

# LAND, WORDS AND RESILIENT CULTURES

THE ONTOLOGICAL BASIS OF  
TRIBAL IDENTITY

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EDITED BY  
**bodhi s.r**  
**raile r.ziipao**



**Tribal Intellectual  
Collective  
India**

*Land, Words  
and  
Resilient Cultures*

**The Ontological Basis of Tribal  
Identity**

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Tribal Intellectual  
Collective  
India

**Dedicated  
to our  
Teacher  
Professor Virginius Xaxa**



The Tribal Intellectual Collective India (TICI) is an Imprint of the Insight Multipurpose Society, Wardha. The TICI endeavours to promote Tribal literature and writers. It aims to further tribal/Adivasi discourse through publishing academic and scholarly content. It is driven by a sincere desire to deepen a 'perspective from within' in Tribal studies. This book is part of the TICI series on Tribal and Adivasi Discourse which aims to de-assemble methodology, deconstruct theoretical perspectives and produce new emancipatory knowledge.

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## Acknowledgement

This book is an effort of the Tribal Intellectual Collective India to articulate concrete tribal conditions in very distinct subject domains – land, language and cultures. This is part of a series titled ‘Tribal and Adivasi Discourse’, a project of the TICI to de-assemble methodology, perspectives and theories concerning tribes/Adivasis in India. This book attempts to unravel new dimensions in the debates on the subject. Most of the authors (both tribe and non-tribe) have framed their papers around a ‘perspective from within(s)’, the premise of TICI’s writings. This book is both an academic engagement within and among Tribal scholars, academics and activist well-wishers who share similar concerns and perspectives.

The Tribal Intellectual Collective India was initiated by Professor Virginius Xaxa and supported by many senior academics in the year 2009. Since then, the TICI runs its own journal and a publishing house, engaging with various subjects cutting across philosophy, methodology, politics, history, economics, arts, aesthetics and society from a tribal perspective. As editors of this book – Land, Words and Resilient Cultures, we are grateful to the TICI who holds the copyright of these articles for giving us papers related to this subject domain, plus the opportunity to engage specifically with methodology, which is also the overarching thrust of this volume.

We are thankful to each of the authors who have contributed to this book. It is both rich in resource and insights and having been written as a collective, it brings to light different methodologies applied by various thinkers from across the geographies of India.

This book is written with the intention to deepen tribal scholarship about social reality and also to articulate an alternative methodology within current academic discourse. It is meant especially for Tribal scholars engaging in knowledge production. It introduces to them the thoughts of the Tribal Intellectual Collective India, both in the domain of epistemology and theory.

Outside of this immediate goal, the book will also be useful to those academics interested in getting a glimpse of the emerging debates concerning the ‘perspectives from within’ formulated by the TICI in tribal studies. Part of our endeavour is to have a theoretical conversation with non-tribe colleagues and readers in the hope of finding common ground on alternative perspectives, dialogical methodology and emancipatory knowledge.

We are extremely grateful to each of the reviewers who have helped enrich the text and also provided insights to us on methodological issues. We thank our TICI colleague Professor Bhangya Bhukya for agreeing to write the foreword. Last but not the least, we remain deeply indebted to Professor Virginius Xaxa and all members of the Tribal Collective who believe that it is a socio-psychological necessity to challenge and reject the idea that tribal peoples are mere ‘recipients of knowledge’ and to reclaim, in its stead, their epistemological agency as ‘producers of knowledge’.

**bodhi s.r & raile r.ziipao**

## Foreword

I am so happy to see the production of this text at this moment, a text that is born out of the Indian experience and has deep organic roots. These are good signs for tribal studies because in many ways, such efforts can also be read as attempts to come out of the shell of dominant societies' theory and its dominance on ideas pertaining to tribes in India. The dominant theories and methodologies of Indian modern social sciences are either Euro-centric or caste centric that failed to comprehend the realities of the diverse non-caste peoples of India. Indeed the problem of our times is not that there is a dearth of scholars from such societies but that contemporary social sciences theories and methodologies itself resist the study of non-caste societies inhabiting very unique habitats; hills, mountains, islands, forest, desert, in more engaging and critical methodologies. It is imperative for scholars of those societies to break the tradition of Indian academia that is inherited from British colonialism. The attempt made here by seventeen scholars, development practitioners and activist from their own location is indeed directed towards that direction. The rich and theoretically engaging introduction of this volume by bodhi s.r and raile r.ziipao unravels how the Indian disciplinary knowledge is hollow when it comes to histories and subjectivities of diverse non-caste societies. The introduction sets the ground for the succeeding chapters. A set of seventeen very distinct scholarships appearing on the Indian academic domain and speaking for themselves is itself a revolutionary attempt in epistemological revival and the making of an alternative tribal/ adivasi studies.

Till recently, non-caste (tribes/Adivasi) societies formed merely an 'object' of inquiry and the 'data' for caste-Hindu academicians. This problematic persist to this very day. On the ground however, there was no qualitative change in adivasi subjecthood. They remained at the receiving end of this caste theoretical onslaught. Nonetheless, as can be observed, the only tangible outcome of this irresponsible and inhuman engagement is that those who used adivasis as their data

got professorships and honorary positions in Indian (upper) caste dominated institutions.

Then there is another serious problem with Indian academia working on non-caste societies. The problem with these academicians is that they simply confined their theorization to reproducing colonial derogatories and were completely bereft, both methodologically and theoretically of any fresh gaze at the nuances of adivasi society. To name a few of these premises, for them, adivasi insurgencies are criminal acts, adivasi politics are apolitical, adivasis are destroyer of forest and environment, adivasi poverty is rooted in their cultural practices, adivasis are changing from tribe to caste, adivasi societies are folklore societies, etc. These somewhat abstruse propositions of Indian academics are not fundamentally different from those of the colonial one. Instead, they are the continuation and extension of colonial constructions of 'alter native' societies who remained out of the caste system. By continuing such a colonial legacy, the Indian academia failed to give ideological integrity to adivasi society.

Adivasi social is historically the foundation of Indian civilisation. But this is consciously derecognised in our mainstream history text. It is an open secret that the adivasi culture, belief system and philosophy have been either destroyed or appropriated by hierarchy bound caste society. The unending physical and theoretical conquest on non-caste peoples is a big epistemological genocide in history. The physical conquests started from the time of the Aryans to the British colonialist who tortured the adivasis in which some social groups were subjugated to their system while many others either stood as martyrs or fled into habitats away from the vicinity and physical proximity of caste society. Unfortunately these unending conquests are not registered anywhere. If at all they are registered they are described as 'criminal acts'. Contemporary regimes criminalise them and label them as anti-state. By naming their politics in such a way, these regimes have furthered the criminalization of their politics. This has parallels with our dominant

caste scholars' prescription of adivasi politics as 'apolitical'. In fact, such construction legitimised the acts of contemporary regimes.

In environmental studies, it is being argued that forests are ruined because of the presence of adivasis in the forest. This led to mass eviction of adivasis from forest, either under forest conservation acts or wildlife protection acts. It is important to note that historically forests ruins occurred only when the state started governing forests under colonial rule. Contemporary regimes are, without thought or remorse parceling up hills and forests for multinational companies and selling forest wood on permit to private timber traders. Indeed, we need a special study to gauge the magnitude of the ongoing forest wood trade.

Also 'adivasi poverty' is attributed to their drunkenness and cultural celebrations. The question is who made adivasis poor. Is it not state? Paradoxically state took away all their source of livelihood, land and forest, and pauperized them. But the blame is put on adivasis to bear. Further most of the sociological and anthropological studies proactively engaged in measuring adivasi poverty through the framework of development indexes. These studies are problematic, reducing the adivasi problematic to the question of poverty. Concomitantly poverty studies are also used to appraise the social change among the adivasi society, and ends up theorising adivasis as transforming from tribe to caste, describing them as people in transition. The nuances of such theories are that caste society has reached the civilisation ladder and that tribal societies have to catch up with them. Such theorisation indeed threatens the very existence of the adivasis, as the survival of these societies is itself resistance; resistance being an articulation of their existence. It is to assert that the adivasi way of life is consciously positioned to resist caste society's theoretical formulations and imposition on their society. The attempt here by (dominant) caste scholars has been to arrest the historically embedded uniqueness of the adivasi social.

Sociologist and anthropologist from caste society also persist in labeling adivasi society as 'folklore' society. It is to say that caste society is 'real' whereas the adivasi society is 'unreal'. The forms of Adivasi intellectual history such as myths, mythological stories, rumours, ballads, songs, symbols, motifs, etc are relegated to folklore and simply dismissed of any historio-theoretical value. These 'so-called' folklores for 'dominant caste scholarship' are in actuality realities of the adivasis. Importantly, it is adivasi intellectual history that provides agency for their new consciousness. Describing adivasis as folklore society is nothing but a diabolical attempt to erase their history and politics from the pages of history and historical text. There is another group of caste scholars who take a very benevolent position on adivasi social. Yet, this position, however emancipatory it might seem overtly, is still very much rooted in ecological romanticism, which equally goes against the adivasis.

I am happy to state that the present volume attempts to reverse many of these theoretical stereotypes. Each of the chapters is unique, critical and deeply engaging articulations on land, territory, language, literature, identity, culture and politics of adivasis/tribes of India. The propositions made in these articles surely disassemble the dominant paradigms, theories and methodologies. I take pride in being a member of the Tribal/Adivasi Intellectual Collective of India and appreciate its timely attempt to bring out this excellent volume.

**Prof. Bhangya Bhukya**

University of Hyderabad

# Land, Words and Resilient Cultures: Laying the Context and Frame

**bodhi s.r & raile r. ziipao**

This edited book of the Tribal Intellectual Collective India (TICI) engages with the philosophy of methodology from a tribal perspective. It revisits the tribal context, problematises the discourse about tribes and reworks ontological formulations of tribal identity around three co-dependent categories - land, words and resilient cultures.

The word 'tribe' in this volume is positioned to refer to methodological communities. Each tribe, we opine, has their own embodied methodological structure - living, traversing and negotiating different politico-contextual terrains. At the very foundation of this structure is land; a dynamic, pulsating, processual, living epistemological entity that defines, produce and reproduces an identity, a tribe, a language, a culture, a tribal ontology.

The chapters in this book are divided into three inter-dependent parts. The first engages with the subject of land, words, peoples and cultures; the second explores the relationship between language, culture and peoples, and the third examines culture, struggles, resilience and gender.

In Part One, we have three chapters, each written from very unique locations, all engaging with history, cultures, peoples and their interconnection to land. We begin with a chapter that looks at the conceptual and theoretical debates pertaining to land and territory from varied tribal habitat across the world. This is followed by the second that discusses the land traditions, the practices of the *Kbasis* in Meghalaya and the transformation that has come about over the years. The third chapter dwells upon the historical struggles of the *Mahadev Kolis* of Maharashtra who find themselves in the midst of

tremendous assimilation processes. All the three papers in this section engage with the intricate relationship between land, words, peoples and cultures.

Part Two has three chapters that unravel the relationship between language, land, cultures and peoples. The first is a theoretical paper that attempts to capture the complexities of language sourced from the experiences of the *Lambadas*. The second discusses the relationship between language and literature among the *Bodos* of Assam during the colonial period and the third assesses the culture and meaning making process of the *Khadiya* of Chotanagpur.

Part Three has ten chapters, each exploring the relationship between cultures, struggles, resilience, transformation and gender. The first discusses the etymological politics between *Boros* and *Bodos* among the Kachari society in Assam and its surrounding regions. The second analyses the livelihood realities of the *Rung* society of Uttarakhand. The third historicise the tribal societies of Ladakh, now that it is a Union Territory of India. The fourth explores the struggles of displaced tribal peoples from big dams in the hills of Manipur. The fifth assesses the realities of the *Eastern Konyak Nagas* residing in the border region between Myanmar and India. The sixth examines the daily struggles of the Adivasis in the Tea Estate of Assam. The seventh interrogates the historical sufferings of the *Chakmas* from the Chittagong Hill Tracts who were rehabilitated in Eastern NEFA after being displaced by the Kaptai dam. The eighth traces the historical struggles of the *Lambadas*, a semi nomadic tribe found predominantly in South India. The ninth articulates the experience of the *Nicobarese* post tsunami in Andaman and Nicobar Island and the tenth is a consolidation of the testimonies of tribal/Adivasi women on land, ecology and resource rights.

Attempting to engage theoretically with the concepts, issues and propositions made in this book, we have divided this introductory note into four sub-sections. The first, 'Contextualizing the Debate', discusses the historical context in which the framing of a certain discourse about tribes took place. The second, 'Articulating the



Paradigm Shift in 'Tribal Studies' problematises the question of methodology in tribal studies and sets out to articulate a preliminary methodological framework as proposed and worked out by the Tribal Intellectual Collective India. The third, 'Towards an AlterNative Methodological Framework', touches briefly the methodological discrepancies of current tribal studies, and articulates an alternative discursive framework to engage with 'tribes' as methodological communities. The last section 'Land, Words and Resilient Cultures: Experiences from varied Alternative Centers' attempts to capture the philosophical subtleties of these methodological communities from varied contexts based on the content and proposition made by authors in the seventeen chapters that constitutes this book.

### **Contextualizing the Debate**

Post 1492, when the word 'tribe' was fundamentally altered to refer to 'the savage other' that needed to be 'civilised' by the forces of colonialism, these diverse tribal societies, collectively underwent and endured an epistemicide. The notion of the 'savage' inserted by the colonialist into the word 'tribe' travelled, together with the coloniser, to distant lands. It embodied, in the process of colonization, newer more complex conceptions that denigrated and condemned tribal society(s), especially its epistemology and theory, to a state of 'primitivity'. Concomitantly, this also led to the reproduction of this historically constituted colonial imagery of the word, manifesting itself as 'common sense', both overtly and subtly in the hoi polloi's social imagination. It also entered the academia and became a very sophisticated evolutionary theory about society. These processes led to the theoretical infantilization and methodological dehumanization of many such diverse tribal realities across both the colonizing and colonised social landscapes.

From the perspective of the coloniser, these historio-epistemological processes were perceived as normative. It did not occur to colonisers that their very narrow 'ethnocentric' project of wealth accumulation by brute force, was being built on the

obliteration of tribal epistemology(s), which also required, as part of the same project of rule, the overt condemnation of a large section of humanity to a sub human / non-human status. Later when theoretical propositions were being formulated and articulated to explain the social reality of the coloniser, most of their 'grand' propositions were framed in such ways as to incorporate the notion 'tribe' initially to refer to 'peoples without souls', then 'half-animal and half-human savages', then as 'primitive peoples' and much later as 'traditional' and 'pre-modern societies'.

These colonial theories went on to even provide an ethical explanation and a politico-axiological legitimacy to the colonial process of physical degradation, identity debasement and political peripheralization of tribal societies. Much later when these Euro-centric colonial theories were marketed as 'universals', that is, theoretical propositions applicable across time, place, space and peoples, the biggest impact that such political interplay had was on the epistemologies of the tribes. Instantly, tribal epistemology(s) was degraded, demeaned and marginalized, and through colonial structures of knowledge and knowledge production was insidiously infantilised and inferiorised.

Viewed in retrospect, most of the colonial meta-narratives generated were framed in ways that needed to boxed the category 'tribes' either as referring to primitive and pre-modern social realities, or undeveloped and backward societies. It is within these set theoretical parameters that colonisers also gave birth to the idea of the 'modern', meant to identify their stage in the evolutionary process. Theoretically, this notion of the 'modern' was strategically marked against the category 'tribe', used as a mirror image to compare and reflect the colonizing society's stage of evolution/development.

Disciplines such as anthropology, which was informed by Western centric conceptions of progress while being grounded in the western method and encapsulated in brute western 'ethnocentrism' were initiated and tasked to study tribal societies and their 'primitive'

cultures. It was hoped that insights derived from such studies would help colonial(ist) society comprehend their reality better. It is important to point out that generally, with exceptions of course, none of these diabolical processes really mattered to the colonialist, because for them the theory and knowledge produced was merely meant to explain their own dynamic reality, blind to the process that their dialectically grounded search for their 'meaning' required a binary opposite called 'tribe'.

Around the mid 1700s, the savagery notion of the category 'tribe' entered the hierarchy bound social imagination of the dominant caste populace of Indian society(s) through the British. Administrators, anthropologist and travelers from both the British and caste society(s) began reproducing the post 1492 meta-narrative, turning this pejorative conception into a norm and a 'given' in the structuralist sense. The term was loaded with paternalism and a condescending attitude, and backed by brute epistemic power; colonialists were able to sell, for commonsensical consumption by the colonized hoi polloi the idea that 'tribe' meant 'primitive', 'wild', 'naked', 'forest people', 'uncivilised', 'culturally inferior', 'technologically backward', etc.

As a matter of fact such conceptions was nothing more than colonial 'common sense' masking in its stead the real colonial quest; infinite greed for wealth accumulation that required both an endless thirst to expand their own polity and a near delusional belief that they were tasked by their 'God(s)' to monitor and save the 'tribal world' from poverty, savagery, degradation and despair. Thus, when 'their common sense became our theory', meaning when their common sense was marketed to tribes as social scientific theories, a form of theoretico-methodological imprisonment took place, the effects of which are the colonization of the (tribal) lands, the colonization of the (tribal) category, the colonization of the (tribal) mind and the colonization of (tribal) epistemology. These pejorative and victimizing narratives still reverberate across the politico-historical spectrum and throughout the (colonial/colonized) hoi

pollo's social imagination to this very day, manifesting in a narrow, uncontrollable 'colonial mentality' of relating and perceiving tribal societies.

Nevertheless, it is important to note the historical response of tribal society(s) to this political encampment and the paternalistic penetrative theoretical gaze of the colonial hegemon. Outside of these constricted ontological epistemological impositions, numerous tribes persisted ingeniously with their own organic struggles to stabilize their own community epistemology(s); rebuilding, reconstructing and repositioning their episteme to adapt to the dynamic social and colonial power play. Even under extreme political duress and persistent brutalization of their epistemology by colonial forces, each tribe struggled, from the perspective of methodology, to guard and keep their community epistemology alive and pulsating. Each tribe responded differently to situations depending on colonial conditions, political context and their own community realities, sometimes consciously and at times unconsciously. For some tribes, epistemological stability became a psychological necessity to bound the community together, for others, overt epistemological assertion became a social imperative, for a few others, epistemological defiance became their only recourse to physical survival, while for a few more, epistemological surrender became the only available path to staying alive.

### **Articulating the Paradigm Shift in Tribal Studies**

There is a paradigm shift taking place in Tribal Studies. This is arising from the works of scholars from the Tribal Intellectual Collective India (TICI). The framework being posited by the TICI is fundamentally grounded on some key theoretical propositions made by the sociologist Virginius Xaxa, stemming from a series of articles written by him on various subjects concerning tribes in India. This framework, as it stands today is being debated among TICI members around two key subject domains.

The first subject domain concerns the problematization and reformulation of four, plus one (five) overarching categories that

have direct epistemic implications on tribes, especially how tribes are conceived and what makes any social reality, in the theoretical sense, a 'tribal' reality. From the point-of-view of the TICI, the deconstruction of these five categories is fundamental to a critical theoretical engagement with the category tribe, and for unravelling the complex tribal reality(s) in India today.

These five broad and overarching categories are identified as colonialism, modernity, development, governance and epistemology. The TICI opines that without a rigorous engagement with these categories, one is likely to fall prey to preconceived existing 'given' suppositions about tribes. Such 'givens', politically speaking, do currently dominate discourse, both in and outside the academia. Trapped theoretically in such 'given' conceptions, it is argued, reduces the scope and possibilities of a more humane engagement and holistic understanding of tribe(s) and their concrete conditions.

The second domain, interlinked with the first, concerns issues related to methodology, arising from the critical analysis of the above four plus one categories. From the perspective of the TICI, these methodological issues are constituted by three key epistemic processes. The first concerns the frame of reference used by theorist to study social reality in general and tribal societies in particular, the second is related to an epistemological premise concerning knowledge and knowledge production, and the third concerns an approach to the study of history and discourse.

Below we will discuss some of these issues as they are being debated and discussed among theorist of the Tribal Intellectual Collective. However, before we proceed it is important to share with our readers that the TICI is still in the process of problematising each of the above five theoretico-methodological categories and only a few key propositions have begun to emerge. While it would have been academically apt to discuss each concept in greater detail, what is immediately possible for us is to only attempt a brief theoretical sketch of the lines of arguments being made by the TICI. These are as follows:

(i) that to begin any serious theoretical engagement with the Tribal realities in India, one cannot shy away from confronting the notion of colonialism; both as a historio-political event and a frame of reference. In the period after colonialism, other categories like semi-colonial or post-colonial have also been posited as frames of reference. However colonialism, semi-colonial and post-colonial as frames-of-reference does not suffice to closely comprehend Tribal realities, they fall far short from explaining the concrete ground realities of the tribe(s). Trying to bridge this theoretical discrepancy between text and context, Xaxa proposes the idea of 'waves of colonialism', also sometimes conceptually posited as 'double colonialism' to generate a new frame-of-reference that gives a superior insights into the concrete tribal condition. The idea of 'waves of colonialism' or 'double colonialism' has also open up the theoretical possibility of conceiving tribes in India as non-caste societies; those diverse and multiple societies that persist in their resistance and are still predominantly outside the caste system, a system that permeates and encapsulate the majority population of Indian society.

(ii) that it is colonialism that produced the idea of the 'modern', and in the process also manufactured the epithetical concept of the 'pre-modern'. This very colonial framework went on to frame many diverse societies across the world in ways that marked such societies as inferior to the self ascribed superior status of the coloniser premised on a spatio-temporal scale. To this mirror conception of the colonial 'modern', the tribal societies were marked as 'pre-modern' societies that needed to be produced and reproduced in the image of this 'modern'. To confront such a conception of modernity, Xaxa posits the idea of an 'alternative paths to modernity', as in to mean that all societies are moving towards their own modernity, probably not in the image of the dominant and in ways that the dominant wishes to or envisages. The tribes, it is argued need not be conceived as static societies, and are, by all means dynamic, moving towards their own conditions of modernity. In Xaxa's view, the problem is not with modernity as an

idea and a process, but the very method of framing modernity within an in-built comparative ontology that posits a particular society's stage of development as a bench mark for identifying others on a spatio-temporal scale of progress. The concept of 'alternative paths to modernity' allows theorist to comprehend tribal communities away from the comparative model that is often rooted in a 'colonial' gaze of other societies, informed by the method of objectification, classification and comparison about and between societies. The alternative paths to modernity allow the comprehension of any society independent of the other's gaze in the process of evolution and change, in itself and in relation to other societies.

(iii) linked to the above colonial idea of modernity is the concept of development, where development is seen as a stage in the evolutionary process, mostly from the gaze of the dominant and the powerful 'modern'. From a tribal perspective, development is conceived in very different terms. They concern the ideas of consensus, the question of participatory processes, the concept of equality, the deepening of democracy, the realization of justice, and the foundation of a just egalitarian society. The TICI coins the term 'development with justice' to provide an alternative paradigmatic frame to the current, very violent framework of development. The experience of tribes in India in the pretext of development has been nothing short of a nature-political calamity. In India, development is directly related to the destruction of tribal life, the displacement of tribe(s) from their natural habitats, the plundering of its resources, the museumization of their culture, the infantilization of their epistemology and the inferiorization of their social realities. From a tribal perspective, these development processes are often perceived as 'very colonial', in both attitude towards the tribes and in the infrastructure and mechanisms put in place to govern them.

(iv) accompanying such a colonial conception of development is a governance framework, often articulated as a theory about tribal

reality. This theory is often posited in such ways as to provide legitimacy to a certain set of governing principles or premise that informs how to see, how to think and how to engage with tribes in India. This theory is constituted by three interlinked concepts – isolation, integration and assimilation. While 'isolation' is seen in very negative terms, often attributed to British colonialism and their strategic project of rule, the concept of 'integration' is seen as important but unnecessary, often attributed to reactionary tribal resistance. The last category, that is the notion of 'assimilation', is on the other hand seen as a politico-cultural imperative and even a socio-psychological necessity for the 'state nation' to achieve and realised, envisaged as the mainstreaming and development of tribes themselves.

However, in actual terms from a 'Tribal perspective, these same processes are perceived and experienced very differently from the way the dominant caste society conceives them. For tribes/non-caste societies, the idea of 'isolation' is often experienced as 'freedom' (degrees of freedom but freedom anyways). The idea of 'integration' is perceived as 'in a state of negotiation' with caste society and the powers that be and the process of 'assimilation' is experienced as having to unwillingly adapt to the brute force applied by the dominant caste society on the diverse tribal society(s).

From such a perspective has emerged a concept the TICI calls 'engaged governance'. For tribes, the idea that they are resistant to any non-tribe(s) in the governing process is not true. What they resist is the perspective of the person who governs; not the ethnic identity or caste of the person. Engaged governance, in this sense stands against the governing principle of 'assimilation' and rejects the dominant's unilinear theoretical framework cum principles of isolation, integration and assimilation. It instead argues for the governing principle around freedom or degrees of freedom, and embraces, in its stead the theoretical framework of freedom, negotiation and adaptation as against isolation, integration and assimilation respectively.



(v) all of the above combined interlocking processes - colonialism, modernity, development and governance emerging from the dominant's episteme are seen by tribe(s) basically as an imposition of the dominant's socio-political structure on them, embodying the problematics of both the historical and the discursive. Embedded at the very core of all these historio-discursive processes is the inferiorization and infantilization of the epistemology of diverse tribal societies, marking in the reproduction process the superiority of colonial epistemology over and above tribal epistemology(s). It is to be noted that the dominant's frame-of-reference, which is almost certainly rooted in a very colonial gaze of social reality, is only one of the many ways of looking at reality(s). From a non-colonial/tribal gaze, these same categories unravel a very different socio-psychological reality, embodied and manifesting in alternative ways of seeing, thinking and understanding of the same historio-political processes.

In problematizing such a politico-conceptual interplay, and against such a colonial frame-of-reference, the TICI have strategically proposed the concept of decoloniality. This notion of decoloniality is a 'point-of-view', rooted in an alternative (dialectical) gaze of the same social reality. From this point-of-view, what unravels when one looks at social reality is a fundamental categorical shift from the 'colonial' to 'waves of colonial', from 'modernity' to 'alternative paths to modernity', from 'development' to 'development with justice', and from 'governance' to 'engaged governance'. This shift, brought about by the decolonial gaze, also embodies, in many ways a theoretical rejection of 'colonial epistemology' and the power that such epistemology has on the colonised 'tribal' subject. tr

It is in this decolonial way-of-seeing social reality that we arrive at the fifth and last category, a category we consider most fundamental in unpacking and understanding tribal reality(s) – epistemology. For us, epistemology is where tribal life pulsates. One who comprehends a tribe's epistemology understands the tribe(s). For those who know, even the contradiction between colonial/caste and

tribal/non-caste societies is a contradiction of epistemology.

How this might be so, one might ask. While there are a number of arguments that foregrounds this proposition, for the sake of theoretical clarity, yet limited to the scope of this introduction, we will examine one empirical condition that brings to light the centrality of epistemology to the above problematic. For instance if one views the governance frame of isolation, integration and assimilation, as discussed above, with epistemology as an object of inquiry, what reveals is that tribe(s) experience ‘epistemological stability’ when isolated, ‘epistemological distortion’ when integrated and ‘epistemological disintegration’ when assimilated.<sup>1</sup> Each of these deeply embedded asymmetrical epistemological processes is hidden from the gaze of the dominant, both academic and non academic, until one seeks deeper truth(s).

It is with this understanding that the TICI argues for the centrality of epistemology in theoretical formulations, especially while problematising the concepts of colonialism, modernity, development and governance. To consciously visibilize epistemology in theory building and to consciously counter the dominant's unconscious invisibilization of epistemology is considered imperative. This assertion of tribes on the criticality of epistemology to their social reality is often articulated by them in many spaces and in multiple ways, but rarely heard by non-tribes. For example, in the politico-cultural domain, tribes often argue, especially in relation to state, that what their numerous historical movements have sought and still seek from the powers that be is not emotional, psychological, political or even historiographical integration, but epistemological integration. Epistemology to tribes is fundamental to their being.

In conclusion, all of the above analysis stemming from a particular

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of these processes please refer to the book of the Tribal Intellectual Collective India: The Problematics of Tribal Integration – Voices from India's Alternative Centers, edited by bodhi s.r and bipin jojo (2019), published by the Shared Mirror Publishing House, Hyderabad.

gaze and location as discussed, could be called the decolonial gaze and the decolonial location respectively. It is based on such formulations, that the TICI argues the need to fundamentally move away from earlier frames of studying tribe/non-caste societies that were formulated on a very loose notion of a colonial 'given', a position that in many ways accepts without awareness a primary colonial assumption about the constitutive meaning of the colonial/post-colonial, modernity, development and governance. The non-problematization of these core categories produced a tribal study that was fundamentally grounded on the gaze of the coloniser, often conceived as 'given', manifesting in the political realm the production and reproduction of more colonialism(s).

### **Towards an AlterNative Methodological Framework**

At the very core of the new approach to tribal studies (or the studies of non-caste societies) initiated by the TICI, is also a proposal for a new methodological framework. This framework challenges the methodology often used to study non-caste societies in India that often stems from a Euro-American centric gaze that in many instances overlaps with the caste society's post-colonial gaze. Both these frameworks are dominant in academia and not easy to disrupt. The vested interest have built institutions and power structures to guard their methodologies and protect them from any theoretical challenge that may arise, branding any alternative methodology as reactive, too subjective, unscientific and non-academic. Based on the propositions of the TICI, we will discuss three key epistemological issues that constitute this new alternative methodology.

The first concerns the premise that is fundamentally grounded on a framework that the TICI calls 'diversity-dialogue'. This is posited as an alternative way of viewing society that is currently totally subjugated to the Euro-centric 'particular-universal' framework. The diversity-dialogue framework replaces the centrality of the particular-universal framework as the only premise in which the mechanics of society operates.

The second concerns a perspective cum approach to the studying of social reality and how one conceives the epistemological subject. The TICI simply calls this approach to knowledge and knowledge production as contextualization. For the TICI, contextualization is a process of methodological 'perception' in the process of knowledge production. It is not indigenization, as in the application of an exogenous theoretical framework on a context that would then have to be altered to fit the meaning making process of a peoples, but the recognition that it is context that produces the theory and not theory that produces a context. Such context based methodology, it is argued, is closer to the social reality theoretically.

Finally, the third concerns the domain of history and historiography. One of the many fundamental markers of colonialism is the suppression of tribal histories. Even before problematising the same, it is first imperative to recognise that tribes cannot represent themselves other than through the framework and knowledge that has been positioned and produced about them. There is an in-capacity to represent, and as a political process; tribes can rarely represent their world as their own and in their own framework. Most cannot even experience their own reality in their own language, in their own history and in their own narratives. How then does one proceed in such a disempowered state of representation to attempt to bring back to life one's own history and then to begin to see and experience the same outside of the colonial gaze? To tackle this socio-political disability, the TICI proposes to call their approach to the study of history as dialogical historiography.

The writing of history from this perspective is mostly about the location and gaze of the historiographer. This historiography is pitch directly against those historiographies that are fundamentally premised on a universal-particular framework. These are colonial historiography, nationalist historiography, regional historiography and subaltern historiography. Each with their own location and gaze of social reality, subaltern historiography being the most

sophisticated framework operating within the universal-particular framework, and in many ways the most strategic attempt at the humanisation of the colonial's 'universal.' Dialogical historiography however relies on the lived, but not merely the 'lived', it recognises and respects the ability of a living epistemological subject to speak and articulate its own theory of history and its own societal reality without having or needing to demean other co-existing social realities.

### **Land, Words and Resilient Cultures: Experiences from varied Alternative Centers**

Before discussing the issues raised in the chapters, it is important that some exploration be made on the key categories that this book attempts to engage with. It is often argued that land, words, tribe and cultures constitutes the ontological core of a tribe's 'being and fullness'. It is on these concepts that many other concepts, such as territory, habitat, ecology, lifeworld is built on. In India the debates concerning the relationship between land, words, tribes and cultures is a complex one. As a matter of fact, many tribes in India still refuse to let go of their history, their indigenous ancestral connections, their lands, their claims over water and forest, their languages, their shared narratives and belongingness and their intrinsic symbiotic connection between their ethnicity/identity and their land/territoriality. Their connections to their historical lands where their ancestors inhabit, whether they currently inhabit or have moved away to other places, still constitute the bedrock of their identity. The way they conceive themselves is so much dependent on their need to identify with their lands.

A tribes' concept of territory is generally holistic and constitutes the hills, the rivers, the natural resources, the mineral resources, the air, the waters and the peoples who firstly inhabit it. Each of these processes is conceived fundamentally as sublime living entities; all alive, dynamic and changing. Tribes tend to treat their non-human surroundings, especially their land, water and forest as a living entities and as mostly as part of their being or sometimes as an

extension of themselves. The land, often being the foundational base, is conceived as being alive. The words and language manifesting from land is dynamic and alive. The peoples who live on and by it are alive and the cultures that spring from it are also alive. Each; words, peoples and cultures, are woven into a land epistemology and it is on such an epistemological premise that origin stories, community narratives, folk stories are produced. Each in turn breaths live into the present relationship also historically locates the ancestral past and formulates vision of a collective future. These can be observed in their rituals and religious practices. These inseparable realms of the material and the immaterial forms the dominant feature of tribal consciousness. It is on this premise that a tribe builds its concept of well being.

Integral to this collective aspect are people, neighbors, animals, insects, vegetables, forest, spirit of the forest, water, waterfalls and all beings; sentient or non-sentient in the local ecology. It is these, within a relative geographical space that constructs a tribe, an identity, a tribal ontology.

In this context the three chapters in Part one deals with these issues, exploring a wide range of dimensions from three different contexts which includes those of the Poumai, Khasis and the Mahadev Kolis. Each with their own unique ways of relating to their lands, producing cultural narratives from it and weaving their ontologies around 'land and language' amidst tremendous tensions with other societies over the same while themselves subsumed in organic transformation.

The first chapter written by Dominic Thaikho begins with a quote by Tuisem Ngakang, a Naga activist scholar - 'We have a sacred responsibility to care for the land. The land belongs to me, and I belong to the land, I am the land, and the land is me, we are inseparable'. He shows how land and territories are the basis not only of livelihoods but also for the total being which includes the spiritual, cultural and social identity. Dominic in his chapters traces the diverse Tribal cultures in different parts of the world and argues

how each share very similar deep-rooted relationship between cultural identity and land. In the light of systematic marginalisation of the tribal peoples, many of their social realities are devastated with direct impact on habitats, land rights, forcibly displacement, loss of their livelihood, culture, values and identity. The first chapter thus traverses the theoretical topography of land, words, peoples and cultures and problematises the fundamental question of land in Tribal people's identity/realities.

Lavinia Mawlong engages with this very complex subject related to the organic change process. She provides a historical account of transformation of land property regimes of her tribe in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. These transformations are highlighted against the backdrop of the traditional land tenure system of one of the districts- the *Ri Bhoi* District, which represents a region with highest privatization rate in the state and highlights the transformation of property regime and contentious issues over property rights in the state. She elaborates the various aspect of the classification of the traditional land tenure system, the main actors responsible for land governance, the administration hierarchy and the terms of use of community land and private land as emanating from empirical data.

Moving from the habitats of the Khasis, Pooja Kudal explores another dimension of the land question by tracing the history of her tribe – the Mahadev Koli, concentrated in the dark forest of the Sahyadri Mountains of Maharashtra. She delves into their historical struggles against the Mughals, Britishers, money lenders and land lenders and discusses movements for preserving and protecting their land, water and forest. She describes the traditional governance system of the Mahadev Kolis from a woman's perspective and reveals how land, power, governance and money are intertwined within a patriarchal set-up. The Mahadev Koli is found inhabiting specified forest areas of Nashik, Pune, Ahmednagar, Thane, and Raigad districts. In the vicinity of Sahyadri Mountains, specifically on the east-west slope, Mahadev Kolis lives in small pockets or hamlets. The area is known as '*Maval*', '*Dangan*', and '*Naber*'.

These cultural ways of expressing land/territory have been put to the test by colonialism, whose worldview manifested in a perspective founded around the objectification of 'nature' thus providing legitimacy to the view that appropriation, domination and exploitation of land/territory are justified. In direct contrast to this view is the tribal worldview. In this perspective, nature and humans share symbiotic existential relationships of reciprocal need and mutual respect.

