Chota Nagpur Plateau is one of the oldest landmasses on the earth, having evolved 50 crore years ago. The Plateau lies between the basins of Ganga and Son rivers. According to the history, the Plateau was ruled by the Nagavanshis and the Chota Nagpur has derived from Nagavanshis kingdom. The Plateau has its fort in village named Chutia of Jharkand state. The Plateau part lies mainly in state of Jharkand and it borders with areas in states of Odisha, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal and covers an area of 47,100 sq. miles. The Plateau is a combination of three plateaus and they are Ranchi, Hazaribagh and Kodarma Plateau.
Chota Nagpur Plateau is one of the oldest landmasses on the earth, having evolved 50 crore years ago. The Plateau lies between the basins of Ganga and Son rivers. According to the history, the Plateau was ruled by the Nagavanshis and the Chota Nagpur has derived from Nagavanshis kingdom. The Plateau has its fort in village named Chutia of Jharkand state. The Plateau part lies mainly in state of Jharkand and it bordes with areas in states of Odisha, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal and covers an area of 47,100 sq. miles. The Plateau is a combination of three plateaus and they are Ranchi, Hazaribagh and Kodarma Plateau.

The Plateau is divided into three parts; the highest step is the western part of the Plateau, having a height of 900 to 1100 meters and second part constitutes three parts and that is the largest portion of old Ranchi, Hazaribagh district and some parts of the old Palamau district, having a height of 600 meters and lowest step constituting of two districts namely the Purulia and Singhbhum, having a height of 300 meters.

The Plateau has two set of rivers, flowing in the region. The first one set of rivers flow from the southern part and another set of rivers flow from the northern part of the Plateau i.e., Damodar, Barakar, Koel and Suvarnarekha are the main rivers, which flow through the Plateau.

The climate of the plateau is humid and sub-humid with hot summers and cool winters and it receives a average rainfall of 1000 to 1600 mm. The moisture is prevalent for 150-210 days and soil is largely dry for more than 90 days in a year. The soil composition comprises mainly of red soil, which has evolved over hundreds of years, due to rock formations. The other types of soils are micaceous soils, black soils, laterite soils and sandy soils in the plateau.

The Plateau has high diversity of flora and fauna as it comprises of number of small and big hills, covered with forests. One can find sal trees which are predominant and most of the parts of the Plateau are covered with bamboo grassland and shrubs in the region.

The Plateau is home to various types of animals and they are tiger, four-horned antelope, blackbuck, chinkara, dhole wild dog, sloth bear and Asian elephant. We can also see rare birds, such as lesser florican, Indian grey hornbill and hornbills native to the Plateau.

The Plateau is home to key valuable mineral resources, the Damodar valley has huge coal reserves, Hazaribagh has the largest mica concentrated region in the world, the Plateau is also the centre for many resources such as coal, iron-ore, china clay, chromite, dolomite, copper, limestone, bauxite, asbestos, feldspar, fire clay, keonite, apatite, manganese, silica, steatite, vanadium steatite, uranium gold and antimony.

The Plateau region contributes 40% to 70% of the total mineral production in the country. Way back, railway lines were established to link Kolkata and Patna to transport minerals and mineral products to other parts of the country. In Bokarao region, a huge thermal plant was established for electricity generation and large steel mill is also located in the region.

The Plateau belt, has many industries that were established, which included iron, steel, automobiles, rail engines, chemical and fertilizers, explosives, coal, washery, cement, heavy engineering, machine tools, paper, asbestos, glass
and ceramic, refractory, earth moving machineries, copper melting station, zica aluminium industries. These industries are located in the belts of Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Giridih, Jhumri-Tilaiya, Chaibasa, Jamshedpur, Jharia, Dhanbad, Daltongunge, Harhargunge, Garwa and Japla towns.

The Plateau is also home to many waterfalls, wildlife, flora, fauna, and National parks which provide tourism based livelihoods to the people. Waterfalls include Phruaghaugh waterfalls (17 meters height), Hundru waterfalls (75 meters height), Dassam waterfalls (40 meters height) and Sandi falls (60 meters height). The Kanke dam is a famous tourist spot, which is a few kilometers away from Ranchi.

The Plateau is home to many Austric tribes and they constitute around 22.5% of the population in the region, a total of 30 tribal groups inhabit the region and some of them are Santhal, HO, Kharia, Munda, Oraon etc. These native dwellers, a few of them subsist on hunting-gathering, practice shifting cultivation and also are artisans. The nomads of the region such as Birhors, who own no land, subsist on hunting and gathering activity, rope making activity and seasonal based fishing.

