Tea Planters Association (ATPA) thanked and appreciated the effort made to reach out to the garden community and empower them digitally. He started quoting that the population of tea tribes is beyond 30 lakhs (around 4 million) in the Assam state, so this digital journey is full of challenges. He spoke about the physical challenge in terms of equipment, devices due to which the community residing in the interior regions are not able to access the right and timely information regarding schemes and entitlements. Since this (BOLT – Internet Roshni) initiative has just began and it has been only a year now reaching to 1,00,000 lakh people, the focus should be how to reach to the entire population. This is the need of the hour for this community because this is one of the most backward community. He shared that if a community does not have access to information that community remains excluded from all the benefits of the government. Now a days every information spreads digitally. Since, the community has no access or very limited access to the physical equipment and devices it gets excluded from the benefits. Another major obstacle for
the community is the level of education which is a societal challenge. There are not many educated people in comparison to the main land communities, which is a stumbling block for them to access information digitally.

The gardens in and around the urban population are far better in terms of awareness about their rights than the gardens located in the remote areas. The speaker said that setting up of digital centers cannot be termed as the community being digitally empowered. The centers are only facilitating the process. The community needs to be made digitally aware. The youths who have access to smart phones and other means of internet have to be made a channel for this awareness. The community have to be made aware of all the facilities of the centres. He himself being the owner of the tea garden has expressed that there is notable change in the way of the functioning of the management. In the 70s and 80s the management did not want their workers to be educated, and knowing many things, but now the management also wants their workers to be educated, informed and healthy to be termed as good worker. He expressed his gratitude that the organization has taken up this initiative of digitally empowering the community. It is very challenging for the organization to achieve the goal at their individual level. The administration, management, service providers and all the key players have to collaboratively come together for the larger goal.

The **FOURTH SPEAKER** representing the Tea Tribe & Adivasi student’s organization emphasized on the need of basic computer education and knowledge for the community. He shared that before the community is educated about internet and digital world, they need to be familiar with the means and equipment that are a source to that information. He even shared that in recent few years the need to pursue formal education have taken a tremendous rise. But even then, the students after completing their formal education finds it very hard to get employment outside the garden because they lack certificates in computer education. The same can be applied for the adults of the community where they too can be given basic computer education. He even shared that parallel with the other activities of the project there should be made provisions for imparting BASIC COMPUTER EDUCATION for the community under some trained and expert faculty.

The **FIFTH SPEAKER** representing the Centre for Labour Studies & Social Protection (CLSSP), Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Guwahati off Campus in Assam, shared his long association with the gardens in various capacities. He shared that with the help of information that too timely and affordable information one can do miracles. He appreciated the effort taken up by the organizations to provide information to one of most excluded and backward community. His recent visit to the centers located in Jorhat district (one of the Bolt project sites) he could see notable changes among the student fraternity. He even said that since it is just the beginning there are ample of scope for corrections. He added that every stakeholders have to play their part diligently in order to bring a change in a notable manner among the entire community in terms of brining in additional funds, creating resources and putting effort at their own capacities.

The **SIXTH SPEAKER** representing the tea planation labor union Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangh (ACMS), Margherita branch in Assam, appreciated the effort of digitally empowering the community. He himself being the representative of the worker community feels that it is the need of the hour for the community in order to cope up with the modern society. He said that before empowering, the community awareness plays a very vital role. If the community is made aware than only they can be empowered. He even added that since the gardens are spread at very large hectares of land one CIL center is not
enough to cover the entire garden. The community though not fully aware about internet and digital but have some idea about it. They use smartphones and phones to check on their salary being credited or not or their other financial benefits are being credited to their account or not. So since they are at least aware of the means and tools of digital information if all the players work together hand in hand surely it will be possible achieve the greater goal of making the community 100 percent internet and digitally enabled.

“The digital need of different stakeholders of the community has to be assessed prior to creating awareness among the community because the digital need of children will differ from that of an adolescent and it will differ from the need of women and students.”

The SEVENTH SPEAKER representing ABITA – UNICEF placed at ABITA Dibrugarh zonal office in Assam, shared his experience working in digital mode during the COVID. He said during the first lockdown when travelling was restricted they used the digital medium to reach out to their beneficiaries from the tea gardens especially the adolescents, lactating mothers and the pregnant women. They used WhatsApp to reach out to children, but it could be found that only 5% to 6% children could be reached out. Again during the second COVID wave they had started a radio program and tried to reach out to more and more number of beneficiaries in Assam through Facebook. But they could reach out to only 5000 to 6000 beneficiaries only. In total only 8% to 9% beneficiaries could be reached out through digital medium. This shows the number of active internet users in the tea garden community who can be termed as digitally active if not empowered.