In relation to this section, it is important to point out that it was on such a pretext that one of the more definitive international conventions such as the ILO 169 was put forth. In Articles 15 and 16 of the ILO Convention, the word 'land' was used to "include the concept of territories, which covers the total environment of the areas which the peoples concerned occupies or otherwise use." The convention recognises the centrality of the cultures and spiritual values of the tribes and their relationship with their lands or territories which they occupy or use, in particular the collective aspects of this relationship.<sup>2</sup>

Part Two engages with the concept of language, land and cultures. For tribes, language has always been fundamental, for it is a very strong marker of identity. The connection between language and land is intrinsic and one self-identifies or is socially categories based on these two fundamental processes. An interesting reflection is made on this count by Vislavath Rajunayak who discusses the complexities of language among Tribes taking the case of the Lambadas of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. This section of the book also brings in other dimension of the struggles of tribes to define and even refine their languages in the current context.

This is followed by a chapter on language and literature of the Bodos by Redion Narzary. He traces the debates concerning Bodo language from an oral form to the rise of a distinct Bodo literature during the colonial period. He brings to light the process,

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<sup>2</sup> Please see ILO Convention 169



chronologically of how a language from near extinction was gradually produced, framed, positioned and articulated, later to even become the 'passion' of the Bodo movement. This having critical repercussions on the social and political realities of the Bodos within Assam and across the region. How language is lost? What dynamics shape language extinction among oral traditions? How assimilation destroys language and cultures? And how a language can be resurrected are some of the questions that this chapter engages with. The Bodos are now the defenders of the tribal reality of the 200 plus tribes in North East, they are in the forefront of the tribal resistance in North East, and their defeat would trigger massive demographic changes within the region.

Reworking the idea of 'jal jungal jameen' into 'jal-jivan-jungal-jameen', Eugene Soreng explores the question of language, land and history through the organic cultural expressions and meaning making processes of his tribe - the Khadiyas of Chotanagpur. He delves into their world view, their philosophy and the process of co-production of realities, together with other tribes like the Mundas, Oroan, Hos, Santhals and others around the notion of 'Adivasiness' as a theoretico-political means to preserve and protect their narratives over their land. Looking at the language question from a meaning making perspective, he traces the origin of the Khadiyas and their migratory routes as captured in folk songs and discusses the multiple elements that constitute 'Khadiya' cosmology. Sourcing from community narratives he explains the 'Khadiya spirit' that ties his community together through songs and dance. He ends his argument by asserting a new concept he argues captures a deeper reality of his community – Jal-Jivan-Jungal-Jameen: Water-Life-Forest-Land.

Part Three traverses very unique locales of India inhabited by Tribes. The first chapter written by Nironjon Islary brings a problematic which is one of the most sensitive subjects among Tribes – the etymology of terms used to identify a tribe and its overlaps with other categories. He takes the case of the Bodos and problematises

the word/terminology that defines community's identity. With the experience of colonialism and even within contemporary political structure, many tribes in India are still identified by exonyms. While some have accepted the same and began using these names to self identify, there are many other tribes who are attempting to resurrect their endonyms- names constructed by and within the tribal community themselves. Islary touches this particular issue in relation to his community – the Boro. Lumped into a colonial construct of 'Plains Tribes', he explains how Boro linguistic groups have been identified as Bodo by others (outsiders) and analyses the genesis of Boro language development as to find out the intrinsic elements that bound the Boro tribes to accept Bodo in place of Boro, though the mass Boro population proudly acknowledge themselves as Boro. He shows how the category 'Bodo' which was meant to refer to many within the Kachari group, was however in due course because of how movements shape up as they struggle for a pan-identity began to use the category 'Bodo' although at the core of the movement lies mostly only the Boro speaking community. These are the kind of complexities we observe taking place across tribal communities.

From Assam we move to the Himalayas, the hills inhabited by the Rung community in the state of Uttarakhand where Chinmaya Shah looks at the livelihood situations from a geo-political lens. Rungs are located between the famous historical trade route where they participate in various trades. However, this trade was affected after the outbreak of Indo-Sino war of 1962. Post the war, many Rungs started collecting rare Himalayan herbs which includes Kutki, Gandrayan, Dolu, Atis and Hathazari or Salam Panja. Among the herbs, Yartsa Gumbu is most expensive insect fungal species in the world which are found in the Himalayas and Tibetan plateau. This chapter incorporated various narratives emerging from the locals whose livelihood is greatly dependent on collecting Himalayan herbs. From the lens of livelihoods it discusses the realities of the Rungs and the difficulties they encounter in the said habitat.

Close to the Rung, reside the Tribal peoples of Ladakh who recently celebrated their new found status as a Union Territory outside of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. bodhi s.r and Stanzin Namgyal engages with their social realities and traces their historio-political struggles for Union Territory status over the years. In their chapter they also engaged with the religious tension that flared up in Ladakh in the 1990s and discusses the fears of a ‘peoples’ who inhabit a fragile eco-system such as Ladakh.

From the mountains of Ladakhs the focus shifts to the hills of Manipur where Onhring Langhu studies the problems that have arisen for the tribes who are displaced by the Mapithel dam located in Ukhrul district. He dwells on the issues of tribe, non-tribe, land and water politics in Manipur. He also examines the question of compensation post the construction of dam, focusing on the resistance and displacement of affected peoples. He discusses how the construction of the dam has inversely affected the livelihood activities of the indigenous people by way of submerging large tract of agriculture land, forest and river, rendering them powerless.

From the Hills of Manipur, Vinoto Shohe travels to the border regions of Indo-Myanmar where he engages with the realities of the Eastern Konyak Nagas inhabiting this region. Konyak tribe predominantly inhabits in the border area and they are deprived of their basic rights, marginalized, discriminated, oppressed and are totally excluded and isolated from the society. Their existence is barely acknowledged and their access to the society and the world at large is crippled. They are also disregarded because of different political ideologies and agendas that consistently occur in the border areas, hence they have been neglected and there is no process of development. The voices and the experiences of these people in the borderland are ignored and remain unnoticed that primarily leads to the reasons for the study of this particular issues in these areas. Furthermore, the identity of the border tribes has either been lost or is in process and is rarely acknowledge by the society. He details the socio-economic and political status of Konyak tribes in Eastern

Nagaland and brings out varied issues confronting their existence ranging from border fencing, less job opportunity, marginalisation and neglect from both India and Myanmar to issue of underdevelopment, identity crisis, political uncertainty, alcoholism and opium addiction, lack of transportation and road connectivity, among others.

This is followed by a chapter concerning the realities of the Adivasi community inhabiting the Tea estates in the state of Assam by Gavrav Sarma and the pain and sufferings of the Chakma community inhabiting the Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh by Utpala Chakma. While Gaurav decodes the phenomenon of plantation labour through a socio-economic lens in relation to the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, Utpala brings out the hardships faced by the Chakmas who migrated from CHT to NEFA, current day Arunachal Pradesh in gaining acceptance as citizens after being displaced by the Kaptai dam in 1958. Gaurav makes explains how 'plantation' as a category is a colonial legacy plus explicates why the term Adivasi is used in place of labour or tea tribe as a point of assertion. Utpala on the other hand narrates the years of endless struggles of the Chakmas around marginalization, both politically and socially, and brings out the realities of 'stateless peoples' who are identified as scheduled tribes in other states. Both these realities are politically very complex issues, yet each unravels the struggles that many tribal communities go through within the Indian state.

Using a similar method, Venkatesh Vaditya's engages with cultural changes and marginalisation of his tribe - the Lambada Community in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. He discusses the realities of a semi-nomadic tribe found throughout India. What are the challenges that semi nomadic groups face in relation to land and what transpired over time for them to make claims over lands. Vaditya begins his analysis with the advent of British rule, where the Lambadas were compelled to give up their traditional occupation of transporting goods owing to the introduction of mechanised transport system, laying roads and rail lines by the then colonial

state. Losing their livelihood sources, they were compelled to take-up activities and occupation criminalised by the colonial state. In the post-independent India, along with other communities they were de-notified and since then tremendous changes have taken place in their occupational structure.

From the North East Region, Bodhi S.R. moves to the islands of Andaman and Nicobar where he discusses his experience with the Nicobari community post-Tsunami that struck A&NI in 2004. This chapter explores the impact of the Tsunami on Nicobarese inhabiting the Katchal Island. It traces the post tsunami response of the community, discusses threadbare the community dynamics in relation to systems' resilience and identifies myriad structural tensions in the traditional structure of the community. Within the realm of the socio-cultural and the socio-political, this paper locates arguments within an identity frame and tries to capture the dimensions of change and resilience of the tribe post disaster.

The final chapter is a consolidated reflection by Bhanumathi Kalluri on the critical question of resource rights of Adivasi Women from a feminist lens. She uses innovative methods of dialogue, field studies and campaigns to capture the voices of tribal/Adivasi women human rights defenders and their contemporary struggles linked to gender and environmental justice. She touches social dilemmas such as marriage and land which are exclusively male dominated spaces in some of the tribal communities.

Each of the chapters speaks very distinct voices and demands serious academic attention to their empirical conditions and articulations. For us however, as a way of concluding this introduction, we wish to only assert that Tribal studies as formulated by the TICI is beginning to produce a very different narrative about tribal society(s), a narrative that is closer to the lived experience of the diverse tribal/non-caste societies and that, at least, at first glance seem both emancipatory and empowering.

## PART ONE

# The Idea of Land and Territoriality in Tribal Society(s)

Dominic Leo Thaikho

### Introduction

‘We have a sacred responsibility to care for the land. The land belongs to me, and I belong to the land, I am the land, and the land is me, we are inseparable’ -Tuisem Ngakang 2007.<sup>3</sup> This statement from a Naga scholar and activist highlight the centrality of land to tribal identity. For Indigenous/Tribal peoples,<sup>4</sup> land and territories are not only the basis of their livelihoods but are the foundational source of their spiritual, cultural and social identity. Although diverse and unique, the Tribal cultures in different geographies shares very similar deep-rooted relationship between their cultural identity and land. The significance of this relationship between land and tribal society(s) is also highlighted by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues:

Land is the foundation of the lives and cultures of Indigenous peoples all over the world. (...) Without access to and respect for their rights over their lands, territories and

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Thaikho 2018: 231. Land, People, and Territoriality: A Study of Poumai Naga Tribe. PhD Thesis (Unpublished). School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

<sup>4</sup> In this chapter the term ‘tribe/tribal society(s) and Indigenous Peoples’ are synonymously use.

natural resources, the survival of Indigenous peoples' particular distinct culture is threatened.<sup>5</sup>

Historically it is observed that there is a systemic marginalization of the tribal peoples' and a devastation of their physical realities due to land dispossession leading to a denial of habitats, land rights, forcible displacement, loss of their livelihood, culture, values and identity.<sup>6</sup> With the loss of their land and control over resources, the tribal peoples are globally becoming very vulnerable and are losing out on their sense of collective identity as observed in the struggles of Adivasis or tea tribes in Assam.<sup>7</sup> The process of the nation-state and present-day economic imperative arising from globalisation and its subsequent tragedy has had severe repercussions on the tribal peoples today. It can be gauged from the words of 'Jawaharlal Nehru' the architect of modern India in 1948 when he says; "*If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country*"<sup>8</sup> (emphasis added) and from the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 under the principles of '*Eminent Domain*' and '*Public Purpose*' (emphasis added). The data shows that an estimated 50 million people were displaced in the name of development in India from 1951 to 2004.<sup>9</sup> The Expert Group on Prevention of Alienation of Tribal Land and its Restoration set up by the Government of India estimates that, of the total displaced due to development projects, 47 per cent are

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<sup>5</sup> UNPFII 2007: 2 cited in Gilbert, Jereme. (2010). Custodians of the land: Indigenous peoples, human rights and cultural integrity. In Langfield, Michele, William Logan and Mairead Nic Craith (Eds). Cultural Diversity, Heritage and Human Rights: Intersections in theory and practice. London and New York: Routledge. P.31)

<sup>6</sup> Please see Thaikho, Dominic Leo. (2015). Reclaiming the Foundational Value of Land: A Poumai Naga Narrative. In Alex Akhup (Ed.). Identities and their Struggles in North East. Kolkata: Adivaani & Tribal Intellectual Collective India. Also Tribal Report Committee 2014, IWGIA Indigenous Affairs 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Dungdung, Gladson. (2013). Whose Country is it anyway? Untold stories of the Indigenous Peoples of India. adivaani, Kolkata. Also see Thaikho 2018. Land, People, and Territoriality: A Study of Poumai Naga Tribe. PhD Thesis (Unpublished). School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Dungdung 2013: 3

<sup>9</sup> Dungdung 2013: 3-4

tribal population.<sup>10</sup> Today, there is a veritable crisis in several parts of India especially in the tribal regions, where we witness a spectrum of issues and the criminalisation of the customary use of land and natural resources. As highlighted, land is an integral part of the Tribal/Indigenous peoples, as, without access to their land, Tribal cultures and identity are at stake. As a result, there is a conundrum within the tribal peoples due to alienation of land in which they are conceptually divorced from the intrinsic connections between their identity and life world which constitutes the core part of their human (ness).

### **The Notion of Land and Identity**

The notion of 'land' is complex and incorporates different multi-dimensional aspects with economic, legal, political, social and spiritual facts, in any parts of the world, and at any moment in history.<sup>11</sup> For many, land is regarded as a source of precious material wealth, means of production for subsistence or commercial sale. It also functions as the pivotal element or 'an area where political authority is expressed and taxes may be raised', providing the concept of 'territory' a means by which groups or an individual maintain social influence and status.<sup>12</sup> Besides, it is a source of feelings of ancestral 'belonging', as ancestors are buried within traditional territories.<sup>13</sup>

Land from the tribal perspective is unique, and this uniqueness begins with the appreciation and understanding of tribal

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<sup>10</sup> Cited in the Report of the High Level Committee on Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India. (2014). Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India. P: 258

<sup>11</sup> Huggins, Chris. (2010). Land, Power and Identity: Roots of Violent conflict in Eastern DRC. International Alert. Retrieved from [http://www.internationalalert.org/sites/default/files/DRC\\_LandPowerIdentity\\_EN\\_2010.pdf](http://www.internationalalert.org/sites/default/files/DRC_LandPowerIdentity_EN_2010.pdf). P. 10, (Accessed on 23rd November 2012.) Also see Burger, Julian. (1987). Report from the Frontier: The State of the World's Indigenous Peoples. London: Zed Books Ltd. and Thaikho (2018)

<sup>12</sup> Huggins 2010: 10

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*



worldviews. Tribal lived experience and worldview focus on oral traditions and the interconnectedness of beings. The Tribal/Indigenous worldview places humans in an interconnected web of relationship with all living and non-living beings and recognizes that their survival depends on how they interact with each other and everything around them. While, the non-tribal worldviews see and places humans atop a hierarchical structure, and land is seen as an inanimate ‘thing’ from which they can take what they want without giving anything back, thereby seeing land as the physical ground that humans trample on and a dead physical ‘thing’ that can be appropriated as property.<sup>14</sup>

The extensive discussion of the classical notion of land as property and materials can be illustrated from the writings of those such as; Adam Smith [(1776) 2007]<sup>15</sup> who viewed land as the political-economic factor whereby the produce of the land is the principal source of the revenue and wealth of every nation-state and gave a comparison between primary and secondary sectors. He opines that primary sector i.e., agriculture is more productive than the secondary sector (manufacturing) since agriculture has two powers concurring in its production, land and labour, whereas manufacturing has only labour. John Stuart Mill in his book *Principles of Political Economy* [(1848) 2009]<sup>16</sup> focuses on the factors of land productivity through division of labour. He believes that the division of labour is one of the main factors of creating new and creative productive means on the particular land.

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<sup>14</sup> Usher 1986; Cruikshank 2005. The extract is from Module 8, an online course from the University of Alberta, Faculty of Native Studies, 2015 which offers Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) in [www.coursera.org](http://www.coursera.org) on ‘Indigenous Canada: Looking Forward/Looking Back: Sovereign Lands, Module 8. <https://www.coursera.org/learn/indigenous-canada/home/welcome> Retrieved from <https://www.coursera.org/learn/indigenous-canada/supplement/IXjAA/sovereign-lands-course-notes>.

Accessed on 14 March, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, Adam (2007). *Wealth of Nations*. New York: Cosimo Publications

<sup>16</sup> Mill, John Stuart. (2009). *Principles of Political Economy*. The Project Gutenberg Ebook.

Karl Marx [(1887) 1967]<sup>17</sup> accounts on the ‘primitive accumulation’ and the relations of ‘land-capital-labour’ which also describes the notion of nature and roles of natural resources as a material and distinguished the commodification of value with the use-value as an embodiment of useful attributes and qualities, and the exchange-value as an embodiment of a certain quantity of labour time.

Paul Bohannan (1963)<sup>18</sup> in his essay entitled “*Land, ‘Tenure,’ and ‘Land Tenure,’*” argued that the meanings of both land and tenure are quite different in European societies and African societies. He examines that many researchers and investigators when 'thinking about land has been and remains largely ethnocentric. The Western societies situate in the matter of conceptualisation of 'land' and divide the earth's surface by the use of an imaginary grid, itself subject to manipulations and redefinitions. Then plot the grid on paper or a sphere, and the problem becomes one of correlating this to the physical features of land and sea'.<sup>19</sup> In other words, he states that European Societies conceives land as an area where the referent is an immutable grid written upon paper according to rules which correlates the written grid with astral observation. Tenure is some right or rights, partial or whole, to exclude others from the land represented on the grid. For the West African, he argues, the land is continuous topography over which the clan roams. The reference points (here it refers to the boundaries), if they can be called points, are the positions of other clans.<sup>20</sup>

From an Indigenous perspective, land is a much larger concept and is often described as ‘sentient’ meaning it has its own agency, spirit and rights that are to be respected as much as those of humans and other beings. This view is a difficult concept within Western

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<sup>17</sup> Marx, Karl. (1887). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Volume 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

<sup>18</sup> Bohannan, Paul. (1963). ‘Land’, ‘Tenure’ and Land-Tenure. In Daniel Biebuyek (ed.), *African Agrarian Systems*. Oxford University Press. TLC Reprinted no.105. Winsconsin University: Land Tenure Center.

<sup>19</sup> Bohannan Paul (1963: 1)

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*

perceptions since rocks, minerals, and water is described as inanimate objects, often thought of as resources for exploitation by people.<sup>21</sup>

The narratives of the tribal society(s) clearly express the interconnectedness to their geopolitical location and ecology. For instance, the Poumai Naga have a deep attachment to the place of settlement and the relationship to the land is deeply embedded in the language of Poumai Naga, “*deimouphii hini kopā*” meaning “*we came from the land*” indicating that we belong to this land. This language establishes a special relationship with the land and to the place, they have inhabited. It becomes the foundation of their social relationship, worldview and customary practices. It is the umbilical cord of the existence, the foundation of their identity and worldview, and becomes a symbol of meaning in life at present and gives direction for the future.<sup>22</sup> Further, the idea of a place or the particular location connects with the notion of belonging, memberships and historical rootedness. It also unravels the embedded nature of land and territoriality as intrinsic to culture, identity, history and ecology which constitutes the very base of human survival and existence. The land also acts as a frame of relations, means of communication tools and ancestral frames of morality and access. When land and nature are defined in the terrains of territoriality as oral tradition and customary practice, they become the set of collective management within that particular geopolitical location.<sup>23</sup>

The importance of land to indigenous peoples as a living entity and identity has been expressed by the Vice-President of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples:

The Earth is the foundation of Indigenous Peoples. It is the seat of spirituality, the foundation from which our cultures

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<sup>21</sup> From the Course offered by the University of Alberta, Module 8: 3

<sup>22</sup> Thaikho 2018: 294

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*: 294 – 296.

and language flourish. The Earth is our historian, the keeper of events and the bones of our forefathers. Earth provides us food, medicine, shelter and clothing. It is the source of our independence; it is our Mother. We do not dominate Her; we must harmonize with Her.

Next to shooting Indigenous Peoples, the surest way is to kill us is to separate us from our part of the Earth. Once separated, we will either perish in body or our minds and spirits will be altered so that we end up mimicking foreign ways, adopt foreign languages, accept foreign thoughts and build a foreign prison around our Indigenous spirits, a prison which suffocated rather than nourishes as our traditional territories of the Earth do. Over time, we will lose our identity and eventually die or are crippled as we are stuffed under the name of ‘assimilation into another society.’<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, The International Indian Treaty Council, a non-governmental organization of indigenous peoples, has made this observation on the distinction between indigenous and Western philosophies:

The philosophy of the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere has grown from a relationship to the land that extends back thousands of years. It is founded on an observation of natural laws and incorporation of those laws into every aspect of daily life. This philosophy is profoundly different from the predominant economic and geopolitical ideology which governs the practices of the major industrial powers and the operations of transnational corporations. Its chief characteristic is a great love and respect for the sacred quality of the land which has given birth to and nourished the cultures of indigenous peoples. These peoples are the guardians of their lands which, over the

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Rights of Indigenous Peoples to the Earth’, submission by World Council of Indigenous Peoples to Working Group on Indigenous Populations, Commission on Human Rights, Geneva, 30 July 1985. Cited in Julian Burger 1987: 14

centuries, have become inextricably bound up with their culture, spirit, their identity and survival. Without the land bases, their cultures will not survive.<sup>25</sup>

Cardenas (2008) notes that for indigenous peoples land is historically linked as their main source of survival and as an essential element for their identity and distinctive cultures, also 'land as a place of ethnic expression and political struggle.' Some of the key association of ethnicity with the land is that people create meaningful relationships with places and their significance to the development of conceptions of self and identities. She further elaborates that symbols and rituals not only reinforce people's connections with land but also mobilize people into regional or nationalistic causes when the correlation between identity and the land is questioned or threatened.<sup>26</sup> Rodman argues that places are socially constructed where there is a multiplicity of voices and to understand 'lived experience' need to be taken into account where there is an individual and collective meaning that is formed and transformed through experience and through sharing with other people. She notes that "Places are not simply containers. They are politicized, cultural relative, historical specific, local and multiple constructions".<sup>27</sup> Occhipinti (2003)<sup>28</sup> observes that the indigenous communities of Salta province in Argentina were able to 'transform the idea of land as a symbol of indigenous identity' and the conception of indigenous peoples unique close connections to land and its traditional territory was one of the strongest arguments to gain recognition in both claims; the rights in land titling and

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<sup>25</sup> Report to the Commission on Indigenous Philosophy', presented by the International Indian Treaty Council to International NGO Conference, September 1981. Cited in Julian Burger 1987: 14

<sup>26</sup> Cardenas, Omaira Bolanos. (2008). Constructing Indigenous Ethnicities and Claiming Land Rights in the Lower Tapajos and Arapiuns Region, Brazilian Amazon. Ph.D Dissertation (Unpublished), University of Florida. Pp. 34-35)

<sup>27</sup> 2003:205 cited in Cardenas 2008: 34-35

<sup>28</sup> Occhipinti, Laurie. (2003). Claiming a Place Land and Identity in Two Communities in Northwestern Argentina. *The Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, 8(3): 155-174.

indigenous status of high land communities. The study also shows how the process of land claims have served as the central elements in a political struggle that has spurred to reinvent and reimagine the invocation of ethnic identification and indigenous identity.<sup>29</sup> This idea is used to argue that it is within the political context of conflicting rights over territory that ethnic identity gains its major expression. Indigenous peoples have used their identification with specific places as a way to demonstrate their heritage and ancestral rights to land.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the relations of land and identity constitutes an important concept while analyzing the notion of land, we talk of identity as referring to a group which includes their common past or history, cultural heritage, linguistic heritage, linguistic affinity, the struggles and sufferings of their shared experiences with a strong sense of belonging to each other and/or identification within an ethnic space, with an ideology and belief in the collective common future.

Identity as a psycho-social phenomenon and a state of creating sense or feeling and sameness and continuity of an individual or group is usually concerned with the consolidation of interlocking symbols which gives of integrity and continuity to action. Erikson (1974)<sup>31</sup> argued that “A sense of identity means a sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops; and it means, at the same time, a sense of affinity with a community’s sense of being at one with its future as well as its history- or mythology”. Erikson also further postulated that any true identity is anchored in the confirmation of three aspects of reality. One is factuality, that is, a universe of facts, data, and techniques that can be verified with the observational methods and the work techniques of the time. Then, there is an inspiring view of experiencing history as unifying all facts, numbers and techniques into a sense of reality that has

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<sup>29</sup> 2003: 157, see Cardenas 2008

<sup>30</sup> Saltman 2002 cited in Cárdenas 2008:35

<sup>31</sup> Erikson, Erikh. (1974). *Dimensions of a New Identity: The 1973 Jefferson Lectures in the Humanities*. New Delhi: Light & Life Publishers.

visionary qualities and yet energizes the participants in most concert tasks. And, finally, there must be a new actuality, a new way of relating to each other, of activating and invigorating each other in the service of common goals (1974:27 original emphases).

### **Territoriality and Tribal/Indigenous Peoples**

Robert Sack (1983)<sup>32</sup> suggested that territoriality is a geopolitical strategy, a means of affecting (enhancing or impeding) interaction and extends the particulars of action by contact. He states that “territoriality for humans is a powerful geographic strategy to control people and things by controlling area”.<sup>33</sup> He further defined territoriality as,

The attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area”.<sup>34</sup>

Other political theorists have focused on the role of territoriality in providing essential public goods, such as security,<sup>35</sup> democratic deliberation,<sup>36</sup> and efficiency.<sup>37</sup> Sack also claims that while he sees "territoriality as a basic of power, he does not see it as part of an instinct, nor does he see power as essentially aggressive but labels the area or place delimited and controlled through territoriality a territory”.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Elden (2013)<sup>39</sup> believes that Sack uses the term in

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<sup>32</sup> Sack, Robert D. (1983). Human Territoriality: A Theory. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol.73, No.1 (Mar., 1983), pp.55-74.

<sup>33</sup> Sack, Robert D. (1986). *Human Territoriality: Its theory ad history*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. p.5

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*: 19 (original emphasis)

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Kolers, Avery. (2009). *Land, Conflict, and Justice: A Political Theory of Territory*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. p.10

<sup>36</sup> Kymlicka, Will. (2001). *Territorial Boundaries: A Liberal Egalitarian Perspective*. In Miller, D and Hashmi, S. (Eds.). *Boundaries and Justice*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

<sup>37</sup> Kofman, D. (2000). *Territorial States: What are they Good For? Who Needs Them*. In Calder, G., Garrett, E., and Shannon, J. (Eds.). *Liberalism and Social Justice*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in Elden 2013: 4. *The Birth of Territory*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

a very general and non-specific way. A place can be a territory at times but not at others; "territories requires constant effort to establish and maintain"; and as a corollary of the previous definition, they are "the results of strategies to affect, influence, and control people, phenomena, and relationship".<sup>40</sup>

According to John Agnew (2000),<sup>41</sup> territoriality is 'the strategy used by individuals, groups, and organisations to exercise power over a portion of space and its contents'.<sup>42</sup> From this perspective, Blacksell (2006)<sup>43</sup> observes that as a strategy it contains some components, and three of which stand out are: First of all, territoriality is a form of classification by area, which both includes and excludes. In the case of a state, the majority of those living within its borders are citizens and the majority of those outside are not, although within both groups there will be certain fuzziness at the edges ... Second, territoriality must be communicated, either physically on the ground, or through some form of easily decipherable graphical representation on a map or plan ... Finally, the maintenance of territoriality demands enforcement, either through the physical presence of the police and military or through threats of recourse to the law and direct action should claim be ignored. 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' is a common message in the countryside and it is not infrequently backed up by that secondary warning 'Beware of the dog', just to ram home the consequence of not complying'.<sup>44</sup>

He further states that 'as a means of reifying power in society and

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<sup>39</sup> Elden, Stuart. (2013). *The Birth of Territory*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. Also (2013b). *The Significance of Territory*. +Geographica Helvetica+, Vol. 68, Issue 1. Pp 65 – 68. Retrieved from "<http://www.geogr-helv.net/68/65/2013/gh-6865-2013.pdf>" <http://www.geogr-helv.net/68/65/2013/gh-68-65-2013.pdf> accessed on 5th October 2013.

<sup>40</sup> cited in Elden 2013: 4

<sup>41</sup> Agnew, John. (2000). Territoriality, in Johnston, R. J., Gregory, D., Pratt, G., and Watts, M. (eds.) *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Fourth edition. Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>42</sup> Agnew John (2000) p. 823

<sup>43</sup> Blacksell, Mark. (2006). *Political Geography*. London: Routledge.

<sup>44</sup> Blacksell (2006). pp.18-19.



for successfully proclaiming exclusive control and legitimising it. Territoriality also displaces the fundamental balance of power between the controller and the controlled, replacing it with a relationship enshrined in law. It also leads to space being divided into containers within which people live, and activities occur, spaces created mould what goes on within them, and it becomes inherently expansionist, seeking by whatever means to annex more space to fulfil its perceived destiny. Thus, the territory is an artificial political construct that seeks to subdivide space. It is inherently political, dynamic and, by its very nature, controversial'.<sup>45</sup>

As discussed above, the classic conception of territoriality was based on - state-centric, positivistic, and focused on fixed territorial boundaries. This very idea of nation-state and territoriality was based on European empires' models of political and social organisation and later exported to the rest of the world especially to the world of indigenous/tribal peoples through colonialism. A nation-state which does not correspond with the socio-political and cultural groupings of indigenous groups who traditionally organised, through tribal and kinship ties, with decentralised political structures and overlapping spheres of territorial control. The inability to qualify as a nation-state and therefore were "without full rights to group autonomy or ancestral lands"<sup>46</sup> leading to what scholars characterized as "entrapped peoples" or "nations within"<sup>47</sup> since

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<sup>45</sup>     ibid: 20

<sup>46</sup>     See Parrish, Austen L. (2007). Changing Territoriality, Fading Sovereignty, and the Development of Indigenous Group Rights. Articles by Maurer Faculty. Paper 889. (Identifying the arguments of Anaya on the concept of 'state' and 'nation-state' and indigenous peoples. Anaya further explains that "[t]o see indigenous peoples as 'states' would in the end prove all too difficult for Western eyes." It also admittedly, at times, indigenous groups have domestically been recognized as separate nations with their own territorial sovereignty – but that was a product of domestic, not international law). Retrieved from <http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/facpub/889> Accessed on 12/03/2014. See Anaya, S. James (2009). International Human Rights and Indigenous Peoples. Austin, Boston, New York: Wolters Kluwer.

<sup>47</sup>     Wiessner, Siegfried. (1999). Rights and Status of Indigenous Peoples: A Global Comparative and International Legal Analysis. Harvard Human Rights Journal Vol. 12, pp. 57- 128. Also see Wiessner (1999), supra note 5, at 59 cited in Parrish 2007: 296

“cultural survival, territorial integrity, and self-determining autonomy of indigenous peoples as matters within the exclusive jurisdiction of the settler state regimes”.<sup>48</sup>

There is a common history of conquest by another groups and subordination of the indigenous peoples within their present states, even where they may not numerically be in the minority, although the particular histories of different indigenous peoples might differ.<sup>49</sup> Wiessner in his observation described as:

[T]he process of colonization has left so-called indigenous peoples defeated, relegated to minor spaces, reservations, bread-crumbs of land conceded by the dominant society. Indians were separated from their sacred land, the land of their ancestors, and from their burial grounds with which they shared a deeply spiritual bond. Deprived of traditional environments, they were not only politically, but economically, culturally, and religiously dispossessed.<sup>50</sup>

The concept of the territorial nation-state thus by its nature undermines recognition of indigenous groups because of its purpose, in part, is to suppress cultural differences and to establish a theoretical unified cultural identity.<sup>51</sup> The existence of indigenous groups with their own culture and traditions challenges the notion of national unity. Further, most states are controlled by an ethnic majority that "is able to exercise cultural hegemony over the rest of the nation".<sup>52</sup> The collective rights of indigenous groups often "go against the grain of traditional Western rights thought, which is

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<sup>48</sup> Williams 1990 cited in Parrish 2007: 297

<sup>49</sup> See Iorns, Catherine J. (1992). Indigenous Peoples and Self-Determination: Challenging State Sovereignty." *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 24: 199 - 348

<sup>50</sup> Wiessner 1999 as cited in Parrish 2007: 229

<sup>51</sup> Kaplan, David H (1999). Territorial Identities and Geographic Scale. In Herb, Guntram H. & David H. Kaplan (Eds). *Nested Identities: Nationalism, Territory, and Scale*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Also see Parrish 2007: 300-301.

<sup>52</sup> Kingsbury (1998), supra note 41, at 424 as cited in Parrish (2007): 300

based on the paradigm of pitting the individual against the state...<sup>53</sup> Similarly, in the attempt to conceptualize territoriality especially by the indigenous/tribal peoples, there is a tendency of projecting the same as 'Ethnic-Nationalism or Ethnonationalism' by the ethnic majority within states or state itself. Since modern states do not recognise forms of territoriality other than that of modern nation-states, this legitimate and perpetuate regimes of oppression which deny territorial rights to subordinated peoples. Notions of territoriality within modern nation-state were conveniently used to deny rights and justify the conquest of these people at a time without any regards for the indigenous/tribal or pre-existing territorial composition. Relatedly, Mary Catherine Bateson (1990) notes in her studies on the 'less advanced,' whose continued existence is threatened by cultural assimilation: "These are people trapped willy-nilly in the politics of boundaries and central coercive power, no longer sovereign, but often excluded from participation, dwindling at the mercy of larger entities".<sup>54</sup> The case of the Nagas can be illustrated as discussed above, where they are divided into two International Boundaries of Myanmar (Burma) and India; within India, the Nagas are further segregated into four states, namely, Manipur, Nagaland, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

The conceptual understandings of territoriality by the indigenous peoples in many cases are neither exclusive nor fixed. To many of the indigenous peoples, their expressions of territoriality are based on mobility and shifting. Therefore, colonialist failed to comprehend this sense of possession or ownership of the land on which the indigenous peoples lived since their understanding is narrowly fixed to their premised of fixed and permanent notions of territory.

The case of Sami can be cited as one of the few examples. Sami

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<sup>53</sup> Wiessner 1999: 120-21 cited in Parrish 2007: 301

<sup>54</sup> Bateson 1990: 150 cited Forrest, Scott M. (1998). Do Fences Make Good Neighbours? The Influence of Territoriality in State-Sami Relations. Master of Arts Thesis (Unpublished). The University of Northern British Columbia. (Forrest 1998:14)

territoriality is closely connected to semi-nomadic reindeer pastoralism which involves a flexible movement of people and animals, without clear territorial boundaries. Thus, it conflicts with the very way the modern state system of territoriality is constituted, presents a threat to the states. The states dictates to accept and recognize the territorial standards set by them and restricting the mobility of the Sami which puts their territorial practices at odds with fixed boundaries of the states which colonized them.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the land is annexed or declared as state land with the application of the legal principle of *terra nullius* ('ownerless land') which was applied to those parts of the globe. Thus, *terra nullius* denied the indigenous inhabitants of these regions all rights to land and resources and especially on 'common property' or 'community land', which were appropriated by the colonial powers.<sup>56</sup> Uzendoski (2012) also problematised the applicability of the dominant (Western) notion of territory and territoriality with the notion of the indigenous peoples the and stated that “indigenous peoples have developed their own complex theories of textuality in which cosmology is inscribed within the body, the social, and the surrounding territorial world. This macro-myth intersects with local mythologies of particular trees, species, and spirits, forming a complex shared narrative world of local differentiation, self and other transformations, and experiences of territoriality”.<sup>57</sup>

The engagement to such conflicting and limitations in understanding the territorial character of the relations between state and indigenous peoples, Avery Kolers (2009) notes a perspective as a point whereby the conceptual understanding of territoriality and territorial rights need to 'appropriate from the notion of land which means ontologies of land and our relationship to it, what land is,

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<sup>55</sup> Forrest, Scott M. (1998). Do Fences Make Good Neighbours? The Influence of Territoriality in State-Sami Relations. Master of Arts Thesis (Unpublished). The University of Northern British Columbia. pp. 15-16.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*: 17 (original emphases)

<sup>57</sup> Uzendoski, Micheal A. (2012). Beyond orality: Textuality, territory, and ontology among Amazonian peoples. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Vol. 2, No.1. pp 55-80.

what about it is valuable, how human interacts with it'.<sup>58</sup> While Nine (2008) also opines that:

Territorial rights are not property rights. Rights are social tools that we use to protect and encourage the realisation of certain values. Rights over goods protect and encourage certain relationships that persons have with those goods because these relationships generate certain values. In order to protect a set of value generating relationships that individuals have with the land, we articulate and enforce certain rights – private property rights. Property rights are meant as a tool for individuals to have the means to pursue their own conception of the good. Certain relationships with the land – individual plans, development and reaping the benefits thereof – are made possible by property rights. Property rights protect this set of normative relationships that individuals have with the land.<sup>59</sup>

She further pointed out that often the normative arguments are linked with the Lockean theory of territory, must have been derived from individual property rights as she gives two assumptions in which the claims must have been located: (1) that any right to a good is essentially a property right; and (2) that any authority or right must originate first in individual.<sup>60</sup> However, she maintains that territoriality, territorial rights are not derived from property rights and states that:

Territory is different. The crucial difference between territorial rights and property rights is that territorial rights are essentially about the establishment of justice. Territorial rights protect a different set of normative relationships that persons have with the land. The kind of relationship with

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<sup>58</sup> Kolers, Avery. (2009). *Land, Conflict, and Justice: A Political Theory of Territory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P.4

<sup>59</sup> Nine, Cara. (2008). *Territory is Not Derived from Property: A Response to Steiner*. *Political Studies*. Vol 56, p. 961

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*: 957 – 963.

land that is important for territorial rights is one that makes possible the establishment of justice. This includes having juridical authority over a region so that the state can provide public goods, make and enforce law, care for the commons, etc. Property rights are not about the establishment of justice, nor should they be. The normative function of property rights is to give individuals the personal means to pursue their own conception of the good; the normative function of territorial rights is to create a society in which individuals are able to do so in just and fair way (*ibid*).