The Plateau receives normal rainfall and has clammy, deep forests and diverse areas. The Plateau is heartland for valuable mines and minerals and is also notorious for being most backward area in the country. The various livelihoods in the region are diverse. Majority of the population predominantly depend on agriculture for their livelihood.

Though the region receives good rainfall, the agriculture productivity is low, mainly due to undulating terrain, sloppy terrain, lack of irrigation facilities, poor water harvesting structure and poor soil conservation methods. As predominant population practice agriculture, cultivation of mixed crops is seen, which suits the dry and humid climate. The above reflects the climate situation of the region. The crops cultivated are paddy, maize, wheat, barley, minor millets, oil seeds and pulses as supplementary crops in the region. In the border regions or the difficult terrains, many of the population cultivate drought resistant, flood resistant and long duration varieties of rice. In few places the local farmers cultivate short duration crops (90) days crops like gora rice to cope with unpredictable monsoon, though has low yield, but ensures reasonable productivity. In case, of high lands, where the water runoff is very high, locals cultivate the shortest duration (60) days crops. In other belts of the Plateau region, which have sufficient water facilities, sugarcane cultivation is also practiced.

The Plateau is also famous for horticulture crops and the varieties of fruits and plants grown here are the traditional varieties of mango fruits like Bathura, Bombai, Himsagar, Kishenbhog, Gopalbhog, Sukul, Rani pasand, Safedmaldah, Chausa, Fazali and Zardalu. We can find a large number of plant species in the region. Apart, from cultivation of horticulture crops, the native dwellers have indigenous knowledge about the various types of medicinal plants and its variety of usage in treatment of various ailments. For instance, the natives use Kurthidaal to cure kidney stones, and karhaini rice to cure jaundice. Bamboo and sabaigrass are available in this region, which are utilized to produce paper and prepare ropes. The lac inset and Laccifer are available in abundance and are used in making varnish, shellac, sealing wax and dyes.

The Plateau produces 41% of the total lac in the country and the infamous tasar silk originated in this region. Livestock farming is another important livelihood activity, observed in the region. The various types of livestock
animals, such as black Bengal goat, Chotanagapuri sheep, murrah, local buffalo, broilers and ducks are domesticated by the local population and they raise crossbred animals for milk, meat and dairy products. Collection of Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) is an important livelihood activity, as the Plateau is home to 22.5% of native habitatants i.e., tribals. The key tribes who are dependent on NTFP are Baiga, Asur, Chero, Gond, Larmali, Kond, Kurmi, Tharu, Kols, Tamar, Khewar, Birjia, Savar, Korwa, Malpaharia and Parchariyas. After collection of NTFPs they sell the produce in weekly local village markets or to the middlemen. The tribal population also sells bamboos and canes, prepare seed oils, fat, cordage, baskets etc., and prepare local liquor with mahua fruit for consumption.

Another interesting aspect in the Plateau, one observes is that local population implement various traditional water harvesting methods i.e., earthen bunding, stone bunding and stone-cum-earthern bunding across the slopes, they use the local resources, such as weeds and bushes to strengthen bunds. It is build on low-cost structure to prevent soil erosion and this helps them to supply water to uplands, which are near to their homesteads. They dig wells and supply water to uplands, this method is called as “Barhi” and in the irrigated lands, they cultivate cash crops, vegetables to supplement their income and also for their consumption needs. The local population based on their land situation scenario, they practice different cropping patterns.

The resource rich Plateau, is witnessing increase in population and large part of the region has been brought under cultivation. Though, a good reasonable part of the area has not yet been touched by cultivation the NTFP exploitation continues and for the native dwellers, collection of NTFP has become a challenge for survival. On the other end, the various industries set up in the region provide livelihoods to local population as permanent workers, contract workers and as daily wage labourers. The mushrooming of small, medium entrepreneurships to industries provide livelihoods to local populations.

The paradox is that there is severe blow to the local tribal populations livelihoods and on the other hand mining, industries, development projects, infrastructural projects, overgrazing of pastures, recurrent droughts and forest fires continue to threaten the Plateau, coupled with soil erosion, rain water run off. Various stakeholders need to come on a common platform, to design a vision to protect the uniqueness of the Plateau and its native dwellers. ❖