Students can benefit digitally from the SIRISH portal launched in 2021 by applying for scholarships and other benefits and a career counselling portal is much needed for the adolescents. Internet has its own implications so during the awareness programs the community needs to be educated on the merits as well as the adverse effects internet can bring upon them. Pre COVID, they had around 20,000 to 30000 women beneficiaries but during COVID through digital mode they could reach out to only 12,000 to 15000 women, this is just because they were not digitally empowered or did not have the tools to be digitally connected.
The **EIGHTH SPEAKER** representing the Village level administration as well as the cluster level administration stated that the community has been benefitted from the BOLT project in terms of applying for entitlements and benefits. In previous years it was seen that the number of applications was very low, but after the intervention through Internet Roshni project the number of applications has far exceeded the number of targets for the district. The project supported CIL centers and the Soochnapreneurs have tried their best to aware the community but looking at the geographical dimensions under one panchayat there are 3 to 4 tea gardens and in one garden there are more than 2000 population so only one center in one garden will not fulfill the motive. Computer education is very much need of the hour for the students fraternity. They have started learning about computers at school but there is no place to go and practice after school hours. So a provision can be made in the centers where the students at least once in a week can come and practice what they have learned in the school.

The **NINTH SPEAKER** representing the Tea Tribe Welfare Department (TTWD) Dibrugarh district of Assam, stated that though the centers set up under the project is running smoothly but proper training is required for the CIL centre coordinators / Soochnapreneurs. They are aware of only the handful of schemes that is being implemented by the government. They need to integrate more services in the center and awareness has to be created among the community. In the entire Dibrugarh district, there is only 10 centers as of now which is not sufficient if want to target the larger population, so in the coming days the centers need to be increased so as to reach to wider community.

The **TENTH SPEAKER** representing the ACMS, Dibrugarh branch and the ACMS central committee, appreciated the initiative taken up by the organization through ‘Internet Roshni’ project to digitally empower the community. He said that the need to be digitally empowered could be felt during the demonetization period after which the digitalization had begun. The tea community were not aware about the digital payment mode before that and during that time they had to face many difficulties for payments and withdrawals. The community is unable to venture out of the premises of the garden to access digital services many times due to poor transportation and communication and also they are not aware whom to approach and where to go. They have to spent more money in order to just simply fill up a form to avail any benefits. Through the project since the provisions are being made to provide the services inside the garden which is much to be appreciated.

This is a very initiative first of its kind in the capacity of the organization. In order to bring about a bigger and notable impact all the stakeholders have to come together and have to present the model in front of the government. They can provide the much needed larger platform so as to make this initiative a better one for the development of the community in a true sense.
2.4. Suggestions / Recommendations

Few suggestions and recommendations that came out during the meet are:

1. There is need to push for digital inclusion and empowerment of the TTAC community from all aspects – internet, devices, skills and access at local levels inside the gardens. A mission mode programme is need of the hour for mainstreaming the community digitally.
2. The community is widely living in information poverty and in real need for wider integration and introduction of other services and entitlements and awareness.
3. The adolescents and youths are great resources of the community and they should be a priority in digital inclusion and empowerment.

4. Stakeholders outside the tea tribe ecosystem must come forward for mobilization of resources inside the gardens to address information and development needs.

5. Based on the BOLT initiative, a consortium of stakeholders must come forward for wider internet and digital inclusion of the vulnerable and indigenous tea tribe and Adivasi communities in the State. The consortium must make plans and actions towards wider digital empowerment of the community.

6. It is suggested that mission mode programme for a certain duration can be taken up for digital literacy and inclusion of the TTAC community in Assam with focus on digital literacy in each household and arranging for low-cost and subsidised devices as well as setting up Community Internet and digital spaces for the community. For this, arrangements like Digital literacy Coordination committees can be set up at garden level involving key local stakeholders like the trade unions, panchayat representatives, SHGs and others.

7. Since internet and digital empowerment is a continuous process, it cannot be achieved at a go. For this, stakeholders must continue to work in a graded process.

8. Collaborating with various educational institutes and universities and linking the students from the community who has been pursuing higher education to come back to the community and help in creating a sustainable model of being trained and then training the community.

9. The project supported Soochnapreneurs / Information entrepreneurs needs further skills and capacity building on dynamics of information and digital world and engage the community closely with access to information, services, entitlements and schemes.