For instance, in the experience of Poumai Naga, the conceptual understanding of ‘*teidel*’ territoriality is multidimensional. In this sense, territoriality to the Poumai Nagas refers to metaphysical/spiritual, distinct cultural identity, traditional institutions, and ecological relationship, which goes beyond the productive and economic aspect of the land. As alluded to, territoriality is expressed multidimensionally: a) instrumental orientation when it is experienced from the natural resource, b) territorial orientation when it asserts on the physical connections such as defined boundaries that provide social security, livelihood and collective identity, c) sentimental orientation when it has emotional attachment to land and place. The holistic understanding of interconnectedness of land, culture, economy, ecology and spirituality becomes their epistemological standpoint from where they understand the collective self and the world, giving the reality of diversity at one hand and uniqueness and autonomy at the level of objectification.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, drawing from these arguments and further elaborating from the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIPS), 2007 that empower the Indigenous Peoples for the establishment of this justice. It states in, Article 3:

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By

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<sup>61</sup> Thaikho 2018: 297-304

virtue of that right, they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. Article 4: Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.

In other words, Article 3 gives the right to 'self-determination'; Article 4, on the other hand, gives the 'right to autonomy'. Article 10, 25- 30 address territorial issues and Article 25 and Article 26 gives the foundational on the subject and thus stated below:

Article 25: Indigenous Peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard.

Article 26:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories, and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired.
2. Indigenous peoples have the right to own, use, develop and control the lands, territories, and resources that they possess by reason of traditional ownership or other traditional occupation or use, as well as those which they have otherwise acquired.
3. States shall give legal recognition and protection to these lands, territories, and resources. Such recognition shall be conducted with due respect to the customs, traditions and land tenure systems of the indigenous peoples concerned.

The remaining articles 27 to 30 forbid military activities and placement of hazardous materials on indigenous territory; legitimize indigenous land-tenure systems; obligate states to "prevent any

interference with, alienation of or encroachment upon these rights"; and, most importantly, require states to obtain the "free and informed consent" of indigenous peoples for any project that affects what the UNDRIPS calls, in a tripartite rubric, their "lands, territories, and resources."



# Transformation of Autochthonous Land and Property Rights among the Khasis in Meghalaya

Lavinia Mawlong

## Introduction: Transformation of Land Property Regimes in Meghalaya, India

In the global context of limited and shrinking resources, there has been gradual transformation of land property rights from community-owned land to private holding over the last four decades, especially land located in the global South in Africa and Asia. There has been little focus on understanding why property regimes change and the impact of such changes on actors involved; in particular studies on transformation have largely been carried out in the context of patrilineal societies such as the transition in post-Soviet countries, China<sup>62</sup> and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>63</sup> In the context of limited studies on the impact of transformation of property regimes in a matrilineal society, the case of the matrilineal system in Meghalaya provides a specific context for the analysis of property rights.

Meghalaya is a small hilly state located in the North Eastern region of India and it consists of eleven districts. The total geographical area of the State is approximately 22,429 sq. km and consists of a predominantly tribal population where people's livelihood is mainly based on agriculture. The social organization in the state is based on the matrilineal system and consists of three major ethnic communities – the Khasi, Jaintia and the Garo. Under the matrilineal system, the lineage is traced through the mother and the

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<sup>62</sup> von Benda-Beckmann, Franz, von Benda-Beckmann, Keebet, & Wiber, Melanie. (2006). *Changing properties of property*: Berghahn Books.

<sup>63</sup> Platteau, Jean-Philippe. (1996). The evolutionary theory of land rights as applied to sub-Saharan Africa: a critical assessment. *Development and change*, 27(1), 29-86.

customary system or rules of descent, inheritance, succession and land ownership are accordingly traced through the female ancestors.<sup>64</sup> In particular, the case of one of the districts – the Ri Bhoi District has been assessed as it represents a region with highest privatization rate in the state and highlights the transformation of property regime and contentious issues over property rights in Meghalaya.

This paper traces the historical account of transformation of land property regimes in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. Transformation is highlighted against the backdrop of the traditional land tenure system. It elaborates the various aspect of the classification of the traditional land tenure system, the main actors responsible for land governance, the administration hierarchy and the terms of use of community land and private land as emanating from empirical data from Ri Bhoi District in Meghalaya.

### **Autochthonous Institutions of Land Governance in the Khasi Hills**

The evaluation of written documents along with in-depth interviews with local actors highlights that the traditional land tenure system in Meghalaya has been in existence since the pre-colonial times and is still currently practiced across Khasi-Jaintia hills in Meghalaya. This traditional system of governance is an autochthonous institution which is indigenous to the place. The word “traditional land tenure” has been used by the local actors and in public discourse to refer to the indigenous land tenure system in Meghalaya. It comprises of both private and community land and is governed at three hierarchical levels – the village level, the *Raid* (Commune) level and the *Hima* (Khasi state) level. The role of various actors such as the ‘traditional chief’, the councils (*Dorbar*) and the headmen are situated within this autochthonous institutional governance set up. The term “tradition” is therefore not used as a theoretical or analytical concept but connotes the actual term used “by the actors

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<sup>64</sup> Chacko, Pariyaram Mathew. (1998). *Matriliny in Meghalaya: Tradition and Change*: Daya Books.

themselves”<sup>65</sup> in a generic sense as that which is “transmitted or handed down from the past to the present”<sup>66</sup> without critically defining the content or process of transmission or the specific functions of traditional institutions in relation to land governance in Meghalaya. However in the present context, the term “traditional institutions” is often criticized in the public discourse<sup>67</sup> with regard to the continued relevance of practices that lack transparency, accountability and which are inherently biased against women<sup>68</sup> due to lack of inclusion.

### **Land Classification and Bundle of Rights in the Khasi land Tenure System**

Land in the traditional Khasi land tenure system is classified into two main classes – community land (termed *Ri Raid*) and private land (termed *Ri Kynti*) which is held by individuals or clans. *Ri Raid* can be used by any member of the Khasi community, with certain conditions attached to its use. The two categories of land in the traditional land tenure system in the Khasi Hills are governed through clear rules and terms of use which specify how the people of the village are allocated user and access rights to community land and what terms are specified in the ownership and control of private land. According to the traditional land tenure system in the Khasi Hills, every Khasi can use and occupy any part of the *Ri Raid* or community land free without payment of land revenue for the land, provided he is a member of the village or the *Raid* or subjects himself to the rules and administration of the *Raid*. In the case of *Ri*

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<sup>65</sup> Karlsson, Bengt G. (2011). *Unruly Hills: A Political Ecology of India's Northeast*: Berghahn Books.

<sup>66</sup> Shils, Edward. (1981). *Tradition*: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>67</sup> Umdor, S. (2015, May 19). Traditional institutions in Meghalaya and Glass Delusion Syndrome. *The Shillong Times*, <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2015/05/19/traditional-institutions-in-meghalaya-and-glass-delusion-syndrome/>. Accessed on 06.11.2015

<sup>68</sup> Mukhim, P. (2015, March 6). Tradition and our youth: The twain doth not meet. *The Shillong Times*, <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2015/03/06/tradition-and-our-youth-the-twain-doth-not-meet/>. Accessed on 05.11.2015

*Kynti* or private land, any Khasi who owns *Ri Kynti* or private land is the absolute owner of it and had proprietary, transferable and heritable rights over it. In essence, the use and ownership of *Ri Raid* lies with the member of the village or *Raid* and *Ri Kynti* or private land is the sole property of individual clans or households.

### ***Ri Raid* or Community Land**

The basic premise of the traditional land tenure system in the Khasi Hills is that land belongs to the people and not to the traditional chief (*Syiem*) or the Government. Historically, land belongs to the Khasi people who have all the rights of ownership, proprietary and user rights of access and withdrawal. This fact is reiterated by several colonial reports such as the one by the British Political Agent Lt. Col. F.G. Lister in 1853 which states that “land is entirely the property of the Khasis (people) and is held either by individuals or families”.<sup>69</sup> Ownership and corresponding bundle of rights over land property rights therefore rest with the people and not with the traditional chief. *Ri Raid* land in principle is the property of the people of the *Raid* and belongs to members of the village and cannot be owned privately.

The Land Reforms Commission (1974) which was appointed to investigate and document the land tenure system in the Khasi Hills defines community land as – “*Ri Raid* lands are lands set apart for the community over which no persons have proprietary, heritable or transferable rights excepting the right of use and occupancy”.<sup>70</sup> In the same light, the Commission defines private land as – “*Ri Kynti* lands are lands set apart from the time of the founding of the *elaka* (area) for certain clans upon whom were bestowed the proprietary, heritable and transferable rights over such lands”.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Rymbai, R Tokin, Nongrum, Humphrey, & Lapang, DD. (1974). Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills: Shillong: Government of Meghalaya.

<sup>70</sup> Rymbai et al. 1974: 17

<sup>71</sup> Rymbai et al. 1974: 17

Traditionally as per the traditional land tenure system in the Khasi Hills, all land within a *Raid* is communal land, called *Bri Raid* or *Ri Raid*. The *Bri Raid* is controlled and managed by the council *Raid Dorbar*, with the chief *Syiem Raid* as the representative head.<sup>72</sup>

The terms of use (access and withdrawal) of the community land specifies that every member of the village or the *Raid* has the right to use and occupy any plot of vacant land which is allocated by the council (*Raid Dorbar*) without payment of land revenue for the land. Any member of the village can cultivate and occupy the plot of land, with the condition that he/ she cannot claim more land than what he can actually occupy and make use of. The land then belongs to the village member, as long as he/she uses the land. However there is no proprietary, heritable or transferable right on the *Ri Raid* land. If the occupant of the land leaves it fallow or uses it in no way for three consecutive years, the allocated plot of land reverts back to the *Raid*.

The decision-making at the council level relates to the management of community land which specifies that a *Raid* or village may reserve land for cultivation or may set aside a village forest area for the common purpose of the community out of which villagers will have the right to use timber for their household needs. Regarding the role and responsibilities of the chief of the *Raid*, it is specified that the *Syiem Raid* is not the owner of the *Raid* but only controls and manages it on behalf of the members of the *Raid*. Moreover, the chief cannot take any independent decisions or actions on matters related to land, forest, paddy fields, markets or any common property of the *Raid*.<sup>73</sup>

With regards to inheritance and transfer of land, a person can acquire heritable and transferable rights on *Ri Raid* land if he has made permanent improvements on it through construction of a permanent building, or cultivation of permanent crops like fruit

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<sup>72</sup> Rymbai et al. 1974: 16-17.

<sup>73</sup> Nongkynrih, Aurelius Kyrham. (2002). Khasi society of Meghalaya: A sociological understanding: Indus Publishing Company.

trees, or converting it into wet paddy cultivation or fish ponds. However, even a permanent structure such as a house if dismantled and abandoned, reverts back to the *Raid* if a person leaves the place. Another provision states that if a person in one *Raid* goes to settle in another *Raid* but wants to continue utilizing the land allocated to him or her in the first *Raid*, it will remain his or her land provided that it is not a plot that the village needs for the community. There are other cases, in which property allocated to a household reverts back to the custody of the *Syiem Raid* if the family loses its inheritance line and becomes extinct (*Ka Khyndew Iapdub*). Furthermore, community land cannot be sold or transferred.

### ***Ri Kynti* or Private Land**

In the case of *Ri Kynti* or private land, any Khasi who owns private land is the absolute owner of it and had proprietary, transferable and heritable rights over it. Proprietary rights include the operational level use rights of access and withdrawal and the collective choice rights of management and exclusion. A private land holder therefore has all the bundle of rights associated with the property.<sup>74</sup> The state has no control over *Ri Kynti* except in the settlement of disputes.

The terms of inheritance of private land is closely linked to the matrilineal system of the Khasis where property passes down the female line wherein the *Khaddub* or youngest daughter is the custodian of ancestral land. In general, the position of women as owners of property is strong. For example, in the affairs of the clan council or *Dorbar*, decisions on disposal of land by the council can be challenged by women by calling a general *Dorbar* of all male members in which the decision is reviewed. In other cases, the youngest daughter or *Khaddub* seeks the advice of her elder sisters.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Schlager, Edella, & Ostrom, Elinor. (1992). Property-rights regimes and natural resources: a conceptual analysis. *Land economics*, 249-262.

<sup>75</sup> Rymbai et al. 1974: 20.

Other important terms in the management of *Ri Kynti* stipulate provisions on the transfer of land; private land owners can sell or transfer land to another Khasi but is prohibited from the sale or transfer of land to a non-Khasi. Sale can be to a member outside the clan and the sale is usually an outright sale wherein the original land owner cannot continue to seek revenue or tax from it. Furthermore, no *salami* should be imposed following sales or transfers.<sup>76</sup>

In brief, the rules of management for *Ri Kynti* land owners vary from family to family and from clan to clan. The land owners make their own conditions without the sanction of a legal and constitutional authority. Therefore there has been a demand and argument for the “customs and usages governing the administration of land to be systematized and codified”.<sup>77</sup>

To summarize, the comparison between the bundles of rights held in *Ri Raid* (community land) and *Ri Kynti* (private land) underlines that the position of an individual who is allocated community land in Meghalaya is that of an authorised user wherein user rights of access and withdrawal are clearly defined (Table 1). On the other hand, an individual or clan owning private land in Meghalaya has all the bundle of rights of access, withdrawal, management and exclusion in the case of a proprietor and the additional right of alienation in the case of an owner. Moreover, private land owners have the right of inheritance which is closely related to the matrilineal system of the Khasis.

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<sup>76</sup> Rymbai et al. 1974: 20.

<sup>77</sup> Rymbai et al. 1974: 22.

**Table 1: Comparison of the bundle of rights between community and private land in Meghalaya**

<b>Bundle of rights</b>	<b><i>Ri Raid</i> (community land)</b>	<b><i>Ri Kynti</i> (private land)</b>
Use	✓	✓
Withdrawal	✓	✓
Management	x	✓
Exclusion	x	✓
Alienation	x	✓

*Source: Compilation based on fieldwork notes 2012, adapted from Schlager and Ostrom, 1992: 252*

### **Governance of Land in the Traditional Land Tenure System**

The traditional land tenure system in Meghalaya is based on community ownership. The decision to record and document the oral beliefs and practices related to communal land in the Khasi Hills, in particular in Ri Bhoi district was taken in a special *Raid* council in 1965.<sup>78</sup> This led to the codification of the governance of community land with specific rules and terms of use.<sup>79</sup> As per the traditional land tenure system in the Khasi Hills, land ownership was divided into community and private land wherein all land within a *Raid* is communal land, called *Bri Raid* or *Ri Raid*. In the case of *Ri Kynti* or private land, any Khasi who owns *Ri Kynti* or private land is the absolute owner of it and had proprietary, transferable and heritable rights over it as discussed earlier.

Mr. Sumar Sing Sawian, an expert on Khasi culture and tradition elaborates (field notes) that such community land has been governed through the customary three tier structure organized at the village level, the *Raid* level and the *Hima* level. The three levels are closely interlinked hierarchically, with the village level at the lowest level of authority and the *Hima* as the apex body governing

<sup>78</sup> Lyngdoh, Sylvanus Sngi (1965). *Ka Riti-Khyndewba la buh u Longshuwa-Manshuwa jong ka Ri Bhoi*: published

<sup>79</sup> Nongkynrih 2002.



the land tenure system. The role of traditional leaders with regard to the allocation of community land, demarcation of land boundaries, and authorization of land deeds and transfer of land is closely related with the three levels of governance.

Within the traditional land tenure system of the Khasis, the territory is divided into states (*Hima*). Each *Hima* is a conglomeration of smaller units called *Raid* and a *Raid* is further made up of a number of villages (field notes, Mr. Fabian Lyngdoh, elected member of the District Council from Umroi constituency). These associations of villages were therefore constituted as limited monarchies.<sup>80</sup> The *Raid* is a political organization comprising of a number of villages which is governed by a council known as the *Dorbar Raid*. Each *Raid* is represented by a chief known as *Syiem Raid* or *Lyngdoh Raid* or *Sordar Raid* depending on their position and title within the traditional Khasi political system. Furthermore, the Chiefs from every *Raid* across Meghalaya represent their respective *Raid* at the *Hima* level. The structure of the *Hima* is similar to that in the *Raid* wherein the council and its ministers headed by the chief *Syiem Hima* look into the administration of the village. The position of the heads at the *Raid* and *Hima* level are hereditary. In certain cases, prominent and elderly members may also be elected as representatives in the council of the *Raid* and the *Hima*.<sup>81</sup>

The administration of land in the traditional system of the Khasis is hierarchically organized at these three levels – the *Shnong* (village) level, the *Raid* (commune) level and the *Hima* (Khasi state) level. Land administration within the traditional system is at the two higher levels of the *Raid* and the *Hima*. Community land is managed

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<sup>80</sup> Tiwari, BK, Tynsong, H, & Lynser, MB. (2010). Forest management practices of the tribal people of Meghalaya, North-East India. *Journal of Tropical Forest Science*, 329-342; Tiwari, BK, Tynsong, H, Lynrah, MM, Lapasam, E, Deb, S, & Sharma, D. (2013). Institutional arrangement and typology of community forests of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland of North-East India. *Journal of Forestry Research*, 24(1), 179-186.

<sup>81</sup> Dasgupta, Joy & Syiemlieh, HJ. (2006). Trends in Tenure Arrangements for Forest, and their Implications for Sustainable Forest Management: The Need for a More Unified Regime: A Case Study from Meghalaya, India.

by the council of the *Raid* (*Dorbar Raid*), with the chief (*Syiem Raid*) as the custodian whose decisions are guided by the *Dorbar*. The decision making process within this hierarchy of authority in the traditional land governance system in Meghalaya has been assessed through the focused group discussion with the elders from village Umroi Nongrah.<sup>82</sup> The elders elaborated that the chief cannot lease out land, issue land deeds (*patta*) or sell any land of any *Raid* without the approval of the *Dorbar*, who has the authority over these community land (*Ri Raid*).<sup>83</sup>

The *Dorbar* of the *Hima* also acts as the apex authority to regulate and sanction land transfer to non-Khasis. In essence, the *Dorbar Raid* had no authority to lease or to sell the community land to a non-Khasi without the approval of the *Dorbar Hima*. The traditional land tenure system reflects the hierarchical power structure wherein the chief at each level represents the collective decision of the council and is accountable to the higher order in the political hierarchy.

The village is administered by a village council (*Dorbar Shnong*) and is headed by a headman who is elected through a democratic process by the villagers. The decision making at the village level informs, influences and is collectively represented at the *Raid* level. The role of the village council is responsible for marking the boundary allotted for a piece of land, issuing No Objection Certificates (NOCs) along with consultation and verification of land transfers with the *Raid*. However the village level is not included in the decision-making process on the actual allocation of land. The village Councils (*Dorbar Shnong*) is at the lowest tier who then derives their legitimacy from the traditional institutions of the *Syiemship* of the *Raid* and *Hima*, headed by the *Syiem Raid* or *Syiem Hima*, who in turn

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<sup>82</sup> Focused Group Discussion conducted in 2012 at the Office of the Dorbar Shnong Umroi Nongrah with Rangbah Shnong, General Secretary, Assistant Secretary and Finance Secretary of the Dorbar Shnong Umroi Nongrah.

<sup>83</sup> Nongkynrih, 2002.

derive their present day legitimacy and status through the *Sanads* or title deeds issued by the District Council.

However the basic unit of the organizational structure is the household in which decisions taken between the members of household informs the governance system at the higher levels of the clan (*kur*) and village (*Shnong*). The social norm followed is that the man in the household represents the interests of the household at the clan and village level, however women are excluded from participating in the village council.

It was observed by the British rulers that “the people govern themselves through their elected rulers, who are bound to follow the advice of their *Dorbars*”.<sup>84</sup> The *Dorbar* of the *Hima* (Council of the Khasi State) is formed by the *Bakbraw* (elders) along with the *Syiem* (chief) and the *Lyngdoh* (ministers). This is the highest controlling power of the State as stated by Mr. David Roy in Cantlie 1934.<sup>85</sup> At both the levels of the *Hima* and the *Raid* the decision of the chief is guided by his council of ministers or the *Dorbar* who hold the position by birthright on account of belonging to certain clans. Gurdon<sup>86</sup> in his seminal work on the Khasis in 1914 notes, “the absence of any recognized organ of supreme power is remarkable among the Khasis. The nation presents a congregation of little oligarchical republics, subject to no common superior, yet each member is amenable to the control of his confederacy.”

### **Continuity and Change of Autochthonous Institutions**

The governance of land property rights in Meghalaya has experienced a gradual process of transformation from customary practices to a formalized system due to changing socio-political and economic environment in the last four decades. The subsequent outcome has defined the nature of property regimes as it exists in Meghalaya. Notably, despite the matrilineal system of women’s land

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<sup>84</sup> Rymbai et al. 1974: 5

<sup>85</sup> Cantlie, Sir Keith. (1934). Notes on Khasi Law (Munro): Aberdeen.

<sup>86</sup> Gurdon, Philip Richard Thornhagh. (1914). The Khasis: Macmillan.

ownership in Meghalaya, women have not been able to participate and influence the transformation process. The transformation of land tenure system from traditional practices has in particular not led to the improvement of the decision making process in the governance of land.

In conclusion, the norms and guidelines for allocating land in the existing traditional system were suited to a closed economy in the past. However due to the changing economic and social context, the demand for land increased and most households tended to cultivate land beyond the three year rule with the objective of acquiring private ownership to the land. Such traditional guidelines for land allocation did not foresee that land could be an asset in itself or that it could be hoarded with the intent of land speculation. Though the traditional system of land allocation was originally meant for equality of asset distribution, it did not anticipate that not only poor rural individual households could request for land ownership for subsistence agriculture but that few individuals and investors with initial capital could acquire large tracts of land and hoard while hiring labour to avoid reversion of user. Despite this process of obtaining private ownership, the perceived constraints of traditional norms have not allowed reforms in the allocation of community land to check the emerging trend for privatization.

# The Mahadev Koli: A History of Land Struggle and Resilience

Pooja Kudal

The Mahadev Koli are “Scheduled Tribes” who mostly inhabit the dark forest of the Sahyadri Mountains of Maharashtra. They primarily reside in specified forest areas of Nashik, Pune, Ahmednagar, Thane, and Raigad districts. In the vicinity of the Sahyadri Mountains, specifically on the east-west slope, Mahadev Kolis live in small pockets or hamlets. This area is known as ‘*Maval*’, ‘*Dangan*’ and ‘*Naber*’. The distinct features like regional affiliation with the settlement, Gotrani system, specific god-goddesses, marriage system, blood relations, and shaped regional borders differentiate the Mahadev tribe from others. It is socially, culturally and ethnically an independent community.

Social homogeneity is another important feature of Mahadev Koli. The homogeneity derived from a common culture, religious belief, social rules, traditions, values and norms. Traditions are transferred from one generation to another through songs, dance, stories, literature, and folk art: *Dhol Nrutya*, *Shimga Naach*, *Sugicha Naach*, *Tamasha*, *Jatyavaril Dalnachi* (mill grind) *Gaani*, *Powada*, *Bhalri*, *Bohada*, *Lagnachi Gaani* (marriage songs).

The Mahadev Koli lived in natural isolation for years and has somehow become inward looking. As a result of this, they are uncomfortable with new intervention of the government in their area in the name of development. Nonetheless, the *Asbramshala* (Government aided tribal schools) plays a vital role in the life of Mahadev Koli and they are taking education which enables them to become vocal for their identity and rights.<sup>87</sup> The scope of this

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<sup>87</sup> Please see Gare, G.M. (2003). Maharashtra Adivasi Jamati. Adim Sahitya Publication.

chapter is to explore the history of the Mahadev Koli, their struggle against Britishers, money lenders, land lenders and movements for preserving and protecting their land, water and forest.

### **Geographical Settings**

Geographically tribal territories in Maharashtra are divided into three parts. The tribal territory in the Sahyadri region encompasses a huge area where the highest population of tribal communities is found. The region is further divided into three sub-parts. The first part is the top of Sahyadri known as 'Sahyadri Ghat Matha', second is the base of Sahyadri known as 'Sahyadri Ghat Payatha', and third constitutes the central part of districts Thane, Raigad and the port belt of Vasai, Palghar and Dahanu. Mahadev Kolis are mainly found on the Sahyadri Ghat Matha. Their settlements spreads from the valley of Musa Khora to the northern part from Lonavala, Khandala, Rajmachi, Bhimashankar, Naneghat, Malshej ghat, Harishchandragad, Bhandardara, Kalsubai, Igatpuri, Trimbakeshwar to Peth, Surgana and Dang. These tribal belts are divided into Ner, Maval, Dangan, and Khore, which are valleys and glens. The tribal settlements on Ghat Matha are popularly known as Maval or Nere, while the tribal settlements in the northern part of Harishchandragad are popularly known as Dangan. Dangan means the valley or segment that comprises forest and fortified hilly areas. Therefore, the Mahadev Kolis from the Harishchandragad or Dangan is far away from the cultural aesthetics of Maharashtra, as the summit is surrounded by Mahadev Koli and Thakar tribes only.

Tribal territories that have been condensed from the Sahyadri Mountains to central India, according to their habitats, the regions are acknowledged as Kolvan, Bhilvan, and Gondvan. Sahyadri mountain ranges from Ghat Matha, Satmala, Balaghat to the southern part of Mahadev donger (Mahadev hills) including Maval, Ner and Dangan are known as **Kolvan**. This region is extended to districts like Pune, Ahmednagar, Nashik, and Raigad which are

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constituted by Mahadev Koli settlements. Cap. Mackintosh has recorded that the Mahadev Kolis precipitated to their present area from Mahadev Hills, which is situated in the north-west Berar, described to be in the state of Hyderabad.<sup>88</sup> **Bhilvan** is the region spread from the northern part of Dang (wild) to the mountain ranges of Aravali, Vindhya, and Satpuda. Bhil tribe settlements reside in the forest of these mountain ranges. While the tribal region in central India where Gond tribe settlements are majorly found, are known as **Gondvan**.<sup>89</sup>

G.S. Ghurye,<sup>90</sup> in his book *The Mahadev Kolis* published in 1963, mentioned the following observations and historical references with the help of the information supplied by local people of Ambegaon, Junnar, Poona, Ahmadnagar, Nashik etc. He also referenced census and Gazetteers of various districts. Mahadev Koli, a community which came under 'Schedule Tribe' in Maharashtra has been known for their geographical concentration. The community majorly engages in agriculture. He also provides a clue to their history and migration. Govind Gare, in his thesis, *Tribes in an Urban Settings*<sup>91</sup> wrote about the migration of the Mahadev Koli. He presented the arguments that Mahadev Koli migrated from the rural settlement to contiguous urban and industrial settings like Bombay, Poona, and Nashik in search of livelihood, therefore, the bulk of their population is found in these three urban areas where they are engaged in urban occupations and new economic set-ups. Such migration of Mahadev Kolis from tribal habitat to the urban environment inevitably creates some problems in their assimilation into a very new cultural way of life and practice. At present the Mahadev Kolis are mainly concentrated in the regions like

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<sup>88</sup> From A. Mackintosh (1844). Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society from 1936-38. An Account of the tribe of Mahadev Koli.

<sup>89</sup> Please see Jogalekar, S.A. (1952). Sahyadri. Prasad Publication

<sup>90</sup> Please see Ghurye, G. (1963). The Mahadev Koli. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.

<sup>91</sup> Please see Gare, G.M. (1971). Tribals in an urban setting: A study of the socio-economic impact of Poona City of the Mahadev Kolis.

Bhimashankar, Kalsubai, and Trimbak, the high peaks of the Sahyadri in Poona, Ahmednagar and Nashik districts. These high peaks are popularly known for Mahadev temple, which are also pilgrim places.

### Social Prehistory

Social structure of tribal communities has special features according to their region. Mahadev Kolis are also not an exception. As tribes are basically formed on clan based system, Mahadev Kolis are also divided into twenty-four clans. Every clan has sub-clans, again sub-clans are subdivided into branches. At present the sum total of clans and sub clans stands at 218.

#### Clan System in Mahadev Kolis

(A-Name of Big Clan); (B Sub clan) - Source: Mackintosh, A. 1844.

A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Vanakpal	17	Kharad	11	Kadam	16	Chavhan	2
Budhivant	17	Uttaracha	13	Pawar	13	Jagtap	13
Kedar	15	Sagar	12	Bhosale	16	Gaikwad	12
Khirsagar	15	Shesh	12	Dalwi	14	Suryawanshi	16
Bhagivant	14	Dojayi	12	Gavali	2	Shirki	2
Shiv	9	Pulivaj	12	Aghashi	3	Namdev	15

In few spaces, originally **Bara Kule** (twelve clans) is primarily found among Mahadev Kolis. They are then popularly known as '**Bara Bude**'. These clans were also called as Gotra. Each clan then is sub divided into twelve sub clans. They call each other **Got Bhau** (Got Brothers). Cap. Mackintosh provides a list of all twenty-four clans as shown above and the number of sub-clans constituted by each main clan. But these following clans have no direct relations with the Bara Bude system among the Mahadev Kolis.

Among the tribes, the Mahadev Kolis are known in history to have dominated over the Maval areas of the Junnar region. In the



Gazetteers of Bombay presidency, vol. No. 17, it has been noted that in A.D. 1340, Mohamad Tughlaq won the fort of Kondhana and the Fort of Dongari in Ahmednagar by defeating the Mahadev Koli leaders as they own the forts. Bahamani Kings in A.D. 1340 to 1490 and Nijamshahi of Ahmednagar in A.D. 1540 to 1636 had recognized the individual autonomy or individual existence of Mahadev Koli leaders. The Mahadev Koli region was then well known as '*bavanna mavlyancha Pradesh*' (fifty-two maval zone) or the '*Khoryancha Pradesh*' (valleys zone). Every maval or Khora has a separate Naik. There were a total of fifty-two Naiks. They were all headed by one Muslim Sarnaik. Junnar was the headquarters, popularly known as '*Bavanchawadi*'. Shivaji Maharaj recognized the strength and rebellious nature of Mahadev Kolis and decided to build a force of them in order to conquer the Junnar region.<sup>92</sup>

### **Mahadev Koli Chauthara (Monument) during the Mughals**



During the regime of Chhatrapati Shivaji, in A. D. 1657, Mahadev Kolis started organizing their troops in order to help Shivaji Maharaj against Mughals. Aurangzeb was well aware that, Shivaji was the one who strengthens their movements. The primary aim of the movement was to expel a Muslim regiment from the Junnar region. For this, Shivaji Maharaj searched and encouraged

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<sup>92</sup> For more details please see Gare, G. M. (2007). Sahyadritil Adivasi: Mahadev Koli. Adim Prakashan.

courageous Mahadev Kolis, those residing in the valleys of Sahyadri Mountains. The rebellion started by Mahadev Kolis provoked Aurangzeb. He decided to curb their insurgency against the Mughal regime. With the help of grand Mughal army, thousands of Mahadev Kolis were captured by Aurangzeb and taken to Shivneri Fort. They cut off the heads of these thousands of Mahadev Kolis and built a chabutra (monument as shown in the picture) on their pile. Rebel Mahadev Kolis did not give up or surrendered to the Mughals, rather they accepted a heroic death. Randulla Khan was the head of the Mughal army. The place where this brutal massacre of the Mahadev Kolis is now known as the 'Mahadev Koli Chauthara' or 'Kaala (black) Chauthara'.<sup>93</sup>

### **Mahadev Koli Movements in the Peshwa Regime and Untouchability**

The Shivneri fort was under the control of the Mughals till A.D. 1716. In the eighteenth century, Shahu Maharaj received the Shivneri fort with the right of self-government. Then the Peshwas came to the fort. During this time, Peshwa was slowly eroding the rights of Mahadev Koli Vatandars (natives). On the note of diary written by third Bajirao Peshawa, it has been known that the first settlement of Mahadev Kolis was in the valley (Khora) of Ghod River near Pune and then they went to the northern part of Ahmednagar, Nashik while some were settled in the Konkan region. During the time of the Peshwa regime, where the practice of untouchability against Dalits reached its extreme peak, Mahadev Kolis were also experiencing untouchability by Marathas and Kunbis. Cap. Mackintosh noted in 1836 that, Kunbis and Marathas did share food and water with Mahadev Kolis near Junnar, but before they used to purify it with cow urine. In the northern part in Mahaldesha, the Kunbis and Marathas did not share food and water

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<sup>93</sup> Gare, G.M. (2007). Sahyadritil Adivasi: Mahadev Koli. Adim Sahitya Publication. p.66

with Mahadev Kolis. (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Vol. No. XVII. Ahmednagar) as cited in Gare.<sup>94</sup>

Cap. Mackintosh in his text noted that “In 1770 amidst, there was one of Mahadev Koli females of the Silkunda family of Ootdoor, a clever, bold and intriguing woman, who had her name enrolled as one of the police sepoy of Junnar. She never shirked her tour of duty and when she appeared in public, she always had the bow and arrow in her hand, and a couple of well-filled quivers strapped crosswise on her back”.<sup>95</sup>

### **Rebellion against Britishers and Moneylenders**

Mahadev Koli and Bhil tribes revolted against foreign power (Mughals) in the eighteenth century. Such rebellions in different tribal areas of “Hindustan” turned the target of British rulers towards the tribals. With the advice of the local government, the British Governor had to make some new laws and regulations. That created the "Scheduled Division Act".<sup>96</sup> Under these laws, the government was empowered to decide which rules to apply or not to apply.

While political peace was taking place on one side, the economic process of plundering the country on the other had begun with the British. The manufactured raw material was coming to the market in India. Exports of raw materials were increasing. The local economic process in the country was weakening and the rural system was collapsing. The exploitation of the economically weaker and socially different peoples had become the target of the exploiting class, and from this economic process came the rise of money lenders. In the tribal areas, a group of lenders started going to the villages to plunder the tribal farms and forest produce. Taking advantage of the poor condition and the inability of the tribals to comprehend the powerful system of the exploiter, the process of moving the

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<sup>94</sup> Please see Gare, G.M. (2007)

<sup>95</sup> Mackintosh (1844). p.256

<sup>96</sup> Gare, G.M. (2007). p.86

land to the creditors and landlords of Mahadev Koli, Thakar, Warli, Katakari, Bhil people increased. As a result, the majority of the tribal area lands into the hands of lenders and landlords who became the owners of the land. As the transfer of land increased, the oppression of lenders increased. Tribals began to realize that this had to be stopped somewhere, and from this the Bhils and Mahadev Koli tribes started to challenge the lenders. Mahadev Koli and Bhil tribes united against the monarchy. The area of Junnar, Ambegaon, Rajur, Kotul, Bhimashankar was affected. Rama Kirva, Raghoji Bhagare, Honya Kengal were the leaders who led the fight against this oppressive system.<sup>97</sup>

### **Rama Keerva**

Rama Keerva was the leader of a rebellion troop against Britishers in year 1829-30. Under his leadership, many insurgent activities took place in Ahmednagar district. Bhil and Ramoshis also joined them. Late Lieutenants Lloyd and Forbes, the former of the 11th Regt. and the latter of the 13th Regiment, greatly contributed to curb the uprising movements led by Koli Rama Keerva. The British army was headed in 1829 by Cap. Mackintosh. Under his superintendence, around 80 Mahadev Koli, Bhil and Ramoshi rebellions including Rama Keerva were captured by British army and taken to Pune and Thane. Rama Keerva, with several other notorious leaders and their followers, were brought to Ahmednagar, where Keerva was executed in 1830.<sup>98</sup>

### **Revolutionary Raghoji Bhangre**

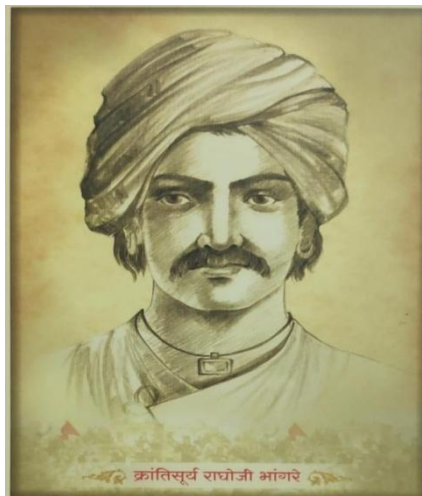
After the execution of Rama Keerva, Raghoji Bhangre became the leader of insurgent movements against Britishers in Akole Taluka of Ahmednagar district. Britishers stripped of the rights of Mahadev Kolis to protect the forts and Ghat matha of Sahyadri Mountains following the demolition of the Peshwa regiment. As an immediate

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<sup>97</sup> Please see Gare, G.M. (2007)

<sup>98</sup> A. Mackintosh, A. (1844). Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society from 1936-38. An Account of the tribe of Mahadev Koli. pp: 263-64

effect of it, there was an intense discontent among the Mahadev Kolis. Raghoji Bhangre organized them and started non-cooperation movement against Britishers. Till 1838, Ratangad and Sanagar forts were the target areas of their revolt. **Bapu Bhangre** was also there in the revolt, as he considered being the Raghoji Bhangre's right hand. Later he got killed by traitors. Raghoji then became uncontrollable for Britishers, they announced a reward of Rs. 5,000 to catch Raghoji.<sup>99</sup>



The intensity of revolt had begun from the year 1828 when the British government decided to collect farm tax in the form of revenue. Due to this method of payment of revenue, the tribals had to go to the money lenders; they exploited poor tribals to the extent that they had to mortgage their land to the lenders. To cease this oppression, a huge revolt had taken place against money lenders under the leadership of Raghoji. The revolts were taking place in various places in between 1843 to 1845. Unfortunately, Raghoji got arrested on the 2nd of January 1848 by Lieutenant Gel and was executed in the central jail of Thane on the 2nd of May 1848. Raghoji Bhangre is considered to be the most influential

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<sup>99</sup> Gare, G.M. (2007). Sahyadritil Adivasi: Mahadev Koli. Adim Sahitya Publication. pp.76-77.

revolutionary in the history of Mahadev Kolis as he expanded the Mahadev Kolis movement by organizing them under one fold.<sup>100</sup>

In the old gazetteers of district Pune, Thane, Nashik, and Ahmednagar, it has been noted that three generations of Raghoji Bhangare had been involved in the history of revolt. His father was also a revolutionary. But the elitist historians have always ignored the stories of resistance and rebels who belonged to the marginalized and who fought for their community rights. Raghoji Bhangare and his contributions are still missing from the pages of tribal history. On 19th April 1910, revolutionaries Anant Kanhere, Krushnaji Karve and Vinayak Deshpande all three were hanged in Central Jail of Thane in the charged of the assassination of British officer Jackson. Even today, their memories remain in prison. But ironically, many tribal courageous leaders like Raghoji Bhangare, who fought against Britishers are nowhere in the history of the struggle for independence.<sup>101</sup>

### **Honya Kengal**

Honya Kengal was another great Mahadev Koli rebel from Ambegaon taluka of Pune district. The first revolt against the money lenders was started in Ambegaon taluka and he was the face of the revolt. Farmers were exploited in the name of 'interest' by lenders. As a result, the farmers became debt-ridden. The lenders then had the right to confiscate the land. In a way, moneylenders deceive the Mahadev Kolis, oppressed them and induced them to commit crimes. Therefore the indignant Honya Kengal rose against it in 1874. He cut the Hatichand Rupchand lender's nose including his three brothers and burned all documents of mortgages, debt bonds and finally robbed four hundred and twenty-two rupees from them. Honya Kengal made a total of twenty-one robberies. His method of burning documents of mortgages and debt bond became famous within the revolts of Mahadev Kolis against lenders. The

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<sup>100</sup> Please see Gare, G. M. (1994). Adivasi Veer Purush. Shree Vidya Publication

<sup>101</sup> Gare, G.M. (2007). Sahyadritil Adivasi: Mahadev Koli: Adim Sahitya Publication. p.80

British government announced a reward of Rs. 1,000 to catch Honya Kengal. In July 1876, Major Danial succeeded to catch him. He was sentenced to black water.<sup>102</sup>

After Honya Kengal, Dhavala Bangara became the leader of the rebellion movement against lenders. He also got arrested in the year 1889 and was sentenced to life imprisonment. Then Balu Pichad, Rama More, Dagadu Nirmal, Sakharam Satpute and Haibati Khade came forward, among them Balu Pichad was encountered by British police while the rest were sentenced to long imprisonment.

### **Mahadev Koli: A Rebel Tribe**

In the history of tribes, we witnessed over the years, the Mahadev Kolis have been raising their voices through uprising, revolt, and movements against Mughals, Britishers and lenders. The tribe was henceforth considered to be the “rebel” and “robber” tribe and therefore, till 1921, Mahadev Kolis were notified by the colonial government under the category of “criminal tribes”, especially in Nashik, Pune, Ahmednagar, and Thane districts, as per the Criminal Tribe Act 1914.<sup>103</sup> Till 1925, around 1,045 Mahadev Kolis were recorded as “criminals.”<sup>104</sup>

### **Ignorance of Adivasi Women’s contribution**

It is important to point out that the writing of the historical struggle of Mahadev Koli community against Mughals, Britishers, Landlords, and Money lenders had only glorified men and their contribution in saving Adivasi self-governance over their own dominated areas. Even though the struggle has its significance in the community's history against power dominance of outsiders and in the survival movement of their land and forests, however, it has depicted only

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<sup>102</sup> Gazetteers of Bombay Presidency. Vol. no. XVII. Ahmednagar as cited in G.M. Gare, Sahyadritil Adivasi: Mahadev Koli. : Adim Sahitya Publication, 2007)

<sup>103</sup> Home Ministry No. 8421/2(1) Date 20th September 1934 noted Mahadev Koli as a criminal tribe under the section of law 10 (1) (a) (b).

<sup>104</sup> Report of the Criminal Tribes Enquiry Committee, 1929 as cited in Gare, G.M. (2007). Sahyadritil Adivasi: Mahadev Koli. Adim Sahitya Publication. pp: 33-34

men's perception towards their own apparatus in constructing the tribal history where women's contribution was invisibilised. The Mahadev Koli's culture which is male dominated, not only in terms of constructing the social politics but also the cultural politics tend to overshadow women's role. Within the community, patriarchal structure and dominance which manipulate woman's autonomy over land and forest is very much prevalent.

### **Self-governance among the Mahadev Koli**

The struggle of Mahadev Koli against Mughals and Britishers had been carried out so long not only to deconstruct the colonial ideas of governance but also to reclaim their own autonomy in terms of right to make and execute their ideas of self ruling and self governing in the tribal area. Self rule includes the traditional mode of governance system like Gavgada (rural sociology), Gotrani system which was free from oppressive structure and dominance of landlords and moneylenders. Where tribal can assert their own socio-cultural politics and can define their own village economics. Below is a brief description of traditional mode of self governance before Independence:

#### **Gavgada (Village/rural Sociology)**

*Patil* (head or chief) holds an honorable position in the social as well as political space of the village. *Patil* was considered as the first person in the village. The position is hierarchical, others were followed after him. Every village has its *Patil*. Mahadev Koli *Patil* is present in many villages on Sahyadri Ghatmatha hills. The assigned predominant duty of the *Patil* was to welcome respected government officers and important guests in the village. Alongside, whether it is on the *Holi* festival or during a *Jatra* (fair) of village Goddess the first honor of worship is given to *Patil*. At the time of crop planting, sowing and harvesting, there was a rule to send one person from each house to work free of charge at *Patil's* farm. This practice has declined in recent periods. Since the post of *Patil* was hereditary, often *Patil* was unwilling to relinquish his rights, resulting in quarrels, disputes, factions, in the village. *Patalimbai* (*Patil's* Wife)



has great honor in the village. She holds an important place in the women's program, be it the wedding ceremony or the blessing ceremony of a new born child.

The charge of making decisions for the village was abundantly rested in the hands of men. On top of that, the hereditary position of *Patil* symbolized the structural domination of men in every important political as well as social affairs of the village while on the other hand *Patlin Bai* even though being at equal position to *Patil* could not be assertive either at social or political spaces, instead, her role was restricted to women's gathering only, and thus kept far away from engaging directly in political processes.

### ***Gotrani system***

In the social life of Mahadev Koli, the Panchayat holds an important role and is widely known as *Gaon Baithak* or Village Meeting. Small fights, fraternity disputes, factional clashes were resolved in Panchayat meetings. The Panchayat has served as the first intervening traditional political institution to settle the judgments about immoral behavior in the village.

Cap. Mackintosh wrote an important note on the Gotrani system among Mahadev Kolis, as practiced effectively in Pune district till the year 1866. The Gotrani system was nothing but the panchayat of clan /kul leaders. It is also known as '*Jat ganga*' and the members of the panchayat were called 'Gotrane'. Primarily to ensure peace and harmony in the community was the main aim behind this Gotrani system. Members then engaged to resolve group/individual conflicts, to punish the person who does commit anti-social activities, to impose social penalties, to give judgments, to organize social awareness meetings in order to keep law and order as per the community customs and rules. An accused member has to face social exclusion at times from other community members. There is no account of the practice of the Gotrani system that has been found in contemporary times.<sup>105</sup> The tribe is patrilinear. The system

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<sup>105</sup> Please see Mackintosh, A. (1844).

was male dominated and no women were part of the Panch committee.

### **Structure of Village Panchayat**

It is also called Gaov Baithak or Village Meeting or jamat Panchayat. It had functioned under the control of Mahadev Koli Saranayaka. The structure had been formulated into a systematic hierarchy which was hereditary in nature starting from *Adhyaksha* (President), *Upadhyaksha* (Vice-President), *Shipai* (Soldier) and so on and so forth.

***Adhyaksha (President):*** The presidency of the Jamaat Panchayat was headed by the people of *Ragatwan Kula*, a sub clan of the *Sheshkula* clan. In order to purify the person or to get him/her back into the community who committed a social crime and excommunicated by the community, he/she was supposed to lick the little finger's blood of the Ragatwan man who headed the position of Adhyakshya in Jamaat Panchayat. Later the practice ceased and the practice of dining in the plate of Ragatwan president began. Recently the practice has also stopped, this discrimination of purity is now not observed anymore.

***Upadhyaksha-*** The post was inherently headed by the Methal clan, which was a sub-clan of Kedar Kula. In the absence of Adhyaksha, Upadhyaksha was the head of the Panchayat meetings in order to resolve social discrepancies.

***Shipai (Soldier) -*** The post was headed by Sable clan, sub-clan of khirsagar kula. They have to perform assigned duties like call the community meetings, sending the message, spreading the news and important information across villages.

***Madke and Hadke-*** The criminals did not come even when they were called by the soldiers, people from Madke sub-kula (clan) used to visit the house of the criminals and took out nine mud pots full of grains as a punishment. The grains were later used at the time of any community programme. After this punishment, people from Hadke sab-kula (clan) used to visit the house of criminals and put

animal's bone on his/her house to declare his/her expulsion from the community, while the people from Vanakpal Kula had the right to perform religious rituals.

### **Problematizing Traditional Panchayat Institutions: Women's Perspective**

Although Panchayat allowed everyone to partake in the meetings, women participation was not a priority due to their lack of awareness about social and political processes. However, if cases related to women were a matter of concern of the Panchayat, adult women preferably attend. Matters like extramarital affair of the wife/husband, pregnancy before marriage, the immoral relation/character of a woman had been discussed and later resolved by Panch members who used to be male-only. Dr. Govind Gare has noted down the Panchayat system and their biased ways of handling women's issues in the book 'Sahyadritil Adivasi: Mahadev Koli'. Here he mentioned that if any woman is accused of extramarital affair or pregnancy before marriage, she is supposed to pay for it according to the penalty decided by Panch members. Even if a woman is found innocent, she has to pay a fine according to the customs rules, and then only she was allowed to come back into the community. The power of taking decisions for the woman's life rested in the hands of Panch members of the village.<sup>106</sup>

### **Women's role in the changing structure of self- governance**

Mahadev Koli is a tribe that follows a male-dominated culture, where the male is the head of the family. However, married women hold a prominent position in the family. Timely guidance and advice of women is taken when making important decisions. Women and girls have been involved in the gender-based assigned work such as cattle ranching, cleaning of cow dung in the herd, yard cleaning, watering, cooking, etc. Apart from that, they have also been involved in work like fishing and vegetable gathering. Women are more laborious than men. They are the ones who look after the

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<sup>106</sup> From Gare, G.M. (2007)

financial affairs of the home. They are bolder than men and endure every crisis situation. The mother-in-law takes almost all the decisions in the house or the old woman in the house has the power.

Widow women receive dignity and equality in society. They are not treated trivially in the family. Widow women are more likely to be honored in the family than be deported. Their advice is equally essential in important family matters. Widow women have the full right to remarry. She may remarry and move to another house.

The male head of the family owns and controls the entire property in the house. He is the owner of farming, landscaping, house and house belongings. However, women in the family may have their own wealth. It is called *Avanji* (Property owned by women). It includes money, farmland, cattle, etc. Whenever a woman leaves her husband, her husband does not stop taking her *Avanji* with her.

Violence against women is normalized in the family of Mahadev Koli. Beating a wife is always a way for the husband to get angry at her. He considers his wife an object of ownership. One of the reasons is that he has to give a dowry for the woman's attainment at the time of marriage. On the other side, women are also getting used to such violence against them by husbands as they considered themselves inferior and powerless at one hand and on the other hand, they have been taught by society a lesson of becoming an ideal wife who obeys her husband.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter underscores critically the sociopolitical history of Mahadev Koli. It foregrounds the historical construct of their historical lands, their habitat, their culture and geographical landscape and governing system. It deconstructs the historical process of the struggle against Britishers, money lenders, land lenders and movements for protecting their land, water and forest over a period of time. Further, it explores the traditional male

dominated political institutions of self-governance and their transitions from pre-independence to post-independence.

Mahadev Koli has held their autonomy of the territory with their own self-governing system till Mughals and Britishers intruded into their spaces. The Mughals snatched their autonomy over forts, while Britishers snatched their land, water and forest. Moneylenders and landlords played key roles in the exploitation of the community that led to the foundation of an exploitative structure in the territory. Consequently, there was rebellion not only against Mughals in Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's regime but also against Britishers, landlords and moneylenders during the Peshwa regime.

The struggle of the Mahadev Kolis was not merely against these intruders but against their interventions into their social, political and cultural space of the community. The historic rebellion was for self-autonomy over the territory, land, water and forest. Further the revolt was not merely against their genocides but also against the degradation of their epistemologies and the sustainable traditional system of natural resources management.

## PART TWO

### Language, Words and Tribes: Critical Reflection on the Problematics of the Empirical

Vislavath Rajunayak

A child speaks the language of her culture at home. They know a lot about their own bodies, the names of the different parts and their connections... they probably have created songs, stories or even drawn pictures of what is around them ... Language names the world around us and stores the knowledge of the names and the named.<sup>107</sup>

Language is perhaps the most important marker of ethnicity and identity. Apart from being an indicator of artistic and cultural distinctiveness, it forms a significant aspect of the culture and identity of an individual as well as a community. Similarly language also helps to develop critical thinking and intellectual nourishment and a personal sense of self-respect.<sup>108</sup> In India there are a considerable number of marginalized languages used for communicating by tribal communities. Presently, the languages and cultural art forms originating from tribal realities are overlooked in both the public and academic domain due to a number of complex factors operating at the socio-political, cultural and economic realm. The continuous privileging of a few officially recognized languages within regional, national and global communicative spaces has led to

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<sup>107</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o. "Foreword I: Education, Knowledge and Empowerment" Promoting Language and STEAM as Human Rights in Education. Zehlia Babaci-Wilhite (edt), Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2019.

<sup>108</sup> Zehlia Babaci-Wilhite. (2019) "Educational Tools to Teach STEAM Subject Integrating Linguistic Rights, Collaboration, and Critical Thinking"

the steady decline and invisibilization of these tribal languages by dominant mainstream languages. This has resulted in not only an endangering of the former, but also initiating an erosion of a tribe's identity. The State's efforts at preserving these languages by the paternalistic process of museumization have done little to enable serious academic engagement with the issue.

In India, most of the tribes have their own language. Many of these languages, especially those of the smaller tribes are endangered and on the brink of extinction. Data reveals that there are approximately 187 languages in India, the majority of which are tribal languages and are under threat of extinction. The idea of India was framed on the basis of different regional-linguistic sub nationalities. The languages of the tribal societies have never been considered popular compared with the mainstream regional languages such as Telugu, Urdu, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali and others. Tribal languages, in many parts of the country are mostly not recognized by the State. Priority is accorded to the recognized official languages for governmental, administrative and legal purposes. Since they are not used by the State, these languages run the risk of being excluded and invisibilised, concomitant with their distinct cultural identities. In academic parlance, the tribes can be said to have reached a stage where they can be called aphasic, that is, those who suffer from the loss of language.

Among the nearly 450 plus tribal societies in India, I will discuss the case of the lambada society inhabiting present day Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Lambadas are spread all over India and the language, which they speak, is called '*Gore boli*'.<sup>109</sup> The lambadas are nomads who travel from one place to the other, encountering in their movement various kinds of people and languages. The majority of the lambadas are economically not affluent; sub-communities such as *Bhats*, *Dapidias*, and *Navies*<sup>110</sup> are always

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<sup>109</sup> A Tribal language, which does not have a script

<sup>110</sup> Dependent communities within the Lambadas tribes, their profession is to preserve lambada cultural narratives accounts and historical stories.

dependent on the upper clans of the lambadas. The fundamental issue with most of these communities is an acute sense of loss pervading their lives – loss of occupation, social status, dignity and honour, and the legitimate rights. These communities seem to carry diverse kinds of historical and cultural burdens that are expressed through their languages.

Being in constant contact with other societies for decades, they have borrowed many words from other languages, having to communicate with other societies persistently. Even though they live in separate hamlets, far away from other societies, they still are able to interact with other people and use their language.

There are even clear instances where some words from English and other dominant languages have been incorporated into the lambada language. For example “Langa, station, military, phone, beer, whiskey and hava, mander, terikat sado, rile” are few of the many new words that the lambadas have borrowed from various sources. It is observed that children of immigrants almost always learn the language of their friends at school regardless of the parents' dialect or original language. Learning a new language opens up new possibilities for exploring and describing one's perceptions, thoughts and beliefs, hopes and aspirations. The lambadas use these unfamiliar (at least to their own historical surroundings) English words in their songs, even while using these words without any inhibitions, the pronunciation of the same is somewhat strained.

‘Language’ is a unique gift to human beings that enables them to distinguish themselves by their unparalleled ability to communicate and share feelings using common ‘codes’ to understand ideas, feelings and experiences, as individuals and collective groups articulate them. Language has unique features the primary one being the process of change. Considering a language as a living entity, it is bound to evolve with time adopting new forms to facilitate the act of communication in society.

However, language and its usage and expression do not change drastically. Linguistic exchanges with neighbouring villages, cities,



states, and countries at large, cause a language to slowly adapt using some words from other languages. For example English has borrowed words like, chutney, khichidi, and others from the Indian languages. Lambadas also borrow words when they move other regions or they adopt some words by listening to modern songs. For example the following song has many words from English and other languages.

### Transliteration

Apan ghar *bus* keru hubiye - beta taro sasaro balayen ayo  
 Jaoni ye sasureri lare - ayeo apana ghar *takter* keru hubiye  
 Beta taro jete balayen - jaoni ye hame jete laree  
 Aye apan ghar *car* keru hubiy- beta taro devare balayen ayo  
 Jaoni ye devareri lare - ayeo apane ghare *lorry* keru hubiye  
 Beta tare nande balayen balayene ayee - jaoni ye hameri nanade ri lare  
 Ayee apan ghare *cycle* keru hubi- beta taro darvani balayen ayee  
 Jaoni ye darvani re lare- ayo apane ghare *scooter* keru hubi  
 Beta tari jatani balayen aye- jaoni ye jatani ri lare  
 Ayo apan ghare *Luna* hubiveri – beta taro vayavalo balayen ayo  
 Patiyaso matho gontho bovoji- patiyama churmo churun jao  
 Luna chadan lego daniya.<sup>111</sup>

### Translation

Whose bus is standing in front of the house? - Daughter your father-in-law has come here to take you

I don't want to go with my father-in-law – whose Tractor is standing in front of the house?

Daughter your brother-in-law has come to take you- I don't want to go with my brother-in-law

Whose car is standing in front of the house? – Daughter your Driver has come to take you

<sup>111</sup> Song collected from Ramjohl (a story teller from Subkapally Thanda of Warangal District) Telangana in 2012.

I don't want to go with my Driver – who has come by the lorry?

Daughter your sister-in-law has come to take you- I don't want to go with my sister-in-law

Whose cycle is this standing in front of our house? - Daughter your elder sister has come to take you.

I don't want to go with my elder sister- whose scooter is standing in front of our house?

Daughter your younger sister has come to take you- I don't want to go with my younger sister

Whose Luna is standing in front of our house? – Daughter your husband has come to take you

Round head (like a pot) comb it my friends- mixes the sweets in the pot my friends

I will go on the Luna with my husband.<sup>112</sup>

## **Embodying Transformations**

With globalisation and mainstreaming of lambadas into mainstream cultures, it is observed that the younger lambadas are finding it difficult to speak their own language. Having to communicate with other communities for livelihoods and survival, they are left with no option but to adapt themselves to speak the language of the dominant, such as Telugu. Even though for the Lambadas, Telegu is a foreign language, they are forced into communicating with others in the said language resulting in the process of assimilation in terms of linguistic and cultural traits and behaviour. This can be seen manifested in their songs. Based on the way they construct their songs, it can be argued that material sustainability and progress are one of the key reasons why they have adopted a modern life style and incorporated the existing hierarchical structure.

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<sup>112</sup> This song and translated version has been used in one of my chapters published. (Vislavath Rajunayak, "Art, Science and language: Teaching Tools of Aborigines in India" Promoting Language and STEAM as Human Rights in Education. Zehlia Babaci-Wilhite (edt), Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2019.)

It is important to bring to light the ways in which the case of lambada women in the rural areas. The tribal societies, it could be argued, were not aware of gender hierarchy as practiced among other communities that are rooted in patriarchy, however, now such patriarchal practices are witnessed in their social life. This change can be reflected in their construction of their songs and the use of language as well. It seems that, language encompasses the unity of the immediate social situation, i.e., the social exchanges between individuals and communities that often leave indelible impressions on the syntax, lexicography, and morphology affecting the semantic reception.

In case of semantic reception, the context makes it convenient to infer the meaning of the word. It is not necessary for both the speaker and learner to have a common understanding of the particular word that has been referred to during the course of a linguistic exchange. The context fills the gaps in the problematics of meaning, even if the listener has only been recently introduced to a particular word. Thus new words are slowly assimilated within a language and embed themselves as real components of that language. This movement and absorption of words into a particular language is not a new phenomenon, it is as old as the institution of language itself. It has become more prominent with the exchange of ideas, traditions, and customs among societies. Moreover, the improved transport system and technological innovations have also brought major changes in language. What this reveals is that, from the perspective of language generation, the vital feature of grammaticality of everyday speech is contextually perhaps unimportant for the common people to communicate easily.

Further the simplification of sound basically allows the speakers to modify and convert difficult sounds to easily communicated ones. The most recent theory pertaining to this was proposed by the American Linguist William Labov. What Labov (2010) identified was that at the beginning a small part of a population pronounces certain words that have, for example, the same vowel, differently

than the rest of the population. This occurs naturally since humans do not reproduce exactly the same sounds. However, at some point in time, for some reason this difference in pronunciation starts to become a signal for social and cultural identity. Others in the population who wish to be identified with the group either consciously or (more likely) unconsciously adopt this difference, sometimes exaggerating it, and at times applying it to change the pronunciation of other words.<sup>113</sup>

They use the newly learnt words hesitatingly at the initially but after a few days they are subsumed within their regular speech. Even a cursory glance at the array of professions in India makes one realize how important a factor this must have been in the pre-modern Indian society and also how the occupations and language have lost their relevance in today's society.

Within these processes, the interesting thing is that people adopt the regional languages as well, depending upon where they live. The Lambadas use Hindi, Telugu and English words and are combining their language with the various mainstream languages. Amidst such a dynamic process, the borrowed words or loaned words are well understood by the listener within a given context without any difficulty. Thus it can be asserted that language is an ever-flowing stream of speech in which nothing remains fixed and identical to itself, secondly language is the stationary rainbow arched over that stream.<sup>114</sup>

Language further constitutes a site of power. Devy and others evoke an argument similar to that of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o where they write:

Language is power. It has power to upset, uproot and shackle.... if you name the world, you own it. If you are dominated, you see the world through the eyes of the

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<sup>113</sup> Labov, W. (2010). *Principles of Linguistic Change, Cognitive and Cultural Factors*. Wiley-Blackwell, New Jersey.

<sup>114</sup> Voslosinov, V.N (1973). *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Seminar Press, New York. P.6

conqueror, effectively burying your memory under the conqueror's memory".<sup>115</sup>

These processes are perhaps what are happening to the tribal communities in India. Terry Eagleton claims that, "No piece of language is closer to reality than any other"<sup>116</sup> yet most tribal languages are gradually being subsumed by mainstream languages such as English and Hindi and in this subsumption process, they not only begin to insidiously disappear but also begins to fragment a tribal society's cultural identity.

### **Some Thoughts on the Marginalization of Tribal Literature**

In order to understand the issue of the marginalization of tribal literature, it is necessary to look at the popular and dominant notion of literature itself. In the Literature Departments across Universities in India, emphasis is given to literature from the "West", mainly focusing on the New Critical and Formalist theories of literature, which give primacy to the written word. According to these theories, only particular genres such as the novel, poetry, drama or essays are considered literary for teaching and research purposes. Operating from such a perspective, indigenous oral narratives are excluded from these literary discourses. Terry Eagleton makes an important point in relation to the same. He argues that there is no such thing as a literary work or tradition that is valuable in it, he says,

Literature, in the sense of a set of works of assured and unalterable value, distinguished by certain shared inherent properties, does not exist. On the other hand, the value judgments that the literary authorities make have their roots in "deeper structures of belief" and are "historically variable" and have a close relation to social ideologies. They refer in

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<sup>115</sup> Chauhan, S. Vibha (2013). Identity, History and Protest: CT/DNT in Literary and Social Texts in India. In: Devy, G. N. et al (eds). Narrating Nomadism: Tales of Recovery and Resistance. Taylor & Francis Group, New Delhi. pp.125-126

<sup>116</sup> Eagleton, T. (2013) How to Read Literature. Yale University Press. New Haven and London. P.126

the end...to the assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others.<sup>117</sup>

Subscribing to Eagleton's analysis one can assert that, no matter the text, whether it is written or oral, each demands an engagement and focus. From here we can posit, in relation to the lambada case, that it is possible to textually construct the culture and identity of the lambadas through their oral narratives which by any methodological yardstick qualify for an intellectual and scholarly analysis. From such theoretical premise, it is actually possible to construct a different version of history of the lambadas as oppose to one written from the perspective of the hegemon in society.

Contrary to the common perception that tribal or folk literature deals with pre-modern societies or cultures, many tribal narratives engage with the realities of the modern world. Through their narratives, they simultaneously establish their own experiences and those of the tribes as they interact with the modern world. Their narratives deals with day to day transactions with modern institutions such as banks and other state institutions, drawing our attention to the discursive dimensions of what even constitutes 'modernity'.

The sociologist Virginius Xaxa (2008)<sup>118</sup> points out that in anthropological literature; tribes in general have been defined in terms of language, culture, territory, and government. In this context I would like to affirm such a position when directly related to tribal languages, both in their textual form and in their multiple usages. At present tribal languages are overlooked within academic discourse, and the linguistic identities of the tribal societies are ignored by the mainstream society. Pointing to this condition, Saumya, shows how the processes of 'othering' works in the course of identity formation in the way words are positioned:

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<sup>117</sup> Eagleton, T. (1996). *Literary Theory*. University of Minnesota Press, United States. p.9

<sup>118</sup> Xaxa.V (2008). *State, Society and Tribes in India*. Permanent Black: New Delhi

Identity formation usually is a cultural construct, a process of inclusion and exclusion of values and symbols defining “we” and “they” or “us” and “others”. Relationships between “we” and “they” are not inevitably always conflicting or competitive but when it takes a political form, differentiations between “we” and “they” get pronounced, prejudices become prominent and boundaries for interactions....<sup>119</sup>

Another very important dimension that I wish to bring forth for interrogation, concerns of tribes and the process of deforestation. Increased deforestation and human settlement by the tribal communities has increased contact with the modern society. These engagements actually situate the languages of the tribes in a dependent relationship to the dominant societies. This puts tribal language at risks of being annihilated. At the rate in which tribes are forced to engage with other dominant societies, Tribal languages might simply vanish by being forced to merge with the linguistic practices of other more numerically dominant societies. From the perspective of a linguist, this would by all means be a loss, not just for the concerned communities, but also for the overall cultural knowledge pool of languages.

In relation to the above concrete condition, Edward Sapir (1921) posits a thesis, often called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis:

Human beings ... are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society ... the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group ... we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because certain choices of interpretation.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Saumya (2008). Communalism: Narratives in Chhattisgarh. *Economic & Political Weekly* 43 (2): 38-44.

<sup>120</sup> Sapir, E. (1921). *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. New York Press, Harcourt, Brace. p.207

Whorf goes on to add, “we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages”.<sup>121</sup> What we mean by the indigenous ethos is concentrated primarily in their languages. It is the language that forms a significant part of their subconscious and gives them a distinct identity.

It is common knowledge that language is culturally embedded. Cultural change is often accompanied by a change in ideas and idiomatic expression. In the age of the computer and technology, the tribal community faces an identity crisis, since their life and culture are being completely unexplored and excluded from the public discourse. There is an increasing anxiety among the tribes in relation to the ways that their language can be established as a part of a larger human inheritance.

### **Concluding Remarks**

To conclude, I wish to make few points in relation to language from a Tribal perspective. The oral resources available in Indian languages could throw a new light on a genealogical understanding of the present history of India. India’s present history is mainly constructed on documents that are available in the written form, mostly under the direct influence of continuous Sanskritization. The tribal oral texts, I opine would offer insights into the alternative history of the communities of India and would change the way in which the colonial and post-colonial Hinduised sections look at these communities. Such an inquiry would be topical as well as deeply historical that might lead to a re-imagining of Indian history itself.

This kind of work however must make use of the critical mechanisms of chronicling-cum-historicizing the available oral narratives of the tribes in order to extract the socio-cultural significances of these specific cultural productions as well as the

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<sup>121</sup> Singer, W. (1997). *Creating Histories: Oral Narratives and the Politics of History-Making*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. p.212.



general oral narrative traditions. Co-ordinated scientific academic efforts could help in the unraveling of the evolving histories of the many tribes and the lambadas specifically as I have briefly discussed above. Such studies would reveal the ways in which the identities of tribes were carefully constructed during the period under colonial rule, sustained with time, and later much after the India's independence absorbed by the new efforts at nation building on the basis of parliamentary democracy and linguistic-cultural order. These will illuminate the strategy of conserving these identities in order to change practices, which have maintained a monolithic and homogeneous cultural view of these societies' that is popularly reflected currently in the mass media.

Finally, no matter my personal resistance, I do recognise that it has become imperative for a speaker of tribal languages to be conversant in other dominant languages like Telugu, English and Hindi to receive an education and be meaningfully employed. Such conditions favour certain languages and marginalize the indigenous languages, something that experts and scholars need to think about. In the light of this, the absence of tribal texts and languages becomes a strong reason for its further reason for marginalization.

Nevertheless, India's official language Hindi uses Devnagari script. To me, the question of the script is secondary to the intention of officially acknowledging a language or a dialect on the basis of its popularity among the people.<sup>122</sup> This would inevitably lead to the development of suitable script and grammar for the language. The present political society seems to ignore and neglect developing multilingual systems for important public purposes such as education. This probably needs to change.

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<sup>122</sup> Bhukya, B. (2012). Andrajoythi daily Telugu Newspaper Editorial page Hyderabad. (Bhukya, 2012, 4)

# Bodo Language and Literature of the Colonial Era: A Historical Conspectus

Redion Narzary

## Introduction

The Bodos are the indigenous people predominantly found in Assam and also scattered throughout North-East India, West Bengal, Nepal and Bangladesh. They have their own language, literature and cultural identity. Linguistically the Bodo Language belongs to a sub-section of Bodo-Naga under the Assam-Burmese group of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Tibeto-Chinese or Sino-Tibetan family. Sidney Endle characterizes the Bodo language as ‘Agglutinative as distinct from the inflexional family of languages’. The Bodos have preserved their tribal identity up to a large extent by maintaining their language. The Bodo language is regarded as rich in vocabulary and is noted for its phonological peculiarity.<sup>123</sup>

The Bodo language shares some common features with respect to vocabulary, phonology, morphology, and syntax with other languages of the Bodo groups.<sup>124</sup> The Bodo language group includes Dimasa, Sonowal, Lalung, Hajong, Tiwa, Barman, Koch, Deuri and Kok-Borok. In pre-colonial Assam, the Assamese language became the predominant language mainly due to the command of Hindu priest under the royal patronage. In course of time, with the development of Assamese language, the survival of Bodo language was threatened. This situation was observed by Gait who noted - “The Bodo dialects, though still spoken in Assam by more than half a million persons are in their turn giving way to

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<sup>123</sup> Mohini Mohan Brahma, *Folk-Songs of the Bodos*, (Gauhati University: Publication Department, 1960), p.8.

<sup>124</sup> Anil Kumar Boro, *A History of Bodo Literature*, (Kolkata: Sahitya Academi, 2012), p.11.

Aryan languages and their complete disappearance is only a matter of time”.<sup>125</sup> S.N Goswami also noted the declining usage of the Bodo language due to conversion into Saranias from among the Boro.<sup>126</sup> During the said period, those Bodos who wanted to convert to Sarania had to abandon their original language and compulsorily adopt the Assamese language. This was, I opine, the main reason for decline of the Bodo language. It is important to note that these processes began to occur during the colonial period as reflected in the writings of the writers then.

Scholar like G. A. Grierson in 1927 found that the invasion of Aryan culture on the Bodos resulted in the separation of the kinsmen of Bodo group between the Hill Tippera with Garo Hills and of the Brahmaputra valley. The aryanisation process was so strong that the old Bodo language faced certain death. Fortunately it survived among those Bodos who consciously held on to their old forms of speech.<sup>127</sup> Due to the high penetration and influence of Assamese, the Bodo general masses were even psychologically prepared to adopt Assamese language as their mother tongue. This was reflected in the census report of 1951 and 1961.<sup>128</sup>

The current state of affairs reveals that many Bodos cannot speak their own language and have lost their own mother tongue. Here we observed that dynamics and politics of languages and the struggle between advanced culture and language and the threat of existence that such a process has on smaller linguistic groups. E.A. Gait affirms this thesis arguing that when one nation brought another under its subjugation, the imposition of its own language became inevitable on the conquered people. In Assam the Assamese

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<sup>125</sup> Edward Albert Gait, *A History of Assam*, (Delhi: Facsimile Publisher, 2015), p. 6.

<sup>126</sup> Satyendra Narayan Goswami, “Cultural Interaction between Tribal and Non-Tribal People in Assam with Special Reference to Languages”, Ed. in *Bulletin of Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Schedule Caste*, (Guwahati: 2000), p. 42.

<sup>127</sup> George A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol-I, Part-I*, (Delhi: Low Price Publication, 2005), p. 62.

<sup>128</sup> Sujit Choudhury, *The Bodos Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority*, (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advance Study, 2007), p. 90.

language supplanted the Bodo language and other tribal languages.<sup>129</sup>

Beginning 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Bodos began asserting their distinct identity away from the Assamese and manifested resurgence by reviving their language.<sup>130</sup> They took their language as the driving force to re-establish their identity. In the view of Sanjib Baruah, one of the most imperative battle grounds of Bodo cultural politics is language.<sup>131</sup> The Bodos forcefully articulated that their language and literature was key to their existence, survival and identity. This became the premise for stages of Bodo identity agitation. However one of the difficulties they encountered was that they lacked written record of their past history as a community. The Bodo language was confined and remained at the level of speech and spoken form only, even though the Bodo language was widely prevalent in unwritten form before the arrival of Aryans in Assam.<sup>132</sup> Thus in order to understand this problematic of the Bodo language, this chapter traces the pre-colonial condition of the Bodo language within the context of the colonial period.

### **The Pre Colonial Context**

In the pre-colonial period, the Bodo language which was in oral form, consisted of a large number of speakers in this region. The lack of a written tradition caused the emergence of various types of dialect from the parent linguistic family. The reason most likely is due to distance in time and space with geographical and physical demarcations such as rivers, sea and mountain barriers that contributed to this multiplicity of dialect. Scholars observed that during pre-colonial times, drawing a boundary of specific linguistic

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<sup>129</sup> Edward Albert Gait, *A History of Assam*, (Delhi: Facsimile Publisher, 2015). p. 2.