10. The adolescent girls and women must be a core priority for digital empowerment interventions in the community or else existing marginalisation of the women would widen.
1. The Programme

Stakeholders Discussion | অংশীদারসমূহ আলোচনা

Digital INJOT (Light): Tea Tribe & Adivasi Empowerment in Assam in A Digital Age

Digital ইন্জোট: ডিজিটাল যুগে অসমত চা জনজাতি আক আদিবাসী সম্প্রদায়ের শৈশবকাল

Improving Access to Information, Public Schemes, Entitlements, Social Protection & Opportunities for the Tea Adivasi Community in Assam in a Post Covid Digital Age

ডিজিটাল যুগে আক কোভিড ১৯ পিছন অসমত চা জনজাতি আক আদিবাসী সম্প্রদায়ের বাবে তথ্য, বাজহরা আঁচল, অধিকার, সামাজিক সুবিধা আক সুনাম প্রতিষ্ঠান উন্নতি

April 5, 2023 | Time: 11:00 AM – 1:00 PM| Venue: Manchali Tea Retreat| Dibrugarh, Assam

ORGANISED BY:

Council for Social & Digital Development • DEF • TISS
2. The Consultation Focus
The Stakeholders consultation would like to delve on the following aspects:

1. Post Covid Response and Improving Access to Public Schemes and Entitlements, Social Protection, Skills, Alternative Livelihood, and Opportunities: Access to these critical resources, opportunities have been a challenge with Covid-19 already having a severe impact on the life, health and livelihood. With uncertainty in wage-based employment, global demand-supply challenges in production and market and impact on wages and employment, impact of climate change on production, market supply, prices, wages and employment, the pressure is on the community to sustain their basic needs and aspirations and their rights and entitlements.

2. Digital Connectivity & Access, Skills and Empowerment: Tea Adivasi Communities are excluded from the internet and digital world of opportunities and networking. There is a strong need to strengthen internet network and access for the community, mostly without smartphones or personal devices for access. The community is not having meaningful access to internet and benefits to meaningfully search information and content for their needs and process the information for their benefits. There is lack of basic internet skills to explore, navigate meaningfully and beneficially. Lack of English knowledge and skills and lack of local language and dialect-based content is also denying effective participation of the community in emerging digital society, economy and services. Currently, most of the processes of availing government benefits have moved online, throwing open both an opportunity for better easy access who can avail, and challenge for those not having access, device, skills (biggest recent example is the SIRISH online portal introduced in 2020 by Assam State Government exclusively for availing tea Adivasi schemes online for the community). With lowest literacy rates, largely being an oral community, lack of skills to navigate and apply benefits online, the community needs digital support and facilitation for online access to critical information and resources around education, health, livelihood, entitlements including scholarships, jobs, opportunities.

Digital Injot: Digital Empowerment of the Tea Adivasi Community in Assam
1. How can digital empowerment of the community can help in improved access to information and opportunities?
2. What is the need for a dedicated digital ‘Digital INJOT / Roshni’ programme for the community to mainstream their needs and opportunities in this digital era?

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2. Participant’s list

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<tr>
<th>SL. No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Organization</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>HARI NANDA GORH</td>
<td>BRANCH SECY</td>
<td>ASSAM CHA MAZDOOR SANGHA (ACMS)</td>
<td>MARGHERITA</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>BHARAT NAYAK</td>
<td>PROG. OFFICER</td>
<td>ETHICAL TEA PARTNERSHIP (ETP)</td>
<td>TINSUKIA</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>MUKTIKAM BORDOLOI</td>
<td>PROG. MANAGER</td>
<td>ABITA</td>
<td>DIBRUGARH</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>ARFAN HUSSAIN</td>
<td>VICE PRESIDENT</td>
<td>SEWA (NGO)</td>
<td>DIBRUGARH</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>SAMUDRA P. BARUAH</td>
<td>VICE PRESIDENT</td>
<td>ASSAM TEA PLANTERS ASSOCIATION (ATPA)</td>
<td>JORHAT</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>PRANJAL CHANGMAI</td>
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<td>TIMONA GAON PANCHAYAT</td>
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<td>SUSHIL TASSA</td>
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<td>TEA &amp; EX-TEA WELFARE BOARD</td>
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<td>URSHILA MURAH</td>
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<td>SUNIA TANTI</td>
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<td>ALL ADIVASI WOMEN ASSOCIATION OF ASSAM (AAWAA)</td>
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<td>ARUPA TANTI</td>
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<td>DR. RAJDEEP SINGHA</td>
<td>ASST. SECRETARY</td>
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<td>KOMOLA SAHU</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>NEELA RAJBONGSHI</td>
<td>PRESIDENT</td>
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<td>DIRECTOR, COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL AND DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT (CSDD); ADVISOR (DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION)</td>
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Digital Injot (Light): Tea Tribe & Adivasi Community Empowerment in Assam (India) in A Digital Age