<sup>130</sup> Jayashree Saikia, *Ethnolinguistic Identity and Intergroup Relationship of Bodo Students in Assam*, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, (JNU: 2006), p.46.

<sup>131</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *India against Itself, Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.185.

<sup>132</sup> G.C. Sharma Thakur, "Tribal Elements in Assamese Culture", ed. in *Bulletin of Assam Institute of Research for Tribal and Schedule Castes*, (Guwahati: 2000), p. 46.

group was perplexing because it was difficult to identify where one language ended and where another began; apparently this led to advent of different dialects.<sup>133</sup> In the case of the Bodo group, the different dialect that emerged like Boro, Dimasa, Garo, Tiwa, Tipra (Kok-Borok), Chutiya, Koch and Hajong etc. gradually attained a separate language.<sup>134</sup> Both P.C. Bhattacharya and Madhu Ram Baro assumed that some of this bifurcation like Garo and Tiwa from the original Bodo linguistic stock took place about one thousand years ago. Method of comparative study of languages can trace similarities between Bodo group dialect and their genetic relationship.<sup>135</sup> At present the Bodo speakers are divided into four dialect areas like north-western, south-western, north-central and southern dialect areas.<sup>136</sup> But scholars are not unanimous about this division.

### **Position of Bodo language**

A language is divided into written and oral form, between the two; the written form is considered as literary or standard language. It is considered that languages of the north-eastern speech communities are unconscious of their linguistic identities.<sup>137</sup> Uttam Bhatari called these oral communities in the region as ‘people without written history’ having no written record of the past.<sup>138</sup> Like many tribes of north-east India the Bodo language also existed in oral form without any written tradition. It was regarded as mere dialect without any written record until the colonial period. Whatever they had existed

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<sup>133</sup> Madhumita Sengupta, *Becoming Assamese; Colonialism and New Subjectivities in Northeast India*, (New York: Routledge Publication, 2016), p.152.

<sup>134</sup> Madhu Ram Baro, *The Historical Development of Boro language*, (Guwahati: N.L. Publication, 2007), p.34.

<sup>135</sup> Linguistically the dialects are divided based on a number of variations in a language with phonological, morphological, lexical and glossarial differences.

<sup>136</sup> Promod Chandra Bhattacharya, “A Few Elements of the Indo-Mongoloid Boro Culture”, ed. in *Journal of the Assam Research Society*, (Guwahati: 1964), p. 61.

<sup>137</sup> Sudhansu S. Tunga, “Sociology of Language North-Eastern Case”, in *Linguistic Situation in North-East India*, ed. Mrinal Miri, (New Delhi: Concept Publication, 2003), p. 118.

<sup>138</sup> Uttam Bathari, *Memory, History and Polity: A Study of Dimasa Identity in Colonial Past and Post-Colonial Present*, Unpublished PhD. Thesis, (GU: 2014), p.2.

in the oral tradition and folklore. Suniti Kumar Chatterji observed that the Bodo dialects were not yet written down and whatever literature they had like songs and fairy tales and traditional myths and legends were all in oral form.<sup>139</sup> Bodo scholar like Mohini Mahan Brahma argued on similar lines, that “though the Bodo language is still current in Assam and in some areas of West Bengal, yet we do not have any trace of books or any inscription in this language. So in the absence of authentic evidence, I find it difficult to say that once the Bodo language was used as a written language in the state”<sup>140</sup>

However, it is believed that the Bodo language was dominant during the reign of the Bodo-Kachari rule until the Ahom kingdom was established in 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Madhu Ram Baro assumed that whatever written documents and monuments they may have were possibly destroyed by the Ahom kings.<sup>141</sup> However this view lacks authentic evidence to support it. On the other hand, a near possibility was that many Bodo-Kachari kings since ancient times might have converted to the Hindu religion. Undoubtedly, the name of ruling dynasty was sanskritised like Danav, Asur and Varman etc., for instance Mahiranga Danav, Bhaskar Varman and Naraka Asur. Subsequently, Bodo rulers inclined towards Hindu culture that resulted in the loss of royal patronage to their own language.

It has come to light that from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards the Bodo rulers gave patronage to Assamese language. It was in the same century Hem Saraswati translated the Bhagavata Purana into Assamese Verse under the support of the then Bodo ruler.<sup>142</sup> In 14<sup>th</sup> century the Kachari king Mahamanikya had patronized Madhava

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<sup>139</sup> Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India*, (Gauhati University: Publication Department, 1991), p. 41.

<sup>140</sup> Mohini Mohan Brahma, *Folk-Songs of the Bodos*, (Gauhati University: Publication Department, 1960), p.8.

<sup>141</sup> Madhu Ram Baro, *Assamese and Boro; A Comparative and Contrastive Study*, (Guwahati: N.L. Publication, 2012), pp.12-13.

<sup>142</sup> Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India*, (GU: Publication Department, 1991), p. 65.

Kandali to translate the epic Ramayana into Assamese language from Sanskrit.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, Chandra Prabha, spouse of Kachari king Tamradhwaj Narayan appointed the court poet Bhubaneswar Bachaspati to translate the Naradiya Kathamrita into Assamese.<sup>144</sup> This trend makes it clear that the then Bodo kings were inclined towards Assamese literature sidelining their own language. I opine that this is one of the major factors for the Bodo language to remain as oral literature till the establishment of British rule.

### **Beginning of Documentation**

Now with the establishment of British rule in Assam, Bodo folk came under the purview of the colonial administration. Subsequently a number of colonial officers, administrators, philanthropists and missionaries arrived in the region. Along with administrative responsibilities and missionary activities, they took interest to write in Bodo language. Former president of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Moniram Mochahari consider their work as the harbingers of the written Bodo language.<sup>145</sup> Establishment of Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 made an important contribution in promoting writings among various tribal communities.<sup>146</sup> They also took interest in the Bodo language which was up to then in oral form and tried to put it into written form. In fact for the first time they had introduced a system of writing among the non-literate Bodo people. It was the colonial period that provided an impetus to construct and understand the history of Bodo community. It was these initiatives and events that became the basis for the preservation of Bodo language and identity.

A. Campbell was the first British officer to write about the Bodos. His work - 'Note on the Mechis, together with a Small Vocabulary

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<sup>143</sup> G.C. Goswami, Structure of Assamese, (GU: Publication Department, 1982), p. 19.

<sup>144</sup> Mohini Mohan Brahma, Folk-Songs of the Bodos, (Gauhati University: Publication Department, 1960), p.9.

<sup>145</sup> Moniram Mochahari, Presidential Address, 33<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (Guwahati: Published by BSS, March 6, 1994), p.1.

<sup>146</sup> S.B. Chakrabarti, "Tribal Studies by the Missionaries in Pre-Independence India: PO Bodding Re-Visited", Ed. in Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, 2015, p. 81.

of the Language' published in 1839 that studied the Mech people. The Mech are the Bodo people inhabiting North Bengal, Nepal and adjoining areas. Presumably this name was derived from the river Mechi. B.H Hodson (Bryan Houghton Hodgson) the then Bengal Civil Servant (BCS) who was posted as the British Minister in Nepal is also widely accepted for being the key contributor to Bodo language. He made a short analysis on Bodo language and its grammar in the treatise "Miscellaneous Essays Relating to Indian Subject" published in the journal of Royal Asiatic Society in 1846. In this work, the Koch, Bodo and Dhimal tribes were studied. His monumental work on "Essay the First; On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes" in 1847 deals with the vocabulary, grammar, location and customs etc. of these groups of people.<sup>147</sup>

Further, J.D. Anderson in 1895, the then Deputy Commissioner of Darrang district published his collection "A Collection of Kachari Folk-tales and Rhymes", consisting of 14 folk-tales, proverbs and songs.<sup>148</sup> His work primarily preserved the pre-colonial traditional Bodo tales, proverb and songs. Then Edward Albert Gait (E.A. Gait) is known widely for his publication 'A History of Assam' in 1906. In this book he discusses the history of Assam from the pre-historic period to the British rule. In fact for the first time he located the name, origin and geographical distribution of the Bodos in ancient Assam. This became a document on the history of the Bodos, and for the Bodos it became a source of arguments to define their identity from the ancient period. Another authentic understanding on the Bodo language comes from the work of George Abraham Grierson. His work 'Linguistic Survey of India' Vol. I (Part-I) and Vol. III (Part-III) provided immense information about the study of Bodo linguistic group. With this publication the unwritten Bodo language became a subject for scientific study.

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<sup>147</sup> Bryan Houghton Hodgson, *Essay the First; On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, (Calcutta: J. Thomas Baptist Mission Press, 1847).

<sup>148</sup> Riju Kumar Brahma, *Boro Thunlaini Jarimin arw Thunlai Bijirnai*, (Kokrajhar: Onsumoi Library, 2007), p. 49.



As a result of British rule in Assam a bulk of the Christian missionaries came into contact with Bodo-speaking areas in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These missionaries, along with the preaching of their gospel, undertook to write and publish documents in Bodo language which included grammar, translation of religious scripture, songs, tales and rhymes. Among them Sidney Endle was the first missionary to work in the Kachari areas of Darrang and wrote “An Outline Grammar of the Kachari” in 1884. He also published “Manual of the Kachari Language” in 1884 and in 1905 ‘A Kachari Primer’ was published by the Assam government. “The Kachari” published posthumously in 1911 at London is an important monograph which narrated the origin of the Bodo-Kacharis and their social history.

Further, the name of Lars Olsen Skrefsrud (O.L. Skrefsrud 1840-1910), a Norwegian, in the year 1889, had written “The Mech Grammar with Vocabulary” based on the dialect as spoken in the then Goalpara district.<sup>149</sup> He detailed and explained the Bodo grammar and phonology. In 1904 A. Christiansen also compiled “Grammar and Dictionary of Kachari language”.

It is important to note however, that scholars argue that their work is not based on modern linguistic method. What defect they found is that the foreign writers generally view the Bodo language structure from the European and Indo-Aryan language orientation.<sup>150</sup> It is believed that preparation of grammar rules of the Indo Aryan language group cannot be used in Bodo language grammar that belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group. Whatever the outcome of this kind of debate, publications of Bodo grammar by the missionaries served as groundwork for the development of the Bodo language as it is found today. Moreover, comparative study of the vocabulary of other cognate Bodo groups i.e. Bodo, Dimasa,

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<sup>149</sup> Rev. Nityananda Borgooary, “Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church; Boro Girjapwri Sungdo Jarimin”, Ed. in Souvenir ‘Dempho’, (Kokrajhar: Published by Gaurang Boro Bible School, 2010), p. 50.

<sup>150</sup> Madhu Ram Boro, *The Historical Development of Boro Language*, (Guwahati: N.L. Publication, 2007), pp.21-22.

Mech, Garo and Kok-Borok is the foundation of Bodo group linguistic identity. Based on this argument, the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha took place in 1952 to bring together the cognate Bodo groups into a common platform.

Translation works of the missionaries to spread the gospel of the Christians like Bech Told, translated the New Testament of the Bible into Bodo language known as 'Gwdan Rodai' in 1905, 'Onnaini Kourang' in 1938 (The Message of Love) and 'Gwdan Rodai' in 1939. As is shown above, we observed a number of translation work into Bodo language from the Bible. Undoubtedly, it enlarged horizon of the Bodo vocabulary and its documentation.

### **Bodo School Text Book**

In the Colonial period the development of Bodo language and literature was enriched by text books publication for the school education. Initial steps in school education were started by Christian missionaries for Bodo children. American Baptist Mission was the torch bearer for the establishment of institutions to impart Kachari children.<sup>151</sup> The name of Sidney Endle who headed the Kachari Mission in Darrang district contributed for promoting school education among the Kachari children. First Bodo medium L.P. school at Bengbari was founded by Sidney Endle in 1865. This genuine interest of Endle towards Bodo language and the desire to impart formal education to the Kachari that led to the publication of an "Outline Grammar of the Kachari (Bara)" in 1884. O.L. Skrefsrud wrote text books in Bodo language like "Boroni Foraigna Bijab", "Boroni Forajennai Bijab", "Gothoni Lekha", and "Lutherni Undwi Foraigna Bijab" and these books were used in schools from the year 1888. Missionary Bech Told also published "Baibelni Makase Gaham Kourang" in 1905 and taught Bodo children of North-Bengal. A.Christiansen, a Danish missionary

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<sup>151</sup> B.K. Bhandary, "Kacharis", in Tribes of India, ed. A.V. Thakkar, (Delhi: Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh, 1950), p.13.

published “Forai Jennai Bijab” and “Boroni Sannai Bijab” in 1930<sup>152</sup> and started to teach it at mission stations.

However teaching of Bodo children through these text books written by Christian missionaries were within the four wall of the church. However in spite of limited scope to use for the Bodo children inclusively, the publication of text books was an important contribution towards the preservation of Bodo vocabulary. On the other hand ‘Cachari Reader’ of 1904 was published by the Government of Assam for teaching Bodo children. This text book was used to impart Bodo children in primary schools of Assam from 1904 to 1963.

### **Inception of Writings among the Bodos**

It was during the colonial period, that the Bodo people became awakened to the preservation of their language and identity. They started the publication work with a humble beginning which I wish to discuss below in a chronological manner. The literate Bodos who settled in the then Goalpara district started to document their language and culture. In 1915, as a first initiative, the Bodo people of south bank of the river Brahmaputra took a critical step to codify their customary laws in the form of social rules called ‘Boroni Phisa O Ayen’ (Bodo Fellows and their laws). It took the role of documentation of Bodo social laws at that time, although in poetical form. This code became a source of information on customary law of the Bodo society. Between the years 1917-1920, Prafulla Khaklouary wrote and produced ‘Boroni Khemta’ in 1917.

Following the initiative of south bank, the Bodo people of north-bank of the Brahmaputra also took steps to work on their language. ‘Khonthai Methai’ was the first of its kind, written by Rupnath Brahma and Modaram Brahma in 1923. This publication prepared a road for future development of Bodo literature. Then the first Bodo magazine “Bibar” (Flower) was edited by Satish Chandra Basumatary and came in 1920 as a wall magazine. From 1924, it was

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<sup>152</sup> Riju Kumar Brahma, *Op.cit.* p. 54.

published as a quarterly in tri-lingual i.e. Bodo, Assamese and Bengali. Publication of Bibar magazine is the torch bearer of modern Bodo literature. It aroused enthusiasm among the writers to create poetry, prose, story and drama. In fact the Bodo scholars periodised the time of this publication as “Bibar Muga” (Flower Age) which started from 1920 to 1937.

Another veteran Bodo writer since the colonial period was Promod Chandra Brahma who edited and published famous poem Hathorki-Hala in 1924. Prasanna Khakhary published his anthology of poems known as Baisaguni Gidu in 1925. “Jenthoka” a famous magazine was edited by Satish Chandra Basumatary and published by manager of the Boro Hostel, Dhubri in 1925. Promod Chandra Brahma edited “Bodosa Bithorai” a Bodo magazine published in 1932. He also edited “Sanshri Arw Mushri” magazine in Boro, Assamese and Bangla language in 1937.<sup>153</sup> This magazine highlighted the education scenario, population and economic conditions of the Bodos of that period. In 1938 Promod Chandra Brahma also edited the magazine “Olongbar” (Name of a star). It expanded the Bodo literature tremendously. Bodo scholars interpreted that in this magazine the thought of Bodo writers was influenced by Romanticism of western literature. The spread of romantic notion in Bodo magazine became an impetus for awakening of a rising national sentiment among them. For the important role that this period plays in Bodo literature, this awakening period between 1930-31 and 1950-55 is regarded as the “Olongbar Age”.

In the year 1943 the All Assam Progressive Kachari Sanmilan published a bilingual magazine “Nayak” in Bodo and Assamese language under the editorship of Mohini Mahan Brahma till 1947.<sup>154</sup> In the post-independence period the Bodo literature continued to grow. ‘Okhaphor’ in 1954 was the famous magazine published by the Bodo students studying in Cotton College edited by Ranendra

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<sup>153</sup>     ibid: 63.

<sup>154</sup>     The Bodo, 26<sup>th</sup> Issue, (Kokrajhar: Published by BSS, 2001), p.88.

Narayan Basumatary. It inspired the young generations of Bodo society to write poems, short-story and essays. In the post ‘Okhaphor’ era, there were a number of journals published on different occasions to fulfill the aspiration of the Bodo people.

It is important to also point out that in the Colonial period the writing on Bodo language was also enriched by the advent of religious literature on the Bathou religion. The original religion of the Bodos is the Bathou religion, and its philosophy, principle, teaching and rituals have been handed down from generation to generation in the spoken form. Prasanna Kumar Khaklouary of Goalpara district was the leading person in this direction. For the first time he wrote “Bathou Bisoi”, “Ahom Boroni Daoha” and “Bathou Nam Baisaguni Gidu” (1920) as per the rituals followed by Boro people of South Bank.<sup>155</sup> In 1925, Modaram Brahma composed the “Boroni Gudi Sibsa arw Aroj” (Principal concept of the Bodo’s Faith and Hymns).<sup>156</sup> He adopted the term “Sibsa” from the word ‘Sibsrang’ which means to cleanse a place. The book contains the mystery of creation, the theme and philosophy of the Bathou religion, prayers, myths and beliefs among the Bodos. On the other hand with the spread of Brahma religion Junior Kalicharan Brahma wrote ‘Khamani Nem’ in 1942 a treatise on religious rituals to be observed in everyday life of the followers of the Brahma faith.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Despite critical criticism on the colonial epoch, it is an historic era for the Bodo language and literature. Whatever, the interest of colonial writers and scholars, it serves as a roadmap for Bodo people and those interested to understand the history of this community. It also enriched and became a store house of ancient Bodo vocabulary. In fact the emergence of written tradition in the Bodo language is regarded as the foundation of the Bodo language

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<sup>155</sup> Monoranjon Lahary, Boro Thunlaini Jarimin, (Kokrajhar: Onsumoi Library, 2008), pp.58-59.

<sup>156</sup> The Bodo, 26<sup>th</sup> Issue, (Kokrajhar: Published by BSS, 2001), p.87.

identity in the literary world. This is the beginning of the permanent establishment of the Bodo language identity. Establishment of modern education system made an unprecedented impact on Bodo literacy, the first outcome being the documentations of their social system and culture. Young educated Bodo made a promising contribution to their community by publishing journals. Gradually, it is their writings that founded and raised the Bodo literature where it stands today. Subsequently, it established its identity in the region as a medium of instruction and is imparted up to the University level at present. At the national level this language is included in the 8<sup>th</sup> Schedule of India constitution and recognised by Sahitya Academi of India. Hence from its state of near non-existence in the colonial era, the Bodo language emerged as a strong medium to protect the identity of the community which is a source of the passion of Bodo movements.

# The Khadiyas: Language, Meaning Making and Cultural Expressions

Eugene Soreng

## Framing the Context

The Khadiyas are predominately found in the Chotanagpur plateau of India and are often regarded as one of the minor tribe of the region due to their small population size. About the khadiyas, there are broadly two authors who have written extensively on their history and cultural practices. They are Dungdung.J and Kullu.P. The author Dungdung in his book '*Khadiya Jeewanaur Paramparaye*' talks about the history of khadiyas, focusing on their folklore as a way of tracing their history. The book also focuses on the cultural practice of the Khadiyas and presents many songs traditionally sung by the community.<sup>157</sup>

Kullu in his book '*Khadiya Dharma ur Sanskritika Vishleshan*' talks about the history of Khadiya tracing its source form the songs and folklore of the community. These songs narrated the origin of Humankind according to Khadiya belief system and also mentions about their belief in one God but many spirits. The author also engages with social structure, songs and dance of the Khadiya tribe.<sup>158</sup>

There are other literary works produced to understand the Khadiyas, but an in-depth engagement with cultural processes seems missing. This is most likely because of the inability of scholars to study processes from within the community as it is expressed and articulated. The earlier literature available on Khadiyas is mostly on data pertaining to what culture is, relying

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<sup>157</sup> Dungdung (1999) *Khadiya Jeewanaur Paramparaye* Ranchi: Catholic Press.

<sup>158</sup> P. Kullu, *Khadiya Dharam Aur Sanskriti Ka Vishleshan* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Ranchi: Catholic Press, 2000)

heavily on comparisons and a comparative framework. This chapter attempts to engage with the 'lived' grounded in 'perspectives from within'.<sup>159</sup>

Khadiyas have a distinctive culture, world view, belief system, tradition, rituals and perspective towards life. They are mostly found in Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Assam, and West Bengal. Khadiyas are considered as a minor tribe in Chotanagpur region. They speak khadiya language which comes under the Austro Asiatic language group, a bit similar to Mundari language. They have distinctive tradition and their historical narratives are mostly oral. Oral tradition has helped them to sustain their historical journey, their tales and memories of life. Khadiyas do not have a script of their own and hence their history is not written. In contemporary times Roman and Devanagari scripts are used to document the data available. Since the histories are preserved through oral tradition many of the histories seems confusing and less evidential. The data presented here are the outcome of in-depth interviews taken from the people who knew their traditions, histories, and the meaning of cultural expression.

### **History of the Khadiya Tribe**

As mentioned earlier, the Khadiyas do not have a script, so the history is being orally narrated in every *lota dab* i.e. engagement ceremony. It's been many years since Khadiya history is being narrated and we see that many of alterations have taken place especially in relation to chronological data on settlement in various places. The history of the Khadiya community is also observed noted in various songs and narratives, where they talk about the places they had settled and the memorable events they went through. The beautiful narration of sorrow and happy moments are mentioned, remembered and passed on from one generation to another. There are two different versions of the origin of the

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<sup>159</sup> As formulated by the Tribal Intellectual Collective India. Please see the earlier two Volumes of TAS edited by Alex Akhup and bodhi s.r published by adivaani. Also see TICI Volume – The Problematics of Tribal Integration edited by bodhi sr. and bipin jojo published by The Shared Mirror.



Khadiyas.

One story relates to the Khadiya people entering the area of India from the region of Khyber Pass. The other story believes that the Khadiyas entered India from Burma, Rangoon. This comes from the song which mentions '*railong kinir*' (Rangoon Forest), *loreng Biru* (White Mountain). The people of the community say that the Khadiya people have less hair on face and have few Mongoloid features, and hence argue that the Khadiya may be one of the mongoloid tribe who moved towards its current habitat.

### Song narrating the travel in the mountain of Tibet

#### In Khadiya

Tibet Biru Debna Debna  
Bah: Rumkup Roh: Ki, Bah: Rumkup  
Roh:ki  
Ayebaar Se Kimin Ki Rayebaar  
Kayebar, Aahbar Ga Melaye  
Baa Rumkum Raina Raina  
Tih: Kata Loyoki Tih: Kata Loyo Ki  
Ayebaar Se Kimin Ki Rayebaar  
Kayebar, Aahbar Ga Melaye.

#### In English

While climbing the mountain of Tibet  
Rice and grain fell down.  
Oh dear daughter in-laws please help in  
picking  
Keep picking do not leave it fallen.  
While picking the rice and grains  
Hands and legs have become stiff  
Oh dear daughter in-laws please help in  
picking  
Keep picking do not leave it fallen.

The narration states that the Khadiyas came through Tibet to India. In India they entered Kashmir where they found '*Loreng Biru*' i.e. White Mountains covered with snow probably '*Hindung Biru*' (Himalaya). Then they moved down crossing the dense forest to *Kullu* where they found many turtles in those areas and as *Kullu* means turtle in Khadiya. After spending time in those areas they moved west towards the Indus River. On reaching it they moved west along the river bank till they got seas and felt that they were safe. Returning a bit back near the areas of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa they settled there as they found this area to be good and safe.

Khadiyas were settled in Mohenjo-Daro for many long years until Aryan Invasion. It is said that they developed their civilization and culture in these years. Aryan invasion created havoc in the khadiya history as it is believed that many people including women and

children were killed, while a few of them managed to escape. From there they moved into modern India near ‘*Deldapur*’ which is current-day Delhi. From there they moved towards Ajod-dah: which is current Ayodhya. Ajod-dah in Khadiya means drying of water, *Moingga-dadom* (Mohenjodaro) means one offered sacrifice and Haharappa (Harappa) means in chaos.

Kadiyas from Harrapa and Mohenjodaro moved towards *Deldapur*.<sup>160</sup> After being there they moved to *Ajod-dah*,<sup>161</sup> and then towards *Pabtopur*.<sup>162</sup> There they were settled for many years there, later with the help of *Vaishali* cow they crossed the river Ganga. This is the reason Khadiyas do not eat beef as a mark of respect towards Vaishali cow. Khadiya then moved down to Gumla district of current Jharkhand and they built their fort named Navratangarh. After the Islamic invasion they had to leave Navrathangarh and were scattered in various regions of Gumla district. Currently Khadiyas are found in Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya-Pradesh and West Bengal. Few of the Khadiyas from *Ajod dah*: moved down nearing Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and finally to Odisha. These were known as *pahadi* Khadiya or hill Khadiya, who at present do not speak khadiya language as their language is mixed with Aryan language.

### **Belief System / World View**

Khadiyas were settled in Chotanagpur for many years, co-existing with many other tribes. Hence we observe many similarities between their world view and belief system with other tribes. Chotanagpur is a plateau filled with dense forest, rocky mountain and beautiful rivers. Most of the belief system revolves around nature and the environment with which chotanagpur comprises. Currently many of the tribal people have changed their faith, adopting other religions.

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<sup>160</sup> Modern day Delhi.

<sup>161</sup> Modern day Ayodhya. The word Ajod dah: means the drying of water. Or the place where the water dried up.

<sup>162</sup> Modern day Patna.

## **Khadiya Origin Story**

In Khadiya narrative, it is said that in the beginning the world was covered with water. Once a crab started gathering sand and making a pillar like structure out of it. When the pillar like structure was built, the crab sat on top of it and started basking. Few moments later there came a person who took the sand and played with it making statue out of it, probably it is believed that the person was 'God'. Every day 'God' used to make two statues, but before drying a horse would come several times and destroy the statue which 'God' made. Now the crab was happy to get a person / God and the process of collecting sand continued till it became a huge island. 'God' was irritated by the act of the horse and gave the statues life when they were still not dried and both the statues became living beings, from which one was man and the other was women and both of them started living in the island. This origin story of creation of humans is one.

The other narrative states that 'God' made a statue of man and women and kept them under the banyan tree. When the milk of the banyan tree fell on the statues, they were turned into living man and women. The humans started having vegetarian food such as leaves, flower, fruit and roots but later when there was lack of food, men and women cried for more food, so 'God' brought a huge storm where the leaves rose up in the sky and they turned into birds. Gradually other animals and creatures were created.

## **Destruction of Humans**

In the Khadiya belief system, humans were destroyed twice in the history, once by flood and the other time by fire and rain. Due to some reason people started cutting many trees and this became the main reason why 'Creator' became angry with humans and decided to destroy humankind. To destroy humankind, the 'Creator' sent heavy rainfall. While birds flew away, the humans drowned and died. Few clever people however climbed the mountain and were saved. Those who were saved later took forward humankind and procreated new generations.

Later after many years humans again displeased the ‘Creator’, and furious with their behaviour, the ‘Creator’ sent fire rain with the objective to completely destroy humankind. Everyone died except a brother and a sister who went toward heavily swampy area and were saved. It is believed that the Underground King *Sambhoo* and queen *Dakai* rani took them under earth and saved them from fire. Some of the stories believed that these two brothers and sisters were only King *Sambhoo* and Queen *Dakai*. When the ‘Creator’ found the two brothers and sisters and asked about them, the king and queen were not ready to leave them as they said that the ‘Creator’ didn’t take care of the humans. At the end there was a deal made by the ‘Creator’ and the king and queen i.e. the possession on Humans of King and queen would be on seven parts of the body, but the ‘Creator’ was allowed to possess only one part i.e. the spirit. So that is how the creator God has control over the human’s spirit.

### **Culture and Meaning: Unraveling Realities**

The notion of culture is understood as referring to belief system, world view and practices which has withstood the test of time. Culture exemplifies the essence and the way of life of a community as it reveals their reality. Hence it becomes important to understand the meaning of culture and cultural expression in order to unravel the essence of a community. This section discusses various cultural practices of the Khadiyas within the framework of meaning making and cultural expression. It looks at few songs and narratives, analysing the same to understand the notion of ‘meaning’ as understood in Khadiya community.

### **Singing**

Music according to Khadiya is not differentiated with song and dance but is a collective process of singing and dancing together. It is part of a celebration. Music is an expression of happiness and exhibits the sharing of happiness as a collective expression. Music is also a medium of entertainment in Khadiya community. Throughout the day men and women toil in the field and by evening, they would join hands to share their experiences and

express their emotions through music and dance with and within the collective. The presence of music is mostly seen in religious ceremony such as *Chatti*, *Lotta Dab*: and Marriage. Music is also exhibited during get-together, be it family gathering or village level gathering. There are different types of elements found in music. Below I discuss some of them.

### ***Aalong (Song) and Durang***

The word '*aalong*' means 'song' and '*Durang*' usually means songs without musical instruments. The selection *aalong* and *durang* are related to mood and situation. *Aalong* is usually sung with the musical instrument which is accompanied by dancing. It is important to understand the time of *aalong*. *Aalong* are sung rejoicing the moment collectively accompanied by collective dancing. *Aalong* are not sung alone but it is done as part of the collective happiness of the community. This is what is expressed in the *aalong*.

It is also important to understand the essence of *durang* and the moments when *durangs* are sung. *Durang* are much slower in tempo than *aalong* and are symbolical representation of a deeper philosophical understanding of the moment, reality, world view, history, and narratives of the people. Usually, there are two groups of people singing the *during* as it consists of two parts: the introduction and the conclusion. Mostly the introduction would raise questions of social realities and the conclusion would focus on the answers to the question.

**Here are some instances of few *aalongs* and *durangs*:**

**(i) In Khadiya**

Eenaroo Delkim Jiyoom...  
Enaro Delkim Re  
Duniyate Kosu Raanga  
Betod Sahena Delkim.  
Delkim Re  
Duniyate Kosu Raanga  
Betod Sahena Delkim  
Bidlote Baki Nyokho  
Lewa Ko Sewa Lamo  
Eenaroo Delkim Jiyoom...  
Duniya Te Kosu Raanga.  
Betod Sahena Delkim.  
Delkim

**In English**

Oh Life Why did you come,  
What is the reason for your coming,  
In this earth, to suffer pain  
Hunger and thirst?  
You came in this earth to suffer  
Pain  
Hunger and thirst?  
The pest ate the paddy  
The crop needs lots of care  
Oh life why did you come to this  
earth?

This song is existential in nature and asks the meaning of life on this earth. Suffering is a phenomenon which seems never ending to humankind. People get ill and falls sick, the paddy despite of so much care yet the pest are successful in damaging them. The pain is everywhere, in family relationship, in livelihood, in building a proper habitat, in caring of child or may it be the seasonal destruction. It seems suffering is synonym with the idea of life. Is this the purpose of life, to have suffering? What exactly is the purpose of life on this earth? These kind of existentialist questions show the collective search of the Khadiyas in understanding the meaning of life.

**(ii) In Khadiya**

Koley Lekhe AaokimRe Jiyom  
Lokha Ya Pinjirate Lisoy Losoy  
Bulina Lakim Re Jiyom  
Aleysere Jiyom  
Goinaya Dino Damna Tere Re  
Ayo Abba Te  
Bhaya Bahin Te  
Jhadi Lebutega Melaituyem Re  
Jiyom  
Aleysere Jiyom  
Goina Ya Dino Damna Tere Re  
Orej Merom Te  
Hoh No Dura Te  
Dhan Sampati Te Melaituyem Re  
Jiyom.

**In English**

Like a parrot you are, Oh life,  
Moving in the cage of this clay  
Of Life you are.  
Wait, Oh life  
When the day of death will come  
Leaving behind parents  
And all the people you will depart,  
Oh life.  
Wait, oh life  
When the day of death will come  
You will leave behind your all  
cattle and go.

This song draws a similarity between a parrot's life in a cage and the life of humans. Here the 'cage of clay' for humans refers to the human body. Here we can understand that the Khadiya people are mostly concerned about humanistic values such as love and care which can be retained over time rather than focusing on the material world which can be destroyed at any time. This song helps to understand the world view of the Khadiya community and how they perceive life or the journey of life. They believe that the body is temporary and hence the bodily needs are also secondary. This song personifies life and tells it to wait until the day of death, where it can ponder over the richness of life itself.

**In Khadiya**

Oleysere Maajo  
 Moing Chepud Rumkup  
 Tumba Te Sajaing  
 Ing Ko SereMaajo  
 Raja Ladhoi Chonaing  
 Jeetenai Re Maajo  
 Kundum Nomte Dokonai  
 Rumang Nomte Chumaying  
 Harenai La Maajoi  
 Daso Samudar  
 Bisu Samudarte  
 Mohjhi Samudarte Dubenaing.

**In English**

Get me O mother  
 One fist of rice grain  
 I will keep it in a container.  
 I: O mother  
 Have to go for the fight  
 If I win O mother  
 I will sit on your lap  
 And, will kiss your face  
 And if I lose I will go and drown myself  
 in the sea.

This song is probably believed to be composed during the Second World War when the British Empire took the Khadiya people to the war front. It reveals the small desire expressed by the son to a mother showing the relationship, the closeness between a mother and child. This song also helps to understand how the Khadiyas perceive war. It is believed that the Khadiyas usually do not fight, but in the history of Khadiya, it is stated that the main fight is mentioned to be between Khadiya women and the Muslim. The song also depicts the notion of pride in the Khadiya community as in when the child says 'if he wins he will come rejoiced and kiss his mother' and if he loses he says 'he will prefer to die'. Thus it is observed in this song how fundamental the notion of dignity and pride is a to Khadiya culture.

**In Khadiya**

Rajam Rajham Daa Gimte  
 Bokop Naingte Areta  
 Re Hogahiga Samai Naigko Aareyta  
 Uluinai Jo Panugotki  
 Goneynaing Jo Joromki  
 Re Haire Daya Hoghaiga Ko  
 Samainaingko Areta Re.

**In English**

The drops of rainfall bit by bit  
 Falls from my head  
 Similarly, the time also is falling  
 down  
 My hairs have whitened up  
 All my teeth are also falling  
 O similarly the time is also  
 falling down

This song depicts the importance of time and the ‘meaning’ of time among the Khadiyas. It also shows how people perceive time and relate to human lives. They believed that time is something that constantly passes by and no one has control over it. As time passes the gradual changes in the human body are seen. It seems that time has control over the body but the human, on the other hand, do not have control over time. Time governs the human activities, the changes in bodily metabolism falling of hair, falling of teeth, the wrinkling of the skin, growing poor eyesight, stiffness in the body, and many more. Despite a lot of effort invested by humans, they do not have control over time. Hence, one should not be materialistic but should understand the realm of the reality where humanistic values and ethics dwells.

**In khadiya**

Sochai Se Re Jiyom  
 Gunai Se Re Kaya  
 Jiyomnaing Sengta  
 Kayanaing Lohdogacholta

**In English**

O life: think over it  
 O body think over it  
 The life moves ahead and the body  
 comes later

This song specifically focuses on the event of death. It clearly distinguishes the idea between spirit and body. It shows the Khadiya's belief in the spirit and it states that at the time of death the first thing to liberate is the spirit, as the body goes later to the grave. This song helps to analyze the world view and the belief system of the Khadiya community as it reveals their sense of this separation between body and spirit, and that the spirit is of greater value. The subtle message embedded in this song is that a person



should not be too materialistic in a world where the spirit is of greater value.

**In Khadiya: Jethwari**

Janam Terop Ayao  
 Janam Terop Ayao  
 Janam Terop  
 Janam Terop Re Ayo  
 Janam Terop Ro Melaituyop  
 Ani Chonanaig Dheerom Dheerom  
 Ingtey Buyop Ayo  
 Ingtey Buyop Aba  
 Ingtey Buyop  
 Ingtey Buyop  
 Re Aba Kuda Maso Bung  
 Ingtey Buyop  
 Ani Chonaning Dheerom Dheerom

**In English**

O mother: you gave birth  
 O mother you gave birth  
 You gave birth  
 After giving birth  
 You left me alone  
 Let's all go slow and steadily  
 O father you fostered me  
 O father you fostered me  
 You fostered me  
 Feeding me madua and maso  
 You fostered me  
 Let's all go slow and steadily

This song is sung to the mother noting that it was over nine months that the mother held the baby in her womb. The child and the mother were united as one body and one spirit. But after birth, when the child comes on earth, he/she becomes an independent being in the process of survival. It says ‘O mother by giving birth why did you leave me alone on the planet. You took care of me, even my father took a lot of care and fostered but altogether I have to live my life alone.’ This song depicts the meaning of the individuality but also shows the importance of communitarian life where everyone has to join hands together and help each other in living their life. Human beings have come alone and will go alone but the company of the community, of family, relatives, is indeed essential for survival. This makes life more beautiful and gives deep meaning to live our lives.

**In Khadiya**

Hey Nare Donga Dah  
 Haire Donga Daah  
 Donga Daah Halkaiga Delta  
 Donga Daah Halkaiga Delta  
 Hare Donga Daah  
 Haire Donga Daah Re  
 Donga Daah Halkaiga Delta Re  
 Donga Daah Halkaiga Delta  
 Ani Chonaning Dheerom Dheerom

**In English**

O beautiful boat floating on the water  
 O floating boat  
 The river slowly pushes the boat  
 further  
 The river slowly pushes the boat  
 further  
 Let's go slowly and steadily  
 The boat made of bamboo wood  
 The paddle made of bamboo wood

Kondeng Aa Daruya Donga  
Kondenga Aa Thewa Dang  
Jhora Beta Lere Donga Chalaite  
Ani Chonaning Dheerom Dheerom.

O dear sailor boy steadily move the  
boat ahead  
Let's go slowly and steadily

This song is believed to have been composed when the dam in the river 'Sankh' was built in the process of 'modernization'. There were many villages which came under the water of the dam. This was seen as a chaotic situation. The Khadiyas had to take all their belongings and put it in the boat to travel to another habitat. This song is a beautiful example of the impact of 'modernization' in the life of the Khadiya community. As a tribe, the Khadiyas are believed to have not engaged in revolting and protesting. In history when the non-Khadiyas attacked the Khadiyas, they did not fight back but migrated to another habitable place to live in. A similar situation is seen in this process of 'modernization' as the Khadiyas were adversely affected. The Khadiyas moved on in search of a better place to live in.

#### **In Khadiya**

Konon Konon Kunu Ki  
Odol Saah Kamtemai Eghai Sundar  
Eghai Sundar Re Odol Saah Kamtemai  
Egai Sundar  
Ani Chonaning Dheerom Dheerom.  
Saah Domte Kamtemai  
Dhudu Domte Phekhaitemai Eghai  
Sundar  
Eghai Sundar Re Odol Saah Kamtemai  
Eghai Sundar  
Ani Chonaning Dheerom Dheerom.

#### **In English**

Small little children  
Go together plucking the leafy  
vegetable  
So beautiful is the view, so  
beautiful it is  
Let's all go slowly and steadily  
They pluck the leafy vegetable  
And throw down its branches  
So beautiful is the view, so  
beautiful it is  
Let's all go slowly and steadily

This is a beautiful description of children plucking leafy vegetables. This act of plucking is regarded as one of the beautiful moments in Khadiya life where many people from the village, with a communitarian approach go together for plucking of leaves. These plucked leaves are then distributed in the village. This song is an example of their belief system, their approaches to life and their

feelings towards their community. The tree of leafy vegetables does not belong to a single house but to the whole community.

### **Dance**

It is really interesting to observe the phenomenon of dance in Khadiya community. People come together in a rejoicing mood holding hands with each other and move in a circular direction properly connecting to the beats of the music. It is also interesting to know and understand that there are different forms of dances as per the mood of the season. According to one of the narratives, the evenings in the summer are pleasant and the song and dance forms are known as '*Jethwari*' which are fast in tempo. Mostly the meaning of the song goes on describing the beauty of nature where the music beats and the dance steps are faster than usual bringing a proper harmony between the collective mood of all and the individual mood within. There are other dance forms according to the festivals which are much slower in tempo. Here children, women, men and elderly people can all participate in the dance following the beat of the music collectively.

Below I will discuss the musical instruments used in the process of singing and dancing.

### ***Mandar***

*Mandar* is a cylindrical musical instrument that is hollow from within and covered with dried skin on either side. The covering of *Mandar* is made up of leather strings used to tighten the dried skin. One side is used to create the treble sound and the other side is used to create bass sound. Perfect melodious beats are produced in the harmonious beating of either side.

### ***Dholki***

The construction of *Dholki* is similar to *Mandar*. But the major difference is that *Dholki* is smaller and broader and the body is made of wood wherein the body of *Mandar* is made up of burnt clay. *Dholki* is usually played in unofficial gathering and *Dholki* is restricted to religious ceremonies.

## ***Nagda***

*Nagda* is a semi-conical sized musical instrument whose surface area is much broader than a *Dholki* and the *Mandar*. *Nagda* is usually used to produce bass effect which generates great excitement. *Mandar* is played by hands, *Dholki* played by a thick drum stick, and few thinner drum sticks. But *Nagda* is played using two heavy drum sticks.

### **Reflections on the Role of Song and Dance in Khadiya Society**

For the Khadiyas, music and dance is a way to celebrate community life, it is not to be objectified but celebrated. You will rarely see Khadiyas performing in a stage; the tendency is always to make song and dance a collective process. These songs and dance become an expression of the feelings felt within and hence becomes a proof of the survival or liveliness of Khadiya life. Without songs and dance life becomes dull, still and dead. We know a person is alive when a person expresses himself or herself and here in Khadiya community the expression of survival is seen through dance and music.

If the lyrics of the mentioned songs analyzed properly we understand the worldview, perspective of life, attitude of living of the Khadiya community. Hence we see what is been felt is been expressed through song and dance. We also see the source of these songs which forms the cultural expression are based on lived experiences of the individual and communities. The knowledge produced is through the lived experiences of individual and community and are exhibited in the form of song and dance. It is also seen that the knowledge produced is much more connected to nature and the environment where the community exists. The cosmological, metaphysical and ontological quest of human beings is expressed through the medium of dance and songs. Hence we see that there is a deep relationship between life, lived experiences, knowledge produced, songs and dance. The joy of the rituals and the mood of festivals are expressed via song and dance.

## **A Narrative about Khadiya Women**

Khadiya women have three vertical straight lines tattooed in their forehead. This according to Khadiya is a sign of pride or victory mark of the community. The story goes like this:

Once a women of other community used to come to Khadiya village to deliver container filled with milk. The Muslim king used the women to know the time when they could attack the Khadiya village. It was one of the festivals when the Khadiya people have lots of alcohol and engage in merrymaking. This was regarded as the best time for the Muslims to attack. The Muslims successfully attacked the Khadiya village according to the conspiracy. But they were surprised to see ‘weird dressed people’ ready to fight with them. Three times the Muslims were unsuccessful in defeating the Khadiya people. After the third attempt the ‘weird dressed people’ went to take bath, it was then that the Muslim discovered that they were women and were very ashamed that they were defeated by women. This is the reason we see three vertical lines on the forehead signifying their three victories over the Muslim king.

This is a beautiful example of other interesting factors about Khadiya community. The element of pride is seen depicted from this incident. The Khadiyas are proud of their historical victory. As mentioned earlier the Khadiya people do not engage in war but always moved away from war. But in this case we see the element of women's power which gives a different view of woman in Khadiya society.

## **Concluding Remarks**

I started with an ontological inquiry of what is Khadiya culture and began to closely observe Khadiya culture, both tangible and non-tangible conditions which can be broadly categorized as cultural elements or cultural expressions. The cultural elements consist of the world view of the Khadiyas. It also consists of the language they speak. It is said that a language is people’s particular code, an area where collective identity is experienced. The cultural elements also

comprise of songs and dance, which are the expression of life or the medium of one's expression of a lived experience. Totems are another important cultural element which defines the attitude and the world view of the community.

Rituals contribute greatly to the stability of the Khadiya system as in it is located the essence of Khadiya culture. These rituals consist of certain practices that are regarded by the community as important; hence it is imperative to understand rituals. The belief system also contributes to the cultural elements as it allows us to explore the various elements or realities of culture. Similarly certain practices of the community consist of the cultural elements of the society.

The world view of Khadiya community reveals a deep connection with nature. Khadiya people believe in living their life to the fullest. Sorrow and happiness are the part of life and the individual can turn his/her sorrows into happiness and happiness to sorrow. They believe nature is the biggest gift to humankind but humans do not own the nature, but are instead the protectors of nature. The Khadiyas depend on nature for their survival while also realising the importance of preserving it. Deep respect towards nature is seen embedded in the Khadiya world view. A harmonious symbiotic relationship with nature is witnessed in the worldview of Khadiya community.

The Khadiyas believe in one God expressed in many spirits. They are also seen respecting/worshiping the sun and the moon and their faith in the spirits. All these reveal their embeddedness in a particular cosmology. Nature cannot be differentiated from Khadiya life but these two elements are fundamentally intertwined. Any separation of one from the other will lead to a loss of identity.

Language is the most integral element of the Khadiya culture as it is the binding element that connects people and helps to communicate within the community. The similar types of phonetical sound coming from within bring the essence that they are one community. Language brings the element of oneness, togetherness, and the 'we' feeling desired for a community to cohabitate. Language helps to

express oneself, and the process of expression helps to build trust and faith with other members of the community. Expression is key to social life and language, which is the main medium of collective expression and meaning making, is channelized through varied forms of songs and stories which connects the being of an individual to that of a community. The history of the Khadiya community is closely connected with their language. It is in their language that they preserve their cultural stories and oral histories.

Most of the cultural practices of the Khadiyas seem overtly simple, but for the community it has deep meanings. It is these cultural practices that constitute the glue of their togetherness, the feeling of their oneness and the collective spirit of their temporary existence. These practices are a framework of their social relationships and the premise of their inter-relationships. They tie the community to a world view where the simultaneous process of ‘respect and love for nature’ and ‘life as a celebration’ is the real meaning of their life and being. Most of the activities such as hunting, gathering, agricultural activities, festivals, dancing, and many other cultural practices have arose collectively as part of community living. As can be observed, Khadiya practices operate on communitarian principles.

In conclusion, the identity of Khadiya tribe can be argued to be embodied in nature, articulated more precisely around the notions of ‘jal-jivan-jungal-jameen’ i.e. water-life-forest-land. These interconnected elements of being can hardly be distinguished from the collective Khadiya ‘spirit’ and it is these entire elements together that constitute a Khadiya cosmology and form an identity, the Khadiya identity.

## PART THREE

# Identifying Boro: Repositioning Terminology and Usage

Nironjon Islary

### Introduction

Terminology defines an individual or an ethnic groups' identity. The application of the correct terminology to identify an individual/ethnic/communities' identity is critical. It is perceived that the affinity of language, culture and literature, religion and other customs and traditions augments the regrouping of scattered groups. Identity becomes an identity when it gets accepted by a particular group and also by other groups – self identification and social categorization. Terminologies are used as identity markers and a particular name changes with changing times, spaces, perceptions and aspirations of the people within a political framework.

In this chapter I engage with the terminological shifts, within a spatio-temporal context, of the Boro tribe which was historically lumped into a colonial construct known as the 'Plains Tribes'. I examine how Boro linguistic groups have been identified as 'Bodo' by others (outsiders). I also trace the genesis and development of the Boro language and unravel the intrinsic elements that bound the Boro tribes to accept the identity construct 'Bodo' although the mass Boro population proudly self identify themselves as Boro.

### Bodo Defined

The 'Bodo' is a generic term which was first used by Hodgson,<sup>163</sup> to identify groups of people belonging to the Boro society that were

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<sup>163</sup> Brahma, K, A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos (with special reference to the Bodos of Kokrajhar District) (Calcutta: PunthiPustak, 1992).



numerically and sociologically one of the largest tribes of India's northeast. They (Bodos) are constituted by different groups of people who migrated from a tract of Tibet called 'Bod'. Hence the word 'Bodo' is derived from it. However no concrete historical records or traditional evidence, either written or oral are available or found to support these views. It is only on the basis of similar physical features, appearance, customs and traditions that they are deemed to be identified as a group tracing their roots to the 'Mongoloid' race. They are considered to be the earliest settlers of northeast India and are scattered both in the hills and the plains areas of undivided Assam, Tripura, West Bengal, Nepal and adjoining regions of Bangladesh. Their descendants have also been considered as early settlers in the said regions/areas by local inhabitants. The movement and later habitats of this group are presumed to be specifically from the south-east Tibet via Upper Burma (Myanmar). In due courses of time and space, they had interfaced with other locals and Burmese inhabitants. They intermixed with the new cultures and customs and this became the reason for them to be ascribed as one of the 'cocktail group identities' often called 'Tibeto-Burman' (race) and of Tibeto-Burman origin.<sup>164</sup>

Gradual growth of their population, pressures from new immigrants, interfacing with different regimes on the basis of socio-political, economic and modern social institutions, forced some of them to move further into unoccupied isolated forested and hilly areas. They slowly began to settle in areas such as the Brahmaputra Valley, the North Cachar (both hills and plains) of Assam, Garo Hills of Meghalaya, Tripura (both hills and plains), North West Bengal, South-Eastern part of Nepal and the adjoining foot-hill regions of present day Bangladesh. The rapid transitions facilitated by their intermixing in the socio-cultural, political and economic spheres altered every new generation. They subsequently acquired

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<sup>164</sup> Ajoy Roy (1995) *The Boro Imbroglia*. Spectrum Publication, Guwahati: New Delhi.

variations in their language, custom, culture and even to some extent in their physical features through inter-marriage and close association with other local inhabitants. In the process, this caused a gap in the ethnicity and any close association with their original kinsman. In the course of time and space, they began to acquire separate tribal identities such as Lalungs, Rabhas, Koches and Sonowal Kacharis in the Brahmaputra Valley; Dimasas in North Cachar Hills; Burman in Cachar plains; Tippra in Tripura; Garos in Meghalaya; Hajongs in the adjoining foot-hills of Bangladesh; Meches in Lower Assam, North Bengal and South-Eastern Nepal. These acquired separate identities became new identity constructs that emerged from their now highly differentiated context.<sup>165</sup>

With the rise of the Ahoms, from the Shan race of erstwhile North-West regions of Thailand, into the kingdoms once held by the Bodos the region was snapped bit by bit by the advancing Ahom invaders and in due course lost most of the settled territories. This process carried forth unhindered till the arrival of the British rulers into Assam. With the domination of Ahoms over different Bodo dynastical kingdoms increased, the Bodo kings and some of their associated subjects including warriors, shifted to new territories and discovered new lands to establish their kingdoms. This is the probable reason why one finds the existence of many new Bodo kingdoms which have been found recorded in history.

In order to safeguard and protect their distinct Mongoloid socio-cultural identity within the territorial boundaries they held, Bodos moved from Dimapur to the present Dima Hasao Hill District and Cachar. Intermixing in the process with different ethnicities, they acquired new identity constructs such as Dimasa (for those who lived in Dima Hasao hill district). For those who resided in Cachar district, they began to acquire the suffix 'Kacharis' as an identity. They now are known as Sonowal-Kacharis, Thengal-Kacharis, Tiuwa-Kacharis, Boro-Kacharis, etc., of present-day Assam.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup>     ibid

<sup>166</sup>     C.J. Sonowal, *Quest for Identity, Autonomy and Development among the ethnic Groups of Assam*. In Sonowal, C. J. (ed), *Quest for Identity, Autonomy and*

Common identical name of Bodos further shifted with the coming of the British colonial rulers who divided the Bodos and other ethnic groups on the basis of their place of residence – hills and plains - to identify them into two separate groups as Hill Tribes and Plains Tribes. It is with the advent of colonialism, that the identity of a single Mongoloid racial group including Bodos who reside within the Tibeto-Burman geography, that the construct of hills and plains emerged. The majority Bodo groups were separated from the hills, and they were lumped into a new monolithic colonial constructed group identity called Plains Tribes.<sup>167</sup> The Bodos were termed/ascribed by the colonial construction of ‘Bodo-Kacharis’. Among these groups some of them converted to Hinduism and accepted an alien culture and custom. In due course they gave up their traditional customs and traditions and gradually forgot their Bodo language and became part of a larger Hindu caste based composite Assamese society.

Today these groups have completely forgotten their language and accepted Assamese and to some extent even adopted Bengali language as their mother tongue as observed among the Sonowal-Kacharis, Tengal-Kacharis, Chutiya, Moran, etc. The Boros, Rabhas, Garos and some more groups have retained their original language and culture despite undergoing so much of pressure asserted on them by other social forces. With changing times, context, socio-political and governing patterns the generic term ‘Bodo’ is undergoing changes as observed in relation to the claims of Mech or Mes to use Kachari as their identity.<sup>168</sup> However Boros to use to be called as Kacharis or Meches are now identified as Bodo, though they are linguistically known as Boro.

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Development: The contemporary Trends of ethnic and Tribal Assertion in Assam: Vol 1 (New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2010).

<sup>167</sup> Pathak. S, ‘Tribal Politics in the Assam: 1933-1947,’ Economic & Political Weekly, xlv (10), 2010.

<sup>168</sup> Brahma. K, A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos (with special reference to the Bodos of Kokrajhar District) (Calcutta: PunthiPustak, 1992).

## **Delineation about Boros**

The 'Boro' are known or called as 'Bodo'. The Bodo category is used for political deliberations and has been widely used even in the academic spheres. It has continued to be used by the older generation scholars up until today. It is mostly used to denote the earliest Indo-Mongoloid people who moved and subsequently spread over different parts of north-eastern regions (Bengal, Assam and Tripura) of India.<sup>169</sup> Though they (Boro-Kocharis) are spread over many regions of the above mentioned states, they however are mostly found inhabiting the foothills of the Himalayas in Northern Bengal and Assam. It is this group that have actually retained their Bodo-Kocharis original language even though there has been an intermixing with other linguistic groups.<sup>170</sup>

Though this community once scattered and ruled the entire regions of Assam valley and even some parts of hills under different dynastical names and founded many kingdoms, in due course of time they subsequently were peripheralised by the more powerful and advanced intruders from the South-East Burma, like the Tai Ahom and also from the West Indian states. They were forced out of their own kingdoms and settled mainly in the districts of Kamrup, Goalpara, Darang and Nagaon of the Brahmaputra valley.<sup>171</sup>

In the process of the decades-long Boroland movement, one half of the Boro population was confined in the newly created Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) which comprises of four districts – Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. These were all a single district till they were broken up. A lesser population of Boros lived in outside of the BTAD. They are spread over different districts of

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<sup>169</sup> Choudhury, S, *The Bodos Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority* (Shimla: RashtrapatiNivas, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2013).

<sup>170</sup> Sidney. E, *The Kacharis* (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2010).

<sup>171</sup> Choudhury. S, *The Bodos Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority* (Shimla: RashtrapatiNivas, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2013).

Assam. They speak Boro language and retained nearly most of the tradition and cultures.

Boros have gone through conversion, assimilation and discrimination. This had led to the majority of Boro elites to adhere to their new Hindu faith leaving out the animistic belief (Bathou). A small but significant Boros have also converted to Christianity while some have remained in the original faith of Bathouism. The ideas of the Aryans have penetrated into the minds of Boro elites, but among the ordinary Boro people, they have still retained their old language and culture and have continued to do so right up to the present days.<sup>172</sup>

### **Political Recognition**

The Boros are politically recognised as 'Bodos'. This is the case with how they are recognised in disbursement of state funds like the tribal development funds of centre as well as state. In the pre-independence period, when the Boros were recognised as Boro-Kacharis by the colonial rulers, their representation was taken into consideration to be within the Tribal League domain. The Tribal League was dominated by Boro-Kachari/Boro leaders. In the beginning when Boros sought political recognition, they were entrusted with the platform of the Tribal League during colonial rule. Post-independence, until up to early 1960s, the Boros did not form any political organisation except the literary 'Bodo Sahitya Sabha' (BSS) in 1952. The BSS emerged to work towards the development of language and culture through the production of Boro literature. It was only in 1967, that Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) came into being, primarily to unite all the plains tribals once again, a grouping that was once together in the pro-active Tribal League, to now seek social, political and economic right within Assam. In the PTCA too, participation of Boro leaderships was found very high. As a result the Boros could gain more political attention to their aspiration of a demand for a

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<sup>172</sup> Roy, A, *The Boro Imbroglio* (Guwahati: New Delhi, Spectrum Publication, 1995).

separate 'Udayachal' state for plains tribes. Consequently since 1967 until late 1970s, PTCA became a single political organisation of the Boros.

Lack of commitment to the demand for separate state of Udayachal, instabilities of leadership and feuds among leaders from within led to the collapsed of the PTCA movement. Subsequently, the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) which came into being a few months before PTCA was formed (1967), withdrew their supports. Single-handedly under the leadership of late Upendra Nath Brahma, ABSU launched the Bodoland movement in 1987 that ended with Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) Accord 1993. This accord for the first time gave some political and economic powers to the Boros to govern themselves in the areas that they demographically dominate.

It was a political mark that Bodoland was in the line with the Boro identity. However this recognition was given without clear constitutional safeguard. A few years later the BAC fell apart due to various reasons. The new movement for separate state of Boroland was resumed by the Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT). It undertook the means of militant underground methods for their fight that resulted in a bitter and violent struggle that eventually ended with the Bodoland Territorial Areas' District (BTAD) in short Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Accord in 2003. With this second accord, the Boros gained some constitutional safeguard that lagged since the days of colonialism. Now the Boros are safeguarded by the Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution through which their language, ethnic identity and socio-cultural and political rights are somewhat ensured.

### **Culture and Linguistic Uniqueness**

The Boro culture and language have been the crucial factors of Boros ethnic and identity assertion. Boros are sentimental about their culture and language. They have never failed to acknowledge and assert their culture as different from the Aryanised languages such as Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, etc. The cultural attires of the

Boro women worn during 'Bwisagu' festival, 'Bathou' religion, 'Bagurumba' dance are differently coloured as seen in the 'Dokona and Aronai'. Boros have partially been able to retain their culture and language despite an intense interfaced with external forces that attempted assimilation. With the further growth of educated 'ethnocentric' middle class by late 1950s, Boros subsequently succeeded to put forward their aspiration in seeking to preserve and protect their socio-cultural and linguistic, thereby keeping their identity alive. This accelerated awareness among the Boros about their distinct culture and language saw an upsurge in unity within the community. There were demands of establishing Boro medium primary schools in the Boro villages in 1963. From this initial attempt to institutionalise Boro language, they have gradually been able to extend Boro teaching till post-graduation. Besides these achievements, Boro language has also been recognised as an associate official language of Assam in the year 1985 and is included in the 'Eight Schedule' of Indian Constitution in 2003.

### **Boro Ethnicity**

Boro ethnicity began slowly with the Brahmanism movement headed by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma. Persistent growth of educated middle class quickened the ethnic consciousness among the Boro community. The formation of Boro Satra Sanmilan (Boro student union) in 1920 became a key platform for Boro student activism that led to mass mobilization of the Boro population. This united the middle class educated youths. It helped consolidate other ethnic groups via kinship and/or common ties of the larger Bodo-Kachari stock that collectivised into a single colonial identity construct called 'plains tribes'. This mobilization also included other ethnic groups and together they became a formidable political force. Some common socio-political problems, grievances and interests of the plains tribes helped create the Tribal League in 1933. This platform was envisaged to represent all plains tribes. Persistent demands made through valid reasons helped the League attain four reserved seats in the Assam Provincial Assembly. The elected

members from the reserved seats through Tribal League further negotiated and bargained for socio-cultural rights, political and economic powers as well as forced the Muslim League Ministry to enlist a separate Bodo-Kacharis population in the census of 1941.

This became a benchmark, after which the Boro leaders of the Tribal League joined the Indian National Congress after independent. Some of the contestants got elected and became cabinet ministers. Their presence in the Congress-led Ministry and conviction to uplift and safeguard the interest of Boro community paved the way for Boro leaders to become an indirect political force.

Subsequent growth of educated elite from among the younger generation consolidated the creation of the powerful All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) in 1967. Immediately the ABSU and BSS jointly launched a democratic movement for introduction of Boro language in Roman script in the Boro medium secondary schools in 1968. The state denied the demand. Both ABSU and BSS launched a vigorous script movement between 1974 and 1975, yet the movement was vehemently dismantled by the state in which more than 15 lives of Boros were sacrificed. However, the assertion of Assamese linguistic identity followed by the recognition of Assamese as a lone official language of the state in 1961 monopolised all governmental business along the line of Assamese language. Introduced as a medium of instruction in all educational institutions and authorised to use it as the only means of communication in all the government business transactions, it disregarded the sentiment of Boros and other tribes. This became a vital driving force of Boro assertion for a distinct language to be recognised as an associate official language in the state.

The formation of PTCA motivated the demand for a separate state of Udayachal for plains tribes. PTCA in collaboration of ABSU and BSS launched the movement on the basis of fractional historical evidence, comprising vast geographical areas from the foothills of Bhutan to the Brahmaputra River via extended or common ethnic



groupings. However a rift within the leadership of the PCTA weakened the movement. The ABSU withdrew its supports and prepared the launch of its own Boroland movement. Thus when its wide mobilisations were growing, the All Assam Student Union (AASU) launched their own Assam Movement to detect and deport aliens/foreigners in 1979. It is because of this that ABSU postponed its proposed separate state movement and instead actively supported the AASU. Six years later the Assam movement ended with the Assam accord in 1985. Immediately after the accord, the AASU student activists formed the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), a regional party, contested election and won a significant majority allowing them to form the state government. Based on some clauses of the Assam accord the AGP government began to detect and evict 'foreigners' which resulted in the eviction of some significant Boro families from the forest. This roused the anger of the Boros and in due course became the new ground for Boros resentment against the state.

The ABSU consolidated their demands around historical constituted grievances since independent; the denial of Roman script to be used for Boro language, denial of admission to Boro students in reputed state run colleges and universities, discrimination and exclusion from government jobs, etc. These issues were brought by the ABSU to the Boro public and a mass Boroland movement was launched in 1987, demanding in its stead a separate state of Boroland which ended with Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) accord in 1993. While this movement united the Boro organizations, its intensity led to deaths, displacement, and many atrocities committed on the Boros.

The bitter experiences of this movement became an impetus to redraw the ethnic boundaries based on the historical memories and distanced past around Boro kingdoms. In the meantime a radical secessionist movement - the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) which was initiated in 1986 began to assert more forcefully their demand for a sovereign Boroland, reclaiming their

ancestral lands/territories for self-rule. This group was refashioned and repositioned to bring back the lost Boro nation/kingdom. Another group, the Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) replaced the BAC with Bodoland Territorial Council (2003) and positioned the Boro ethnicity around clear ethnic boundary, with the hope of protecting the identified space and gain political and economic power.

The various movement ranging from those seeking socio-cultural and economic rights, linguistic and cultural identity, script, Udayachal separate state movement, Boroland movement and sovereign Boroland movement have been key to the defining and consolidation of a Boro ethnicity.

### **Contemporary Realities**

The Boro political and ethnic consciousness began with the formation of the Boro Satra Sanmilan meaning Boro Student Union in 1920 which was formed under the leadership of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma. One could argue that the Boros never accepted the category 'Bodos'. Probably the Boro in those times might have had a clear understanding about the difference between the generic Bodo and the specific Boro. The usage of Bodo on behalf of Boro was perhaps rejuvenated with the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) in 1952 whose nomenclature itself seemed to be borrowed from Hodgson's consolidated writing. If at all the BSS stood with an intention to consolidate all sub-tribes of Bodos which were also known as the Bodo-Kacharis, then it would be justified. However the activities and leadership compositions of the BSS over the period explicitly indicates that the usage of generic 'Bodo' category of self-claim literary body for all said sub-tribes has nothing to do with other Bodo groups other than Boros (Boro linguistic group). The demand for the introduction of Bodo medium school which was envisaged as Boro medium, for Boro linguistic group only in their dominated districts' villages does not seem to include other Bodo groups. This demand only encourages Boro writers to Boro literature as was observed from the awareness program about demanding that Roman script be used for Boro

language. These activities clearly revealed that the BSS was conscious about the category Bodo as referring to a generic community. However later we observed the rise of the usage of the category Bodo with the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU), Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT), All Bodo Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF), etc. However, while speaking in a generic all encompassing sense by the usage of the category Bodo, yet the struggle was aimed mostly at Boros only.

Probably it is because of this complex situation of the how the category is positioned that at times we observe that other Bodo sub-tribes such as Rabhas, Garos, Sonowal Kacharis, Deoris, Thengal Kacharis, etc., have distanced themselves from the Boros. They have instead demanded their own autonomous council making an imaginary territorial boundary which enabled the acquisition of a separate identity council such as Sonowal-Kacharis Autonomous Council, Thengal Autonomous Council, Deori Autonomous Council, Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council, etc., these developments has distanced the brotherhood affinity among Bodos further.

Holding on to the generic Bodo category while restricting the movement merely to Boros have also provided scope for the usage of both the category to mean the same thing. Thus there is a misunderstanding of the process within academia, the media and even within the government institutions about these two terms. Even the emerging educated Boro generation has started self identifying themselves to outsiders as Bodo. Nonetheless for those curious enough and have some knowledge about these terminologies will know the differences.

It is important to point out that a huge Boro illiterate populations who do not have much historical knowledge or educations, express their identity as Boro when asked about their identity by outsiders. If at all illiterates can pronounce or tell the genuine identity without friction then why do the Boro elite groups educated intellectuals still continues to write Bodo in place of Boro. It's alright to use Bodo as

usage for political deliberation if at all political leaders find suitable it for governmental scheming for the development funds, but keeping intact the political terminology to identify the identity is vague idea.

### **Concluding Remarks**

No social phenomenon be it nomenclature, identity, culture, language, religion, ethnicity and ethnic boundary and institution is static. Social phenomenon changes because its attributes are variegated<sup>173</sup> at all times. Therefore, ethnic group formation may be with discarding some in-group members to out or regrouping scattered groups into a single group, for certain political interest. This is bound to change the identity, nomenclature and language as well. As discussed, no definitive historical records are found to qualify the identity of Bodos as a generic ethnic group except from a few colonial ethnographers. Thereby in due course of time many new separate identities have emerged out of Bodos. Oral histories of Boros and common mass Boro population who lag outside exposure have a clearer conception of their identity. Thus they proudly acknowledge themselves as Boro when questioned about their identity is asked by outsiders. In this context I am of the opinion that all Boro leaders and intellectuals must re-examine the established usage of the category Bodo on behalf of Boro identity. This will clear the misconception among outsiders to be able to differentiate between the Bodos and Boros and identity of the Boros as original Boro speakers (Boro linguistic group).

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<sup>173</sup> Joseph Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics A Conceptual Framework* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

# The Borderlands: Impact of Geo-Political Location on the Livelihoods of the Rungs

Chinmaya Shah

## Introduction

The chapter is a product of a research which explores the possibilities of how systemic change in livelihood can alter the lifestyle and, simultaneously, the worldview of a community. The Rungs inhabit several high mountain valleys of the Kumaon region, which is one of two former kingdoms and administrative units along with Garhwal in the Indian federal state of Uttarakhand. The valleys around seven rivers namely Bhagirathi, Alaknanda, Dhauliganga, Goriganga, Darma, Kali and Kuti Yankti to the north of Indian central Himalayan region fall between the international frontier of India and Tibet. The area, earlier known as Bhot Pradesh, is now divided into three districts of Chamoli, Uttarkashi and Pithoragarh for purpose of administrative convenience. The people from this community are referred as the Jadhs of Uttarkashi district, the Marchha and the Tolcha in Chamoli district and the Rungs and Shaukas of Pithoragarh district.<sup>174</sup> Jadhs are Buddhists and the Shaukas have a religion that is a mix of Hinduism and Buddhism. The Marchha and the Tolcha are Hindus and subscribe to the caste system. The Marchha and the Tolcha inhabit the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve and share Rajput family names as well. Rajput princes penetrated into the Garhwal Himalayas in the middle ages in an attempt to escape the brutality of the Muslim invaders in the south. The princes' offered locals a status of high caste citizens if they would convert to Hinduism, thus, receiving a Rajput

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<sup>174</sup> Kumar, N. N and Kamlesh. 'The Holy Himalaya: A Geographical Interpretation' New Delhi: Daya Publishing House, (1989).

surname.<sup>175</sup> The word '*Bhot*' means north which is most likely a phonetic derivative of the Sanskrit word '*uttar*' meaning north. The non-'Bhotia' Garhwalis and Kumaonis used the so called word 'Bhotia' for people 'who lived or came from the north', that is, with respect to their own habitat. However, those who were being referred as a 'Bhotia', also, used this word for the Tibetans or Hunias, because they (the Tibetans) also came from the north, so far as the 'Bhotia' habitat was concerned.<sup>176</sup> The inhabitants of the three valleys of Pithoragarh district namely Darma, Vyans and Chaudas collectively identify themselves as a part of Rung community.<sup>177</sup>

The term 'Bhotia', as used in the census, is divided into numerous ethnic-groups all of whose members speak a language specific to themselves.<sup>178</sup> The name, however, is very generic and people resent being referred as a 'Bhotia' and prefer to be known by their indigenous names.<sup>179</sup> 'Rung' for that matter, in Darma valley where this research has been conducted. While people of the seven river valleys do not constitute a single ethnically or linguistically homogeneous tribe, they are, however, not completely isolated from each other. There exists a certain amount of commonality in terms of communication, exchange and transaction in many social-cultural-economic matters that indeed, took place between them in the past. The 'Bhotias' of Uttarakhand are different with those living near the Bhutan border, in parts of Sikkim, and are referred as

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<sup>175</sup> Singh, Ajay. 'History of Garhwal, 1358-1947: An Erstwhile kingdom in the Himalayas', New Delhi: Rawat, (1989).

<sup>176</sup> Chatterjee, B. B. 'The Bhotias of Uttarakhand', India International Centre Quarterly (1976), 3-16.

<sup>177</sup> Singh P.R. 'Sabha' Ritual: Cultural Heritage of Shaukas of Rang Society of Chaudas Valley and its Importance Status', New York Science Journal (2015), 77-81.

<sup>178</sup> Sharma, R.S. 'The Bhotias: The Disruption in Lifestyle of a Nomadic Community in the Indian central Himalayas.' In Nomadic Peoples (1995).

<sup>179</sup> Please see <http://uic.gov.in/Without%20Fear%20or%20Favor/Great%20Tribal%20Diversity%20of%20Uttarakhand.pdf>

‘Bhutias’.<sup>180</sup> The community is primarily Mongoloid in appearance, with occasional Aryan and Aboriginal traits still available where they reside within the Indian state of Uttarakhand, in the frontline areas bordering to Tibet.<sup>181</sup> The presence of this community can be loosely located across different valley systems of Uttarakhand and is mentioned below.<sup>182</sup>

- I. Jadhhs of Jahnavi Ganga, originally belonging to Nelong and Jadung valley, now settled at Bagori on Bhagirathi River.
- II. Marchha and Tolcha of Niti and Mana valley of Dhauli Ganga and Alaknanda River.
- III. Johari Shauka of Johar valley of upper Gori Ganga River.
- IV. Darmani of Darma valley.
- V. Chaudansi of Kali valley.
- VI. Vyansi of upper Kali and Kuti valley.

The chapter is sourced from my research on the ‘Rung community’ of Darma valley, henceforth, I shall refer them as ‘Rung’ or ‘Bhotia’ interchangeably which are both indigenous and administrative term.

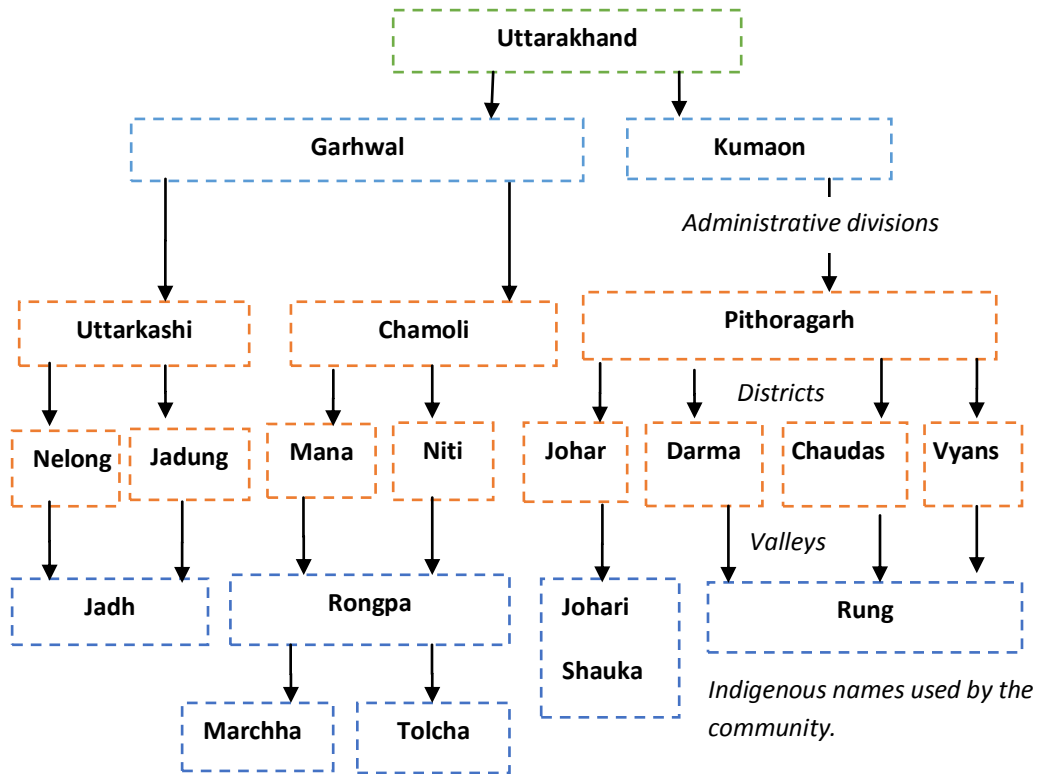
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<sup>180</sup> Chatterjee, B. B. ‘The Bhotias of Uttarakhand’, *India International Centre Quarterly* (1976), 3-16.

<sup>181</sup> Singh, N.C, 2012. ‘Sustaining Life and Livelihood: A Case Study of Askote Conservation Landscape, Central Himalaya.’ *International Journal of Biodiversity and Conservation* (2012), 164-178.

<sup>182</sup> Chatterjee, B. B. ‘Literature on Bhotias of Kumaun-Garhwal and a Bibliography.’ *Indian Anthropologist* (1977), 125-137.

The division of the so called ‘Bhotia’ community at different level is illustrated in fig. below:



*Classification of the community at different levels (compiled by author).*

## Transhumance

The term transhumance stands for pastoral nomadism or a seasonal movement of the community along with their livestock between fixed areas for summer and winter pastures. In the mountainous regions of Uttarakhand, this movement can be seen in every valley system depending on the change of season with people moving from lower valley region to higher during summers and vice versa. The Rung community, for that matter, resides in villages of Darma valley during the summer, rainy and autumn season. With the onset of winter, they move down to low altitude areas like Dharchula. These serve as residential requirement for families belonging to villages usually from the same valley system. However, Dharchula is also a winter dwelling for ‘Bhotias’ from the three river valleys of



the Johar, Chaudans and Vyans *pattis*<sup>183</sup> as well. This transhumance tendency or seasonal migration along a river valley forms the life-line of the community's existence<sup>184</sup>. Transhumance, also, enables community to gather rare Himalayan herbs so that it can be utilized for trading in the summer villages. Specialized high altitude crops are also grown which are adapted to poor soils of the Himalayan region.<sup>185</sup> Bhatt<sup>186</sup> links this to tribal nomadism and posit it performed for cultivation of subsistence agricultural food crops. The tribal community has permanent houses with basic amenities that one would require in both summer and winter villages.

### **Darma Valley: Situating the context**

The valley is located at an altitude between 7000 and 14,000 feet.<sup>187</sup> It is located in the eastern part of the state in the Kumaon division under the Dharchula Tehsil (an administering unit that stands below the district level) in Pithoragarh district. It comprise of 14 settlements which are scattered between altitude of approximately 2250m and 3500 m. These settlements start from lower Darma to upper Darma with villages: Sela, Nangling, Chal, Baling, Dugtu, Saun, Dantu, Baun, Philam, Go, Dhakad, Tidang, Marchha and Sipu. Talla Darma refers to the area below the first summer settlement Sela. There existed a trade route from Darma towards to the Tibetan plateau via Labe Dhura pass whereby markets at Taklakot and Gyanima were major centers.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Sub-division of a block constituting few villages and has a revenue officer called Patwari.

<sup>184</sup> Chatterjee, B. B. 'The Bhotias of Uttarakhand', India International Centre Quarterly (1976), 3-16.

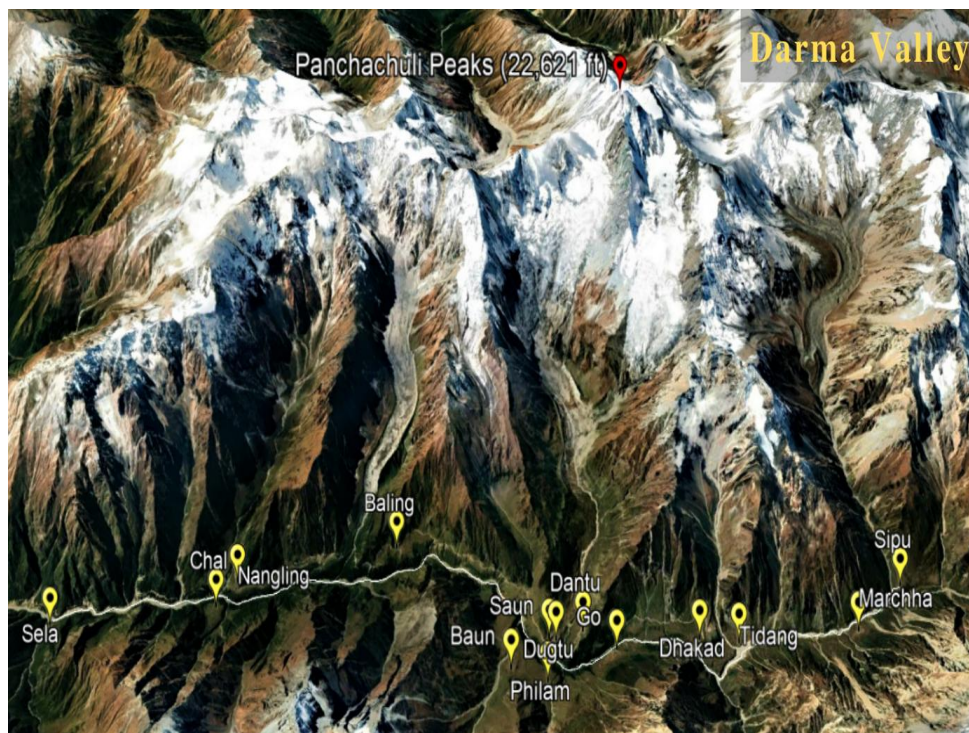
<sup>185</sup> Singh, N.C. 'Sustaining Life and Livelihood: A Case Study of Askote Conservation Landscape, Central Himalaya,' (2012), 164-178.

<sup>186</sup> Bhatt, V.P. 'Ethnobiology of high altitude Himalayan communities in district Chamoli: A conservation perspective.' Zoos' Print Journal (1999).

<sup>187</sup> Garbyal, S.S K. K. Aggarwal, K.K and C. R. Babu, C. 'Return of biodiversity in Darma valley, Dharchula Himalayas, Uttaranchal, North.' Current Science, 88 no. 5 (2005);

<sup>188</sup> Bergmann, Christoph. 'The Himalayan Border Region: Trade, Identity and Mobility in Kumaon, India' (2016).

The nearest town to Darma valley is Dharchula which is separated by its Nepali counterpart Darchula by Dhauli Ganga River.



Representation of Darma valley recreated through Google Earth. (© Vidur Shreshth and Chinmaya Shah)

### **What is Livelihood?**

As human beings moved from being, once, hunter–gatherers toward a more civilized and well behaved manner of interacting with one another, they evolved in an attempt to co-exist with different social groups. In order to adjust to one’s changing environment, securing the basic necessities becomes a question of one’s existence. It is thus important for a person to make optimum use of the resources available in a manner that it is sustainable over a longer time. By this assumption, livelihood can be defined as *‘a set of economic activities involving self-employment and/or wage employment by using one’s endowments (human or material), to generate adequate resources (cash or non-cash), for meeting the requirements of the self and the household, usually carried out repeatedly and as such becomes a way of life.* Ideally, a livelihood can be called sustainable if it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks maintain or enhance an individual’s

capabilities, assets and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation. It should also contribute net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long term.<sup>189</sup> A person's livelihood can be seen in relation to existing material conditions available in one's locality. In the formation of one's sustainable livelihood environment, the location plays a significant role in terms of the availability of material resources and a constant interaction with other members of the community. However, this relation can be put to trouble if there is a disjunction between the above two factors. Latter can be a result of some political, economic, socio-cultural or a geographical event that might eventually affect one's livelihood.

This is, possibly, the 'stress or shocks' that Chambers talked about which can affect the relation and interaction with fellow community members. This change in pattern can trigger larger processes of economic relations for any community. As a result, they might simply opt out of traditional economic relationship and can engage themselves in a new arena of livelihood depending on the availability of resources. However, this shift will simultaneously define and regulate the local structures and social relations. Therefore, these changes can be understood by studying how a community or an individual try to associate with the livelihood and how certain internal and external factors are responsible in determining the dynamics of latter.

### **Livelihood of the Community**

Situated between the famous historical trade route, the Rung community has been a major participant in the entire process. Since ages, salt, wool, wheat, rice, sugar, brassware etc. were primarily used for trade.<sup>190</sup> Rice, sugar, brassware among others were tradable

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<sup>189</sup> Chambers, R. and Conway, G.R. 'Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Practical Concepts for the 21st Century', Institute of Development Studies, (1991).

<sup>190</sup> Sharma, R.S. 'The Bhotias: The Disruption in Lifestyle of a Nomadic Community in the Indian central Himalayas.'(1995).

commodities. Based on excavation, traces of ‘*pipilika gold*<sup>191</sup>’ which was the main source of gold for local items in the Kumaon region, was said to be originated and produced originally from Tibet<sup>192, 193</sup>. From the Indian side, pearls, corals and glass beads were the main exports. The flow of trade and commerce activities were largely dominated by the business communities, thereby, local population comprising of Shah (Sah) and the ‘Bhotias’.<sup>194</sup> For the latter, sheep, goats, jhuppus, mules, horses and Tibetan sheep dogs traditionally used to constitute their wealth.<sup>195</sup> With the arrival of the Britishers, these products became a part of gradually spreading economy of British India<sup>196</sup>. ‘Bhotia’ traders from different valleys would travel further southwards to the ‘*terai*’ and ‘*bhabbar*’<sup>197</sup> to big market towns in the plains like Dehradun, Kotdwar and Tanakpur. These traders

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<sup>191</sup> Literally mean ‘gold dug by ants’.

<sup>192</sup> Atkinson, Edwin Thomas. ‘The Himalayan Districts of the North-Western Provinces.’ (Vols. I, II, and III. (Vols. X, XI, and XII of The Gazetteer N.W.P.). Allahabad: Government Press, 1882, 1884, 1886.

<sup>193</sup> Chandra, Moti. ‘Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India’, (Abhinav Publications), (1977).

<sup>194</sup> Brown, Maheshwar P. Joshi and C. W. ‘Some Dynamics of Indo-Tibetan Trade through Uttarākhaṇḍa (Kumaon-Garhwal), India’, Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, 30, No. 3 (1987), 303-317.

<sup>195</sup> Chatterjee, B. B. ‘The Bhotias of Uttarakhand’, India International Centre Quarterly (1976), 3-16.

<sup>196</sup> Traill, G W as quoted in MacKenzie to Colebrook, 28 August 1818 in Pre- Mutiny Records, Office of the Commissioner of Kumaon, Misc. Letters received 1818, vol. II (U P State Archives, Lucknow, hereafter UPSA, vol. 13); Traill, G W enclosure 13A and 13B in Procs. Board of Revenue, Ceded and Conquered Provinces, 25 July 1817 (UPSA); Traill In Batten, ed. op. cit., p. 33, it is not known with certainty if Indian iron technology had any bearing on borax, but if it could be established, Asoka's set of 14 rock edicts at Kalsi may be cited as evidence of the contact of the local borax traders with the Mauryas (cf. Allechin, F R. in Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol. V pp. 208-209). In any case, Indo- Tibetan trade may be traced to at least the third century B.C. on the basis of the joint testimony of literary and archaeological sources, cf. Charaka Samhita, Chikitsa sthāna, I. 39, ed. by Gangasahaya Pande, Kashi Sanskrit Series No. 194, Benares 1970; Habib, Irfan, op. cit., Traill in Asiatic Researches, XVI (1828) pp. 157, 226 ff. (reprint New Delhi 1980).

<sup>197</sup> Narrow belt of the outer Himalayas.

would have a sizable amount of sheep and goat while yaks or 'jhuppus'<sup>198</sup> were used for transportation.<sup>199</sup>

The Sino-Indian war of 1962 halted this traditional method of livelihood, thereby, impacting two-thirds of the population which was entirely dependent on the income from trans-Himalayan trade. Simultaneously, the transhumant lifestyle of moving from lowlands to highlands along with sheep and goats in order to maintain trade relations was also affected.<sup>200</sup> Large section of professions of the subsistence economy such as sheep rearing, wool industry and crop cultivation were badly disrupted. Closure of borders forced the community to search for an alternative method of livelihood. The community was given a Scheduled Tribe status in 1967. Further, several rural development plans such as school building activities and government buildings, implementation of an enlarged administrative structure in these remote areas was also started by the government.<sup>201</sup> This paved way for newer occupations in which traditional traders, weavers and shepherds took up jobs of daily laborers, local contractors, in government services, agriculture and business. The establishment of Indo-Tibetan Border Police after the 1962 war simultaneously provided jobs in the defense sector.<sup>202</sup> With newer occupations, literacy increased along with level of awareness about education.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Jhuppu is a crossbreed of an Indian Cow and Tibetan Yak. They are not only strenuous for such high altitudes but also have high milk producing capacity.

<sup>199</sup> Kak, Manju. 'Those Who Once Walked Mountains,' *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol.27/28, Vol. 27, no. 4/Vol. 28, no. 1: *The Human Landscape* (Winter 2000/Spring, 2001), 177-192.

<sup>200</sup> Negi, C.S. 'Declining Transhumance and Subtle Changes in Livelihood Patterns and Biodiversity in the Kumaon Himalayas,' *Mountain Research and Development*, 27 no. 2 (2007), 114-118.

<sup>201</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. 'Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaon Himalaya, India.' *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2 (April - June 2012), 91-107.

<sup>202</sup> Sharma, R.S and H.C. 1995. 'The Bhotias: The disruption in lifestyle of a nomadic community in the Indian central Himalayas,' In *Nomadic Peoples* (1995).

<sup>203</sup> Government of India, *Census of India*. New Delhi: Registrar General of India, (2001).

In the meantime, many started collecting rare Himalayan herbs such as Kutki (*Picrorhiza kurrooa*), gandrayan (*Pleurospermum angelicoides*), Dolu (*R. emodi*), Atis (*Aconitum heterophyllum*) and Hathazari or Salam Panja (*Dactylorhiza hatagirea*).<sup>204</sup> However, a caterpillar fungus known as Keeda Jadi (*Cordyceps sinensis*), holding a great economic value to the local inhabitants, topped the collection.<sup>205</sup>

## Yartsa Gumbu

Yartsa Gumbu (*Cordyceps sinensis*) is one of the most famous and perhaps the most expensive insect fungal species in the world found in the Himalayas and the Tibetan plateau. It is the Tibetan name for *O. Sinensis* given by Nyamnyi Dorje (1439–1475) in the 15th century which literally translates to ‘summer grass winter worm’ (Winkler 2008). This Himalayan caterpillar fungus has a high market value, an unusual life history, varying medicinal benefits and is ranked highly valued in traditional Chinese medicinal system. The native occurrence of this fungus is restricted to high Himalayan Mountains of Nepal, Tibet and India at an altitude varying between 3000 m to 5000 m in a cold and arid environment. In the Indian mountain side, it is popularly known as ‘Keeda Jadi’ (insect herb) and in China as ‘Dong Chong Xia Cao’. At present, it is mainly found at higher regions of Uttarakhand in the alpine meadows of Chiplakedar, Darma-Vyans valleys, Nangnidhura and Ralamdhura of Kumaon region and in the Niti-Mana valleys of Garhwal region.<sup>206</sup> The fungus is a parasitic complex formed by a parasitic relationship between the fungus<sup>207, 208</sup>. Largely known as an

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<sup>204</sup> Singh, N.C. ‘Sustaining life and livelihood: A case study of Askote conservation landscape, Central Himalaya,’ (2012), 164–178.

<sup>205</sup> Garbyal, S.S, K. K. Aggarwal, K.K and C. R. Babu, C.R. ‘Return of biodiversity in Darma valley, Dharchula Himalayas, Uttaranchal, North,’ Current Science, 88 no. 5, (2005).

<sup>206</sup> Negi, C S, Koranga, P R and Ghinga, HS. ‘Yar tsa gumba (Cor.sin.) A call for its sustainable exploitation,’ International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology 13 (2006), 1-8.

<sup>207</sup> Winkler, D. ‘Caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) Production and Sustainability on the Tibetan Plateau and in the Himalayas,’ Asian Medicine (2009), 291–316.

aphrodisiac and popularly termed as ‘Himalayan Viagra’, it has been therapeutically used to strengthen lung and kidneys, to increase energy and vitality, stop hemorrhage and decrease phlegm<sup>209</sup>. It has been traditionally used in parts of Nepal and is also present in the traditional Chinese medicine for over 2,000 years<sup>210, 211</sup>.

### Laying the Frame

Geopolitics is the study of the effects of geographical space (human and physical) on international politics and on international relations. It focuses on political power (diplomatic history) in correlation to territorial waters and land territory. Academically, geopolitics tries to engage with history and social science in keeping geography as a backdrop and in relation to politics. For one to understand how the present system of livelihood of the Rung community came into existence, one needs to trace back any events of ‘stress or shocks’ which might have occurred previously.

Trade flourished during pre-British colonial times where latter especially gained by opening of frontiers into the Tibetan highlands. This worked in favor of the community as they were the middlemen and had a direct monopoly, thereby, getting most of the profit from trade. Notably, as the trade was localized, it became a regular source of earning during off seasons. Part of the transport was sold in the market of Dharchula and Bageshwar.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Cannon, P. F, Hywel-Jones, N.L, Maczey, N, Norbu, L, Samdup, T and Lhendup, P. ‘Steps towards sustainable harvest of *Ophiocordyceps sinensis* in Bhutan,’ *Biodiversity Conservation* (2009), 2263– 2281.

<sup>209</sup> Holliday, J., and M. Cleaver. ‘Medicinal value of the caterpillar fungi species of the genus,’ *International Journal of Medical Mushrooms* (2008), 219-234.

<sup>210</sup> Devkota, S. ‘Traditional utilization in Dolpa district, western Nepal,’ *Our nature* (2006), 48-52.

<sup>211</sup> Shrestha, B, Zhang, W, Zhang, Y and Liu, X. ‘What is the Chinese caterpillar fungus *Ophiocordyceps sinensis* (Ophiocordycipitaceae)?’ *Mycology* (2010), 228-236.

<sup>212</sup> Brown, Maheshwar P and Joshi, C. W. ‘Some Dynamics of Indo-Tibetan Trade through Uttarākhaṇḍa (Kumaon-Garhwal), India,’ *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 30, No. 3 (1987), 303-317.

However, the disruption in the first chain of process was witnessed when British military force invaded Tibet to drive back the still assumed Russian influence in the region. An agreement was imposed leading to the sanction of establishing British trade posts at the Tibetan plateau.<sup>213</sup> In the 1920s, as Bergmann argues, led to the gradual restructuring of the Rung trade. Tibetan wool was successfully replaced by imports from Europe and Australia and main commercial route shifted eastwards, linking Sikkim with the coastal areas of India. With countries like India and China getting independence in 1947 and 1949 respectively,<sup>214</sup> the cautious cooperation was held with notions of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism with an idea of self-managed Asia at the centre for both ruling elites.<sup>215</sup> With China's control over Tibet in 1951, negotiations on trade agreement in 1954 called the 'Panch shila' brought disagreements over the common border. Lack of infrastructural provisions and geographical backwardness were, probably, the earliest factors created fertile grounds which impacted the local people.<sup>216</sup>

The Indo- China war of 1962 was the second event in the chain of history which had an impact directly on the community. The thriving trans-Himalayan trade which was a means of sustenance for the local community was lost. At least two-third of the Rung population dependent exclusively on income from trade was badly affected. This further meant that the transhumance lifestyle of moving from lowlands to highlands now required a second thought.

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<sup>213</sup> McKay, A.C. 'The establishment of the British Trade agencies in Tibet: A survey', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, (1992), 399-421.

<sup>214</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. 'Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India,' *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2(April - June 2012), 91-107.

<sup>215</sup> Guha, R. 'The unquiet woods. Ecological Change and peasant resistance in the Himalayas', (1989).

<sup>216</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. 'Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India', *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, no. 2(April - June 2012), 91-107.



No inflow of Tibetan wool and silk eventually led to the decrease in traditional crafts.<sup>217</sup>

With building geopolitical tensions, the Indian State keenly invested in these border areas by extensive military road-building programmes in many Himalayan border valleys of the Kumaon region.<sup>218</sup> The introduction of 'Kumaon and Uttarakhand Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act (KUZA) of 1960 which got completed by 1966, also, had its equal share. The act transferred the ownership for agricultural land to the actual cultivators from the tenants<sup>219</sup>. The Johari Shaukas were the ones who were impacted the most by losing their access to pastures and land in the foothills. The Darma community was less affected as they had developed far less landlord-tenant relations than the Joharis.<sup>220</sup>

The formation of ITBP in 1962, passing of KUZA act of 1967 and recognition of Scheduled Tribe status in the same decade together can be seen as the 3<sup>rd</sup> major event in the process for a gradual decline of traditional livelihood. With ending of Trans- Himalayan trade, new professions emerged, state institutions entered providing formal education, which in turn resulted in fascination for organized service sector jobs leading to migration<sup>221</sup>, <sup>222</sup>. Munsiyari and Dharchula were established as economic and administrative

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<sup>217</sup> Singh, N.C. 'Sustaining life and livelihood: A Case Study of Askote Conservation Landscape, Central Himalaya,' *International Journal of Biodiversity and Conservation*, 1 April, (2012), 164-178.

<sup>218</sup> Nautiyal, S, Rao, K, Saxena, R.K and Maikhuri, K.G. 'Transhumant pastoralism in the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, India. A Case study in the Buffer Zone,' *Mountain Research and Development* (2003) 255-262.

<sup>219</sup> Government of Uttar Pradesh. 'Uttar Pradesh Gazetteer-Pithoragarh district, Pithoragarh', (1967).

<sup>220</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. 'Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India,' *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2(April - June 2012), 91-107.

<sup>221</sup> Rikhari, Subrat Sharma and H.C. 'The Bhotias: The disruption in lifestyle of a nomadic community in the Indian central Himalayas,' In *Nomadic People*, 1995.

<sup>222</sup> Sahani, Ashok Ku. 'Changing socio- economic Scenario among the tribes of Uttarakhand,' 2014.

centers for the new service sector class.<sup>223</sup> Most parts of the Rung valleys remained enclosed under the so-called 'inner line' areas, which had strict regulations for the entry of outsiders, the reason being the issue with Border security.<sup>224</sup> Bergmann (2012) argued that the area formed part of a geopolitical horizon for nation building while the people living near border areas were kept in the peripheries of economic development.<sup>225</sup> The need and, therefore, a gradual rise of a market oriented borderland clearly laid down its fertile grounds.

With this, the 4<sup>th</sup> major event in shaping the livelihood of the Rung community took place when India liberalized its economy in 1991. The trans-Himalayan trade route after 30 years of economic blockade was reopened through Lipulekh pass in 1992.<sup>226</sup> Bergmann argues that the developments on the national scale cannot be ignored while considering regional processes. In this regard, the formation of Uttarakhand after bifurcation from Uttar Pradesh in 2000 is, however, important. Since, this part of, then, U.P was marked with low educational and employment abilities for people even among those who were 'educational unemployed', the government had regularly ignored demands coming from these peripheries<sup>227, 228</sup>. To allocate funds for itself, the Uttarakhand

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<sup>223</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. 'Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India,' *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2 (April - June 2012), 91-107.

<sup>224</sup> The Statesman. 'The inner line legacy: Trend towards isolation,' Newspaper archive maintained by the history department of the South Asia institute, Heidelberg, (1981), 12 28.

<sup>225</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. 'Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India,' *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2 (April - June 2012), 91-107.

<sup>226</sup> The Indian Government was keen to re-open the Lipu Lekh pass, as this allows a selected number of Indian citizens to make a pilgrimage to sacred Mount Kailash in Tibet. Trade, however, plays a rather marginal role so far. In 2006 the China-India friendship year was celebrated and set in scene with the reopening of the Nathu La pass in Sikkim. (M. G. Bergmann 2012).

<sup>227</sup> Rangan, H. 'Of myths and movements: rewriting Chipko into Himalayan history,' 2000.

<sup>228</sup> Jayal, Niraja Gopal. 'Same Wine, Same Bottle, New Label?' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 49 (2000), (Dec. 2-8) 4311-4314.

government established a mountain specific agenda which aimed at attuning market based approaches of development adjusting to local requirements. For this, sectors like medicinal plants, hydro-energy and tourism were targeted as key essentials for development which were promoted through local programs. Moreover, the allocation of funds through 'Border Area Development Program' for the high valleys has been highly profitable. The state has been highly accepting in promoting investments in infrastructure, education and agriculture<sup>229, 230</sup>. There have been ambitious plans to integrate uppermost settlements of Gori and Darma valley with the state's road network<sup>231, 232, 233</sup>. As Bergmann (2012) argued that for the localities, these projects have become highly disputed due to various ideas of how the region should be developed.<sup>234</sup> For some, the notion of development involved investments and new jobs, however, for others; the strategic development for national security was matter of grave concern.

Amidst this, the cultivation of Himalayan herbs, medicinal and aromatic plants gradually increased. Selling of Yarsa Gumbu became a major source of earning among people from these

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<sup>229</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. 'Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India.' *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2(April - June 2012), 91-107.

<sup>230</sup> Tribune. 2011. 'Over Rs 32 cr for border area development.' Newspaper article, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2011/20110514/dun.htm#4>.

<sup>231</sup> Mohan, C. R. 'Soft borders and cooperative frontiers: India's changing territorial diplomacy towards Pakistan and China.' *Strategic Analysis* 31 (2007), 1-23.

<sup>232</sup> Tribune. 'Reopen Darma valley route via Sobla: Migrants.' 2015. Accessed March 13, 2016. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/uttarakhand/reopen-darma-valley-route-via-sobla-migrants/59771.html>.

<sup>233</sup> Tribune. 'Darma valley villagers cut off for two months.' (2016), 11 August. Accessed March 13, 2016. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/uttarakhand/community/darma-valley-villagers-cut-off-for-two-months/278726.html>.

<sup>234</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. 2012. 'Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India.' *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2(April - June 2012), 91-107.

valleys.<sup>235</sup> The increasing demand of fungus caterpillar among a large section of the rising Chinese Upper class as a tonic, aphrodisiac agent and status symbol at dinner parties resulted in rapid collection from high altitude grasslands. The people rather preferred informal institutions for regulating the collection of medicinal plants than on local Forest Dept.<sup>236</sup> However, people carrying Yarsa Gumbu from India to Nepal have been caught by the local police. Smuggling was reported to be on a rise with Yarsa Gumbu being priced around INR 60,000/kg to 80,000/kg in Pithoragarh and was sold in the Chinese market at INR 1,00,000.<sup>237</sup> There exists a lack of regulation at the Indo- Nepalese border at Dharchula. The state govt. vested power through issuing guidelines to the local van panchayats for monitoring the cultivation of herb. However, the exercise was futile as many times middlemen were from the same village/community.<sup>238</sup> However, cases of non-Rungs entering the area and illegally collecting the herb were also witnessed. Moreover, the herb is seen as economically fruitful for the villagers residing in the upper Himalayan region where there are no other economic activities.<sup>239</sup> Well-established network of local middlemen, brokers and merchants in Dharchula and Munsiyari near borders make it easier for trafficking. Prices offered by legal auction system by Forest Dept. are far below the market price. The trafficked quantity during 2008-2012 increased from 309 kg to 345 kg locally. Its price increased from US dollar 3333/ kg in 2008 to

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<sup>235</sup> S. S. Garbyal, K. K. Aggarwal\* and C. R. Babu. 'Return of biodiversity in Darma valley, Dharchula Himalayas, Uttarakhand, North,' *Current Science*, Vol. 88, NO. 5, (2005), 10 MARCH 2005.

<sup>236</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. 2012. 'Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India,' *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2(April - June 2012), 91-107.

<sup>237</sup> Tribune India. 'Miracle drug adds muscle to hill economy,' (2009), Saturday July. Accessed January 2017. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090704/dplus.htm#1>.

<sup>238</sup> Down to Earth. 'Yar Tsa Gumba,' (2003), 15 October. Accessed January 2017. <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/yar-tsa-gumba-13566>.

<sup>239</sup> *ibid*

US dollar 20,000/ kg in 2012 yielding US dollar 75,00,000.<sup>240</sup> Furthermore, China accounts for nearly 95% of the total production of between 83 tons and 183 tons annually, with Nepal producing nearly 3 tons, followed by India (1.7 to 2.8 tons) and Bhutan (0.5 to 1.5 tons).<sup>241</sup> Till date, India has not put the herb on its negative list of export; however, no legislation has been passed.<sup>242</sup>

A guideline, however, does exist for the collection of 'Keeda Jadi' in these areas.<sup>243</sup> It is as follows:

1. The season for collection will be: May- July.
2. Van Panchayat/ Gram Panchayat will be the issuing authority for collection.
3. Only locals will be allowed for collection through payment of INR 1000/ head to Van Panchayat.
4. The collected herbs will be deposited to Van Panchayat Sarpanch. This will be verified and buying agencies will be contacted through forest dept.

The Forest department is responsible for issuing 'Ravanna' or transition pass to buying agency after latter pays a sum of INR 5000/ kg as royalty which is otherwise fixed at INR 50,000 per kg.

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<sup>240</sup> Chandra S. Negi, Paras Joshi, and Sachin Bohra. 'Rapid Vulnerability Assessment of Yartsa Gunbu (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis* [Berk.] G.H. Sung et al) in Pithoragarh District, Uttarakhand State, India,' Mountain Research and Development, 35(4) (2015), 382-391.

<sup>241</sup> Hindustan Times. 'Himalayan viagra: The fungus that is fighting poverty in Nepal,' (2016), 09 January. Accessed January 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world/himalayan-viagra-the-fungus-that-is-fighting-poverty-in-nepal/story-1Weekoei5x4NEFoQHIXDK.html>.

<sup>242</sup> Sharma, Subrat. 'Trade of Cordyceps Sinensis from high altitudes of the Indian Himalaya Conversation and biotechnological priorities.' Current Science, Vol. 86, No. 12, (2004), 25 June 2004.

<sup>243</sup> Narayan Singh, Rakshita Pathak, Arjun Singh Kathait, Deepak Rautela and Anoop Dubey. 'Impacts, Collection of Cordyceps sinensis (Berk.) Sacc. in the Interior Villages of Chamoli District in Garhwal Himalaya (Uttarakhand) and its Social.' Journal of American Science, (2010).

However, due to lack of effective monitoring by local institutions, the increased price of the trafficked herb hasn't gone down.

Nevertheless, the economy of the Rungs is a product of their geo-political location existing between India, Nepal and Tibet. The dynamicity of the livelihood has largely been governed by its very existence near the frontiers. This 'border land', thus, becomes a vantage point as an intersection between the state and non-state centers of development and, therefore, a topic of our study. As Novak (2016) argues that borders are not only state-centered cartographies related to development but are, also, sites sharing a 'colonial past whose unequal premises and outcomes are constantly evoked and actualized by contemporary inequalities'.<sup>244</sup> Its origins exist in European compulsions and imaginations with coming together of a colonial institution (border), a colonial state project (development) and a diverse population which are entangled with each other.<sup>245</sup> It is, therefore, not the indigenous phenomenon or foreign imports but both development and borders are 'key institutional sites of contestation, negotiation, co-option and cooperation weaving global, regional, national and local social forces and social groups, from colonial times to the present day. Development and borders are interrelated, with latter shaping individual and social positions, opportunities and risks.<sup>246</sup> Borders, however, can represent a source of livelihood for many as most people living in these regions are a product of the relation to larger economic and political strategies.<sup>247</sup> The development interventions

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<sup>244</sup> Novak, Paolo. 'Placing Borders in Development,' *Geopolitics*, 21:3, (2016), 483-512.

<sup>245</sup> Cooper, F. 'The Recurrent Crises of the Gatekeeper State. In *Africa since 1940: The past of the present*, Cambridge, (2002), 156-190.

<sup>246</sup> Metcalfe, A. Kaur A. and I. 'Mobility, Labour Migration and Border Controls in Asia,' (2011).

<sup>247</sup> D. Feyissa and M. V. Hoene. 'State Borders and Borderlands as resources,' In *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*, London: James Currey. (2010), 1-26.

in such areas or the evolution of border towns are largely a reflection of the same<sup>248, 249</sup>.

Development and borders, thereby, exist amidst a variety of spatial and temporal scales with multi-scalar social forces shaping it on grounds of structural transformations and intentional development interventions.<sup>250</sup> The intersection between borders and development also gives rise to a series of border controls, labor and systemic social hierarchies. This can be articulated as multi-scalar state power projections, administrative spatial administrations and social regulations<sup>251, 252</sup>. It is merely seen as an ‘agency and dynamics of capital and borders and their articulation with respect to state projects at contrasting geographical scales’.<sup>253</sup> These regional border managements are seen as immanent dimensions to cater to the ‘necessity to the global factory’. However, these are contradicted by the ‘constant border struggles taking place around the unstable border line between the inside and outside’.<sup>254</sup> These practices can only be challenged by the local population who are the ‘voices of colour’<sup>255</sup> but their action will ultimately respond to workings of global capitalism.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Sturgeon, J. C. ‘Border Practices, Boundaries, and the Control of Resource Access: A case from China, Thailand and Burma,’ *Development and Change* (2004), 463-484.

<sup>249</sup> Nugent, P. ‘Border Towns and Cities in Comparative Perspective,’ In *Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Anthropology, Volume 26: Companion to Border Studies*, by T. Wilson and D. Hastings, Wiley-Blackwell, (2012), 410-432.

<sup>250</sup> Novak, Paolo. ‘Placing Borders in Development,’ *Geopolitics*, 21:3, (2016), 483-512.

<sup>251</sup> D. Arnold, and J. Pickles. ‘Global Work, Surplus Labor, and the Precarious Economies of the Border,’ *Antipode* (2011) 1598-1624.

<sup>252</sup> Walia, H. ‘Undoing Border Imperialism,’ *Institute for Anarchist Studies*. (2012)

<sup>253</sup> Smith, A. ‘Macro-Regional Integration, the Frontiers of Capital and the Externalisation of Economic Governance,’ *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (2015) 207-522.

<sup>254</sup> Neilson, S. Mezzadra and B. ‘Border as Method, or, the multiplication of labor,’ *Duke University Press* 242. (2013)

<sup>255</sup> Walia, H. ‘Undoing Border Imperialism,’ *Institute for Anarchist Studies*, (2012).

<sup>256</sup> Novak, Paolo. ‘Placing Borders in Development,’ *Geopolitics*, 21:3, (2016), 483-512.

This being said, borders are sites of dynamic social processes as a result of state formation, development and negotiation of spaces. The geo-political location of a community and its livelihood is, therefore, largely a dimension of macro-regional integration working under the diktat of global capitalism. This research attempts to unravel the borderlands and, also, whether tribal societies are being an impetus to global market trends and capital forces.

### **Understanding and Adaptation of Livelihood**

In order to understand livelihood development as capable of catering to basic needs of existence, a qualitative study was conducted at Darma valley. Use of open ended questions was done to focus on the objective as to how community see themselves with the emergence of Keeda Jadi as a livelihood practice in their region.

The origin of Keeda Jadi was traced not more than 20-25 years back in the valley in the early 1990s.<sup>257</sup> It was credited to '*Lal Singh Khampa*' who brought the first specimen in these areas. The Nepali men accompanying Khampa marked out territories where the presence of Keeda Jadi was available. Eventually, the local community members of the valley became aware about the medicinal herb and started engaging in its trade. It was their understanding of the self with the work which brought out the adaptability at different levels. For many respondents, Keeda Jadi became a "*source of income*" for their livelihood. For others, it was a way of getting "*easy money*" as one respondent observed. However, the collection of the herb was not seen as a lifelong process. The constant "*insecurity regarding one's job*" existed as respondents were not certain about this mode of revenue generation. Moreover, the collection process was limited to months of May and June only. "*Disillusionment*" was linked to the work and perception towards the

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<sup>257</sup> Chandra S. Negi, Paras Joshi, and Sachin Bohra. 'Rapid Vulnerability Assessment of Yartsa Gunbu (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis* [Berk.] G.H. Sung et al) in Pithoragarh District, Uttarakhand State, India,' *Mountain Research and Development*, 35(4), (2015), 382-391.



collection of Keeda Jadi varied from person to person. It provided ‘*satisfaction*’ to those in need of money as the trade “*brought easy money to people*”. Yet, one respondent said that “*they don’t know how long would such kind of activity go?*” With more people engaging in collection, the availability of Keeda Jadi has resulted in decline and has threatened the ecosystems in other regions as well.<sup>258</sup>

However, the trade of fungal caterpillar as a source of livelihood also responds to the need for ‘*survival*’. People preferred to engage in the collection as it was seen as an alternative to the issue of ‘*unemployment*’. One respondent commented that “*there is hardly any govt.schemes or jobs in the area*”.

The areas from where Keeda Jadi is collected are located at very far-off distances. One respondent added that “*the area of collection is 4 km away from his village and one can only return in the evening*”. This need and dependency to travel distant locations in the snow covered Himalayan Mountains resonate to the initial themes whereby it was seen as a source of revenue generation. The flow of income not only facilitates in achieving a better “*standard of living*”, giving an ‘option’ to choose and, thus, increasing one’s purchasing power. The money collected by trading is often spent in order to satisfy one’s immediate needs. As one of the respondent said that the collection of Keeda Jadi has made her able to “*purchase jewelry for herself*” and another one added that “*everyone owns a phone or a television these days*”.

The growing dependency on Keeda Jadi in the Kumaon Himalayas, also, showcases the very ‘*nature of the community*’. Keeda Jadi or Yarsa Gumbu is a natural forest produce found in the higher altitudes. As a forest dwelling community, the Rungs of Darma valley has been collecting the forests produce for ages.<sup>259</sup> Along with trading, these have also been used at the household level as well. The valley and

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<sup>258</sup>     ibid

<sup>259</sup>     Negi, C.S. ‘Declining Transhumance and Subtle Changes in Livelihood Patterns and Biodiversity in the Kumaon Himalayas,’ Mountain Research and Development Vol. 27, No. 2 (2007) 114-118.

its forests are resource rich regions used by the community all year round. After the sale of Keeda Jadi in summers, '*Jambu*' and other herbs are traded during months of August and September. However, it is the fungus caterpillar which gives higher returns by working for short durations. With many households joining the service sector jobs and moving out of the valley, it was those who remained in the higher villages continued with transhumanism.<sup>260</sup> A respondent said that "*we do the collection so that we can earn money for our children, provide a better future for them and not a nomadic lifestyle like ours*".

The Rung community sees the entire process of herb collection more as a '*family business*' where everyone comes together and performs the task collectively. For many respondents, it is "*a family affair as the every member goes for the collection*". Every family member is assigned a particular role around collection. A lot of young children are taken into high mountain areas by their parents as it is easier for them to spot Keeda Jadi which grows right above the ground.<sup>261</sup> However, Children are excluded from the decision making process and they adhere to the demands of the senior ones. When asked, it was told "*how can children say anything against this? They are bringing money to the family*". Over the years, the trade of Keeda Jadi has further instilled ownership with a sense of knowledge about their designated village forests. Since, "*every village goes to their own areas for collection*", meant a sense of entitlement.

Those engaged in trade, the utility of the medicinal herb was for both '*personal (health)*' and '*commercial*' purposes. As one respondent said, "*we are engaged in commercial selling as well*" while another said, "*I used keeda jadi to cure stomach related problems in my family*".

However, the value of Keeda Jadi doesn't depend on the ownership of land. Many respondents confirmed that "*it is a thekedar*<sup>262</sup> who

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<sup>260</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. 'Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India,' *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2 (April - June 2012), (2012), 91-107. (Please follow the uniform referencing style)

<sup>261</sup> ANSAB, Asia Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bio resources. 'In search of Yarsa Gumba: A trans-Himalayan journey,' (2015), Nepal, 15 July.

<sup>262</sup> Thekedar is a Hindi term for a middleman or a trader.

*usually comes and negotiates the price*". This contradiction between the ownership of land and failure in deciding the value of the forest produce is discussed later part of the paper. The sense of understanding towards one's livelihood shows how the village community even though, being the primary collectors is neglected from decision making and profit.

Understanding toward one's livelihood develops when an individual is able to adapt to three different levels of one's immediate setting. This depends on (i) a person's adaptation with the self, (ii) with the family and (iii) with one's immediate locality compromising of a village or a community. The process of adaptation occurs with initial contradiction with one's values, practices and belief system and then with gradual acceptance. In the first level, an individual tries to adjust with the dominant narrative which surrounds the new mode of revenue generation. In the study conducted, it was found that for some, there *'existed a conflict between the trade and their values'*. One respondent said that *"there are a lot of people who have misused the money but I haven't as it is against my values"* suggesting that the entire trade of Keeda Jadi was subjected to a moral scrutiny by many community members.<sup>263</sup> One major reason can be that trading the herb offered instant monetary benefits which could be consumed over months. It further differed from traditional sources of revenue generation. As discussed earlier, due to its geographical location with lack of employment opportunities, the engagement with this trade has resulted out of *'compulsion'* as well. For many, Keeda Jadi had multiple advantages to offer, however, the common thread was largely based on one's survival. An individual rather engaged in trading because *"one had to support the family as well"*. For some, the trade of Keeda Jadi was an added bonus along with their traditional service sector jobs. This *'dependency'* reflects in one such statement where the respondent said that *"those engaged in services and young engineers also come during summer holidays to their villages to earn"*. Such

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<sup>263</sup> James, Jamie. 'Himalayan Viagra' stirs danger, violence in Nepal,'the centre for investigative reporting,' (2012), 11 march. Accessed in April 13, 2016. <http://cironline.org/reports/'himalayan-viagra'-stirs-danger-violence-nepal-3312>.

adaptations loom between an individual's personal choices for economic benefits and existing moral-ethical imperatives.

The second adaptation for an individual occurs in adjusting to one's various microsystems. Here, family becomes the immediate system around which a person tries to adapt oneself with one's choice of livelihood. Family is seen as an 'asset', collection of the herb can result in a surplus. "*Bigger the family, bigger the yield*" as told by one respondent, suggesting that with more people involved the trade, there are higher chances of earning money. With even women actively participating for higher economic gains in those areas where it was earlier seen as a taboo, it has further threatened the availability of the herb.<sup>264</sup> It also becomes a "*convenient source of income for some in a place like this (Darma valley)*".

The third level of adaptation occurs with respect to the immediate community where an individual is located. The engagement at a macro-system comprises of general values, beliefs or ideologies that influence the ways in which traditional institutions are organized. The sense of ownership towards the land has been discussed earlier where the 'collective' participation of the village takes place. It was found that each village fixes a particular date of collection for themselves. The decision is collectively taken by the village members depending on suitable weather conditions. As one respondent noted "*the entire village goes and all those who are in good health, participates*". The dependency on informal institutions in regulating collection of medicinal plants and grazing of animals shows the influence of the same in these high mountain areas.<sup>265</sup> Entering to these areas before the given date is seen as breaking these regulations. The person is liable to pay a bounty depending on the value of Keeda Jadi collected in the previous year. In villages

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<sup>264</sup> Chandra S. Negi, Paras Joshi, and Sachin Bohra. 'Rapid Vulnerability Assessment of Yartsa Gunbu (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis* [Berk.] G.H. Sung et al) in Pithoragarh District, Uttarakhand State, India,' *Mountain Research and Development*, 35(4), (2015), 382-391.

<sup>265</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. 'Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India,' *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2(April - June 2012), (2012), 91-107.

like Sela, where returns were higher, the bounty was priced at INR 50,000 while in places like Baling it was priced around INR 5,000 in 2016. Though, outsiders are usually not allowed to enter these areas for collection, however, in places like Sela, where availability of herb was told to be more, and a certain amount can be paid and sites can be visited for collection. It is to note that collection of the herb makes an individual to adapt and associate with the larger village/ community. The 'support' is shown in the form of financial assistance to other village members as "*if someone has more money, he is asked to help the other one*". However, a village would rather 'associate itself as a group' with a particular 'territory' for herb collection. It was informed that issues were raised between village Baling and Nangling over a meadow for ownership a few years back. "*The forest officials from Dharchula were then called upon and both the parties were given permission as it was a 'forest land' and not owned by any village community*", one respondent said. Having no clear boundary demarcation in the high mountains, conflicts have become common between villagers. People trek for multiple days for good collection sites. Garbyal suggests that it was easier for a Nepali outsider to enter these areas and look for Keeda Jadi, however, due to conflicts, it discontinued.<sup>266</sup> Similar cases of conflicts were witnessed in Nepal as well over similar matter.<sup>267</sup>

### **Geo-Political Factors in the Creation of Livelihood**

The origins of Keeda Jadi, as discussed earlier, trace its origins in the early 1990s with non-Darmani people coming to these areas in search of Keeda Jadi. The rise in the demand of the caterpillar fungus was first noticed in 1993 at the world Athletics.<sup>268</sup> In his

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<sup>266</sup> S. S. Garbyal, K. K. Aggarwal\* and C. R. Babu. "Return of biodiversity in Darma valley, Dharchula Himalayas, Uttaranchal, North." *Current Science*, Vol. 88, No. 5, (2005), 10 March 2005.

<sup>267</sup> James, Jamie. 'Himalayan Viagra' stirs danger, violence in Nepal,' the centre for investigative reporting,' (2012), Accessed April 13, 2016. <http://cironline.org/reports/'himalayan-viagra'-stirs-danger-violence-nepal-3312>.

<sup>268</sup> Times, The Himalayan. 'Yarsagumba lifts living standard of rural Nepalis,' (2016), 08 January. Accessed on January 2016.

paper, Bergmann builds an understanding as to how the Indo-China war, Inner Line Permit, strict regulations, failure to establish a tourism industry and keeping the region away from the developmental discourse towards its peripheries had created conditions for a newer livelihood to bloom.<sup>269</sup>

The growth in the trade of Keeda Jadi, also, points out that there existed no traditional usage of the caterpillar fungus amongst communities residing in the Indian part of the Himalayas. According to folk tales, Keeda Jadi was used by the traders to feed their Yaks to make them resilient to low availability of Oxygen during the trans-Himalayan trade.<sup>270</sup> One, therefore, needs to look at the (i) internal and (ii) external factors to explore the reasons in making the herb collection a source of livelihood.

### **Internal Factors**

The case of unemployment is, perhaps, one primary reason as one commented that “*there were no options available in the valley*”. While others added that “*the selling of Keeda Jadi is the only source of income for them in such a remote area*”. New infrastructural projects like Hydro-electric dams, construction of roads to border frontiers,<sup>271</sup> although, have provided local villagers part time employment under governmental schemes like MNREGA. However, for rest of the year, these provisions are unlikely to replace the monitory benefits of Keeda Jadi. The reason being i) high market returns and ii) the actual working period only restricting to 2 months and its year round benefits. Garbyal (2004) in a similar study finds the same

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thehimalayantimes.com/business/yarsagumba-lifts-living-standard-of-rural-nepalis.

<sup>269</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. ‘Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India,’ *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2(April - June 2012), (2012), 91-107.

<sup>270</sup> Sharma, Subrat. ‘Trade of Cordyceps Sinensis from high altitudes of the Indian Himalaya Conversation and biotechnological priorities,’ *Current Science*, Vol. 86, No. 12, (2004).

<sup>271</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. ‘Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India,’ *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2(April - June 2012), (2012), 91-107.

suggesting that for a family of 5, collection of half a kg for 1-2 months is sufficient to sustain them for whole year.<sup>272</sup> The site of collection, moreover, were located in the high mountains and meadows close to their villages, therefore, access was difficult but not impossible. As Winkler in his paper puts that the three main factors which enable the rural households to participate successfully in the collection of Keeda Jadi are (i) the widespread knowledge about the insect caterpillar and where it can be harvested, (ii) accessibility to grasslands where it grows and (iii) no capital is needed to participate, at least for local population.<sup>273</sup>

### **External Factors**

The respondents pointed out a basic difference of the non-existent market in the Indian side and the international markets of Nepal and China offering high returns. At the end of trade cycle, the medicinal herb originating in the valley will, ultimately, be taken to Kathmandu and then to Hong Kong. It was told that “*whatever is collected, goes first to Kathmandu and then to Hong Kong*”. China witnessed its economic liberalization in the early 1980s, which increased the price of Yarsa Gumbu in Tibet region drastically.<sup>274</sup> The herb was priced at CNY 1,800 per kg in Lhasa, rising up to CNY 8,400 by 1997 (an increased 366%) to CNY 36,000 in 2004 (an increased 1900%), Winkler argued. Similarly, till the late 1980s in Nepal, Keeda Jadi was traded for cigarettes, noodles and other goods that were not easily available in villages.<sup>275</sup> However, by 2001, regions like Dolpa sold fungus for NRs 200-600 per piece (an increase of 900-2300%). For that matter, exporters, by 2001, were paying NRs 80,000-130,000 to local traders. Keeda Jadi, therefore, became a

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<sup>272</sup> S S Garbyal, K K Aggarwal and C R Babu. ‘Impact of Cordyceps sinensis in the rural economy of interior villages of Dharchula sub-division of Kumaon Himalayas and its implications in the society,’ Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge, Vol 3(2), (2004) April: 182-186.

<sup>273</sup> Winkler. ‘Yartsa Gunbu (Cordyceps sinensis) and the fungal commodification of Tibet’s rural economy,’ (2008), 291-305.

<sup>274</sup> ibid

<sup>275</sup> Uttam Babu Shrestha, Kamaljit S Bawa. ‘Trade, harvest, and conservation of caterpillar fungus (Ophiocordyceps sinensis),’ Biological Conservation, (2012).

status symbol amongst the wealthy and powerful elite class in China and western European countries.<sup>276</sup> The ‘*increase in demand*’ of Keeda Jadi in both China and Nepal and the non-existent market in India found fertile grounds for Nepali and Tibetan traders to explore newer regions for ‘*cheap*’ and ‘*easily available*’ medicinal fungus. Therefore, the Indian mountains of Dharchula became newer grounds for collection than that of Nepali counterpart, Darchula<sup>277</sup> where the fungus was already being collected. Since “*their location was very close to Nepal and Tibet border*”, it was easier to trade as whatever got collected was passed to Dharchula and then to Darchula.<sup>278</sup>

### **Global Capital and Tribal Market**

Keeda Jadi as a ‘finished product’ is priced very high in the international market with local traders easily getting around INR 2,00,000 - 7,00,000/ kilo in Dharchula and Munsiyari.<sup>279</sup> The consumer, in a long chain of demand and supply, finally purchases Keeda Jadi as a finished product from either pharmaceutical companies or in its natural form (clean and dried) from online retailers. The export of Keeda Jadi from the mountainous regions of Dharchula to lower plains finds its way to different parts of the world. The herb is processed at the village level and then passes through a network of traders, middlemen or personal contacts in Dharchula. Not much data is available of an existent market in India, however, it was informed that “*there are people in Delhi who have links in Dharchula*” signaling that there are possibilities of the herb having a local Indian market as well. The highly priced herb is

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<sup>276</sup> Winkler. ‘Yartsa Gunbu (*Cordyceps sinensis*) and the fungal commodification of Tibet’s rural economy,’ (2008), 291–305.

<sup>277</sup> Dharchula (India) and Darchula (Nepal) are two border towns at the Indian-Nepal border and are separated by Kali River. Also, (ANSAB 2015) showed the rampant collection of Keeda Jadi in Darchula region.

<sup>278</sup> Tribune India. ‘Miracle drug adds muscle to hill economy.’ (2009), Saturday July. Accessed January 2017.  
<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090704/dplus.htm#1>.

<sup>279</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. ‘Geopolitical Relations And Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaon Himalaya, India’ *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2(April - June 2012), (2012), 91-107.



traded in liquid cash with added chances of theft and loot. This has made the trade secretive in the local market and in the international market as well.<sup>280</sup>

The trade operates at multiple levels with primary collectors (not the field gatherers) being either Nepali, a non- Bhotia or, at times, a member from the Rung community from Dharchula. The collector asks for a quantity based on demands at higher levels. The demand is either met collectively by the village or a tan individual level if the person/family<sup>281</sup> has collected the required amount. With the former, the monetary benefits are split equally depending on the quantity one has contributed. These middlemen collect the fungus caterpillar from primary collectors from different villages and valleys and then supply to lower areas. As Sharma (2004) opined that Dharchula becomes a major storehouse for trade.<sup>282</sup> This is due to the fact that the geo-political location of the town is such that it becomes a center for demand and supply for traders from both Tibet and Nepal. The route through Lipulekh pass for trading is debatable due to border checks and regulations. Moreover, the time spent to export Keeda Jadi to Tibet would be much easier through Nepal rather than through the traditional trans-Himalayan route. After Keeda Jadi reaches the border town, it is then traded at multiple levels and transported across the border to Nepal. Upon crossing the International border, it is easy to travel from Nepal border to Kathmandu after payment of royalty making the trader immune to any administrative hassle. The herb is then sold to bigger players operating from Kathmandu and in mainland China. These are largely pharmaceutical companies and online retailers. Due to secrecy of trade, there exists high level of corruption at

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<sup>280</sup> Sharma, Subrat. 'Trade of Cordyceps Sinensis from high altitudes of the Indian Himalaya Conversation and biotechnological priorities,' *Current Science*, Vol. 86, No. 12, (2012), 25 June 2004.

<sup>281</sup> For the sake of simplicity, family is being considered as one unit.

<sup>282</sup> Sharma, Subrat. 'Trade of Cordyceps Sinensis from high altitudes of the Indian Himalaya Conversation and biotechnological priorities,' *Current Science*, Vol. 86, No. 12, (2012), 25 June 2004.

every level. In India, the local forest department and policemen rather becoming enablers often restrict the trade. Many respondents were uncertain about the legality of Keeda Jadi. In many cases, the forest department seized the entire collection at the check posts near Tawaghat. Many traders said that they haven't personally faced any issues as the middlemen usually come to their villages for collection. Those who have gone directly to Dharchula to get a higher amount have faced difficulties. One respondent said that "*he has heard traders and people getting hauled up by the local police*" and that the "*forest officials have made it illegal*". On January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2002, a guideline was issued by the Govt. of Uttarakhand to the District Magistrate, Pithoragarh, that Keeda Jadi would be collected through Van Panchayats. These powers would reside with the sarpanch and that a committee of van panchayats would be formed to monitor the exploitation. The mentioned work would be done under the supervision of the Conservator, Pithoragarh. Adding to that, 5 per cent of the total collection would be deposited with the samiti's exchequer, in monetary terms.<sup>283</sup> However, this hasn't been fruitful. The herb being highly priced in the International market is yet to be included to the Negative List of Export. The sale, collection, use, distribution, transportation and export of Keeda Jadi was once banned in Nepal but, later on, it was removed, although, no such actions were taken by India.<sup>284</sup> There were some people who were not clear on the '*legality*' of Keeda Jadi but rather claimed it as "*a forest produce which causes no harm to anyone*". The issues of legality and corruption have not only posed problems but have, simultaneously, dominated the discourse among common people. Due to lack of presence of any '*trade union*' in the region, there is no one to safeguard people's interests. It becomes easy for the forest dept. and police officials to stop an individual seller and is only released after receiving their own share. The Keeda Jadi confiscated by these

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<sup>283</sup> 'Down to Earth'. 'Yar Tsa Gumba,' (2015), Accessed January 2017. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/yar-tsa-gumba-13566>

<sup>284</sup> Sharma, Subrat. 'Trade of Cordyceps Sinensis from high altitudes of the Indian Himalaya Conversation and biotechnological priorities,' Current Science, Vol. 86, No. 12, (2004), 25 June.

officials is then sold to middlemen in lower regions to earn their own profits. The lack of royalty system<sup>285</sup> in the area as opposed to Nepal was one of the major concerns. A respondent added that “*in Nepal, one needs to pay NPR<sup>286</sup> 15,000 and one can easily travel to Kathmandu, however, there exists no such mechanism in India. One is very likely to get caught*”.

The trade of Keeda Jadi is a nexus of global capital finding its way through traditional localised institutions and has created new markets at high altitude alpine regions. In the entire process, where money travels through multiple channels, the value of the fungus caterpillar gradually increases at every level. People living in these areas risk their lives and are extensively engaged in the collection of Keeda Jadi. However, it has largely ended up into commodity fetishism<sup>287</sup> with the actual collectors being ‘alienated from the main produce’. This has occurred at different levels:

A kilo of Keeda Jadi in the markets of Dharchula gets a high bargain with locals earning an average of INR 4-5 lakh<sup>288</sup> in 2015. One stick of Keeda Jadi was sold between INR 400-500 at village level. However, it is difficult for a family to collect a kilo of the fungus caterpillar due to uneven geographical distribution and scarcity of resources. Therefore, when the profit is divided, per family distribution of wealth gets reduced. The economic returns are, however, way lesser than in comparison to the amount of labor invested in collecting Keeda Jadi for over weeks in cold Himalayan mountains. This doesn’t include the cost of tents, taking ration to higher regions in order to continue collection, medical check-ups

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<sup>285</sup> Royalty system: It is more of a permit system where an amount is to be paid to the government to allow free trade and movement in a particular area.

<sup>286</sup> NPR is an abbreviation for Nepalese Rupee, the legal currency of Nepal.

<sup>287</sup> Commodity fetishism: is the perception of the social relationships involved in production, not as relationships among people, but as economic relationships among the money and commodities exchanged in market trade (Wikipedia 2017). For more, refer to Capital: Critique of Political Economy (1867) by Karl Marx.

<sup>288</sup> This was the average price around which Keeda Jadi was sold in 5 villages where the study was conducted. Also, the amount varies depending on the quality, quantity, area, season, colour and trader.

and, most importantly, risk to life while working in such areas.<sup>289</sup> The price difference in the international market and that at the village level shows people not being able to receive the required amount for their labor. As one respondent opined “*if in the international market, the price is around 10-20 lakh, we are only paid INR 500 for a stick*”. This difference in the price shows the value fixation done not by the collector but by those who are at the end of the supply chain, negating the individual efforts and profit gained from the product.

This also varies depending on what has been the demand in the international market. With an increase in demand by the international buyers, traders and middlemen coming to the villages in Darma valley would rather fix a lesser price in order to maximize their profits.

The entry of global capital in the tribal markets and borderlands like Darma valley has brought changes in the socio-economic and cultural spheres. In a capitalist society, the value of the product is determined neither by the producers (here: collectors) nor by its consumers but rests with the Capitalist class which owns the means of production. The worker fails to relate to the product and see the object as alien from one’s lived reality. As a point in case, whatever is manufactured from Keeda Jadi as a medicinal herb is sold in cities or through online retailers and at enormous prices that it becomes inaccessible for the field gatherer (physically and economically) to get its benefits. The herb is, also, consumed in its natural form; however, there is a lack of information about its personal benefits. Simultaneously, unemployment, loss of traditional occupation, geo-political location and availability of Keeda Jadi has created conditions whereby the trade has become the only de facto livelihood option. This has caused wage compulsion and created market conditions for the people of these Himalayan regions. The selling of one’s labor power is largely bound to the demands of the

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<sup>289</sup> ANSAB, Asia Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bioresources. ‘In search of YarsaGumba: A trans-Himalayan journey,’ (2015), Nepal, 15 July.

capitalist class (in this case, the pharmaceutical companies and online distributors). The collection of Keeda Jadi is largely an individual/family based occupation with regulations made by the traditional institutions. Although, a village usually has its own area of collection, however, people often compete for their own economic interests. People from different valleys are engaged in the same process working under the same structures of exploitation. The working conditions are same in the hilly tracts of Nepal, China and Bhutan. In a capitalist society, the labor of the worker is reduced to a commercial commodity which gets traded in a competitive labor market. Those who control the means of production extract labor (value) from the workers in the form of capital. The arrangement of relations of production establishes social conflict by putting worker against the worker for 'higher wages'. Therefore, one would find people from the same region or community working as brokers and traders for their own individual higher benefits. This alienates collectors from their mutual economic interests. It results in a continuous structural process aiming at providing profits to the owners and alienates collectors of Keeda Jadi from the profit and the product.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The sudden rise in trade of Keeda Jadi in past few decades near the international border and the entry of global capital in the Himalayan highlands signify a condition of emerging border spaces with an impetus given by the Indian state. The reshaping of borders by the colonial rulers succeeded by the Indian state has changed the dynamics of the local societies existing in the borderlands. The imaginary division represented by a 'Borderline' has, thus, witnessed, changes in the socio-cultural paradigms, traditional culture and livelihood. The borderlands of Uttarakhand, through a case of the 'Rung community of Darma valley', have shown how in capitalism's global search for newer areas for low-cost labor and resources result in the intensification, diversification and heterogenization of labor. This, simultaneously, has reshaped the

labor experiences and conditions of the community from these areas.<sup>290</sup> The current globalizing processes have developed into a continuous reshaping of different geographical scales that cannot be taken for granted in their stability. A borderline, thus, facilitates the global modes of production and various labor regimes (here India, Nepal and China) by exploiting the commonalities between mountain communities and the gaps- the borders that separate them. One needs to, therefore, locate our understanding at a time when the capitalist mode of production continues to undergo momentous and uneven transformations. One crucial aspect of this change is to study the realignment of relations between the state and capital, which is, largely unnoticeable, however, is involved in regimes of exploitation, dispossession, and domination.

The community living in the borderlands between India and Tibet, have had always tried to connect the two states while travelling and existing through non-state spatial lands, for centuries. The Rungs of Darma Valley and 'Bhotias', at large, is a mosaic of several socio-cultural, linguistic and economic traditions who have survived depending on their traditional institutions. However, the changing dynamics of the local structures is to be countered with propositions which will favour not only people who live in these mountains, but, the agency of taking decisions needs to be shifted to the community itself. However, there are challenges that one need to address. Rapid exploitation, ecological affects unaccountable trade and growing dependency of the mountain communities have emerged as key factors associated with the collection of Keeda Jadi. Its transport from India into Nepal through unchecked passages is, largely, because it has not been listed in CITES.<sup>291</sup> Countries like Nepal which lifted the restriction on Cordyceps trade in 2001, puts royalty of NRs 20,000 per

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<sup>290</sup> Neilson, S. Mezzadra and B. 'Border as Method, or, the multiplication of labor,' Duke University Press, (2013), 242.

<sup>291</sup> CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement between governments which aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

kilogram and a ban on exporting the caterpillar fungus in its raw form. However, the government had a tough time implementing it due to lack of infrastructural support and economic returns to collectors. In Bhutan as well, the government lifted the policy ban after a couple of studies found that the ban was ineffective and only became a source of conflict between government and local communities.<sup>292</sup> Therefore, one possible solution can be to lift the ban on this Minor Forest Produce in India as its trade is no more a hidden secret.

Moreover, short seasonal collection of Keeda Jadi can, actually, be profitable in the Himalayan alpine areas. Sundriyal (2003) suggests that cultivating cash crops and other activities might not be able to compensate the amount earned by the fungus caterpillar.<sup>293</sup>

However, overexploitation of the resources will be a bone of contention for those involved in policy making and suggestions regarding effective use of the Himalayan herb. Multiple measures have been considered depending on the context where *O. sinensis* (Keeda Jadi) was located. In Bhutan, the collection included:

- (i) Laws relaxation on gathering the herb in order to provide the community with an incentive to police their areas and protect natural resources,
- (ii) Delegating the power by restricting number of collectors to a few members from each household and
- (iii) Establishing a law that *O. sinensis* (Keeda Jadi) will be only sold at authorized auctions by authorized collectors with buyers being Bhutanese nationals.

This was, further, utilized by imposing a 4.9 per cent levy on sales to cover the expenses of auctions and to support environment

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<sup>292</sup> Namgyel, Phuntsho. 'Conservation and Income Generation Opportunities from High-value species: Cordyceps Policy in Bhutan and its Implications for the Himalayan region,' (2008).

<sup>293</sup> R.C. Sundriyal. 'Conservation salvage of Cordyceps sinensis collection in the Himalayan mountains is neglected,' *Ecosystem Services*, (2003)

protection programmes.<sup>294</sup> In Nepal, a different approach was taken by the village development council, whereby, a date gets fixed for the commencement of collection. Every able-bodied community member is required to physically check-in at the community meeting house 4 times daily and, that too, weeks before leaving for the collection. Those caught visiting the pastures before the given date is posed with heavy fine. The village leaders are liable to postpone the commenced date depending on the conditions and the bonafide resident is only allowed to collect the herb, a status given through participation in a household taxation system<sup>295, 296, 297</sup>. In regions like Nubri and Tsum, Nepal, collection is prohibited by religious decrees (chos khrims) in certain sacred areas, making sure that part of the landscape remains undisturbed. In Sama, Lamas protect certain areas on the slopes of sacred Gang Pungyen (Mount Manaslu, 8156m), the abode of Yul Iha, and the resident deity through ‘sealing decrees’ (shag rgya). This prohibits people from gathering forest products (including *O.sinensis*), hunting wildlife and from cutting trees.<sup>298</sup> Simultaneously, development of value addition methods of the herb can, also, result in earning more economic benefits as compared to selling it in crude form<sup>299, 300</sup>.

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<sup>294</sup> Cannon, P. F., N. L. Hywel-Jones, N. Maczey, L. Norbu, T. Samdup, and P. Lhendup. ‘Steps towards sustainable harvest of *Ophiocordyceps sinensis* in Bhutan.’ *Biodivers.Conservation*, (2009), 2263– 2281.

<sup>295</sup> Chandra S. Negi, Paras Joshi, and Sachin Bohra. ‘Rapid Vulnerability Assessment of Yartsa Gunbu (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis* [Berk.] G.H. Sung et al) in Pithoragarh District, Uttarakhand State, India,’ *Mountain Research and Development*, 35(4), (2015), 382-391.

<sup>296</sup> Childs. ‘How to fund a ritual: Notes on the social usage of the Kanjur (bKa’-’gyur) in a Tibetan village,’ *Tibet Journal* 30(2), (2005), 41-48.

<sup>297</sup> Childs G, Choedup N. ‘Indigenous management strategies and socioeconomic impacts of yartsa gunbu (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) harvesting in Nubri and Tsum, Nepal.’ *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 34(1), (2014), 8-23.

<sup>298</sup> Chandra S. Negi, Paras Joshi, and Sachin Bohra. ‘Rapid Vulnerability Assessment of Yartsa Gunbu (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis* [Berk.] G.H. Sung et al) in Pithoragarh District, Uttarakhand State, India,’ *Mountain Research and Development*, 35(4), (2015), 382-391.

<sup>299</sup> R.C. Sundriyal. ‘Conservation salvage of *Cordyceps sinensis* collection in the Himalayan Mountains is neglected,’ *Ecosystem Services*, (2003).



Creating rest areas, providing knowledge of Keeda Jadi's reproductive cycle and establishing an end date to the collection might allow sufficient spore dispersal to maintain sustainable populations.<sup>301</sup> Higher economic incentives can be provided to local people who comply with collection guidelines thus resulting in sustainable harvest.<sup>302</sup> Though, effective strategies can only be brought out through the participation of local communities whereby latter acknowledges the problems of commercial exploitation and institutional mechanisms at the local level to make the harvest more sustainable.

Adding to this, a gradual entry of the state in non-state spatial lands of the Himalayan Mountains can be symbolically witnessed with the modern day institutions and a developmental discourse coming in confrontation with the spaces dominated by traditional institutions. This has, largely, resulted in dilution of the latter with the rapidly changing socio-cultural and economic fabric of a community. Symbols of modernity like roads and hydro-electric power projects, on one hand, not only facilitate but, in contrast pose serious implications on the very essence of the community. As a point of reference, the construction of road till the last village, Sipu, will certainly cause dynamic socio-cultural and economic transformation which will leave an impact on the worldview of the community and the valley itself. It was reported that road has reached Nangling and will reach to the last village of the valley soon.<sup>303</sup> The transhumant

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<sup>300</sup> Shrestha UB, Bawa KS. 'Trade, harvest, and conservation of caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) in the Himalayas,' *Biological Conservation* 159, (2013), 514-520.

<sup>301</sup> Baral B, Shrestha B, Teixeira da Silva JA. 'A review of Chinese Cordyceps with special reference to Nepal, focusing on conservation,' *Environmental and Experimental Biology*, (2015), 61-73.

<sup>302</sup> Chandra S. Negi, Paras Joshi, and Sachin Bohra. 'Rapid Vulnerability Assessment of Yartsa Gunbu (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis* [Berk.] G.H. Sung et al) in Pithoragarh District, Uttarakhand State, India.' : *Mountain Research and Development*, 35(4), (2015), 382-391

<sup>303</sup> Tribune. 'Darma valley village gets road, residents elated,' (2016), 2 October. Retrieved from <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/uttarakhand/community/darma-valley-village-gets-road-residents-elated/303493.html>. Accessed on February 27, 2017

nature of the Rung community of Darma valley is likely to get dissolved in the contestation between the state and non-state subjects where former is likely to subsume the latter. This gradual process might ultimately result in Rungs behaving like any mainstream society devoid of any traditional institutional mechanisms over control of their resources. The researcher would, therefore, like to argue and open grounds for the policy makers, social work practitioners, academicians and readers to imagine a space within the Indian state polity, where state-led institutions and non-state traditional institutions of the Rung community can co-exist, letting people choose their own narrative of development. This proposition, however, needs to arise from the community itself and not by the researcher or by the non- Bhotias and, certainly, not by the Indian state in the first place. What has been mentioned above finds its resonance with Zomia<sup>304</sup> and a perspective which is needed to be built around the same. As Bergmann argued that an analytical approach, which advocates Zomia thinking, is required as a dual strategy on focusing how national histories and government policies shape highland communities.<sup>305</sup> This can be, further, used to develop active local strategies and their effects on state and border making. One needs to recognize that the Himalayan regions

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<sup>304</sup> Zomia: The term was coined in 2002 by a Dutch social scientist Willem van Schendel in an article published in the geography journal *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. The author presented a macroscopic and thought provoking analysis to reconsider the highlands of Asia, from the western Himalayan Range through the Tibetan Plateau and all the way to the lower end of the peninsular Southeast Asian highlands, as a political and historical entity significantly distinct from the usual area divisions of Asia: Central (Inner), South, East, and Southeast. 'Zomia' is, therefore, a neglected – an invisible – transnational area, which overlapped segments of all four sub-regions without truly belonging to any of them. The area is marked by a sparse population, historical isolation, political domination by powerful surrounding states, marginality of all kinds, and huge linguistic and religious diversity. In 2007, Van van Schendel tentatively opted to extend Zomia, further, westward and northward, including southern Qinghai and Xinjiang within China, as well as a fair portion of Central Asia, encompassing the highlands of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. This was done based on the discussions with scholars of the western Himalayas reacting to his 2002 proposition (Michaud 2010).

<sup>305</sup> Bergmann, Martin Gerwin and Christoph. 'Geopolitical Relations and Regional Restructuring: The Case of the Kumaonhimalaya, India,' *Erdkunde*, Bd. 66, H. 2 (April - June 2012), (2012), 91-107.

situated in the borderlands are not only resource rich and environmentally fragile but also, local communities are entirely dependent on the same for survival. The people living in these regions are bound with a complex cross-border network of social, cultural, and economic relations which have been formed based on their geopolitical location. It is, therefore, needed to put the community back at the centre and give them the agency to decide for themselves. Let the ones who once walked mountains reclaim their spaces.

# Leh Ladakh and Tribal Peoples: Reflections on Politico-Historical Realities

bodhi s.r and Stanzin Namgyal

## Introduction

Embodying an intricate and somewhat complex history, exhibiting prolonged periods of socio-religious mutation, yet characterised by episodic geopolitical upheavals and at times even abrupt politico-historical ruptures, Ladakh provides extremely rich insights into realities of tribal communities. How do self-sustaining indigenous / tribal communities with long histories of interaction and boundary crossing, evolve and adapt to treacherous and difficult habitats while being periodically overwhelmed by violent political cataclysm with external forces. From an indigenous / tribal perspective, Leh Ladakh is an important site of inquiry within tribal studies, with eight Schedule Tribe communities inhabiting the geographically bounded region. In this chapter, the authors seek to elucidate the politico-historical realities unravelling among the Scheduled Tribes inhabiting the vast lands of Ladakh and locate these phenomena within a rich yet complex politico historical reality of its tribal peoples.

The Ladakhis are politically very sophisticated people, having learnt from their own historical experience the obvious dangers of abandoning the critical edge when it comes to power and relationship with the 'other'. Over millennia, these most dignified, honest, truthful and hospitable peoples inhabiting Leh Ladakh have evolved a symbiotic mode of living with their habitat and developed an intricate narrative of relatedness with the living others. The Ladakhi peoples belong to their immediate context, intertwined with their naturally endowed high mountains, rich valleys, perennial streams and lush green patches, which are the quintessence of their

existence; the abode of their forefathers and foremothers; the source of their science, technology, religion and livelihood; the grounds for their song, dance and language; and above all the fountainhead of their organic governing structure, all enmeshed and encapsulated within a distinct bounded life world.

Ladakhis conceive their cultural manifest as entwined to their geography. Their sublime endogenous systems work on the premise of minimising conflict and maximising peace and in comparison to many other non-tribal communities, they have maintained their egalitarian ways to this very day. Deeply entrenched within the Ladakhi psyche is a constant search for an awakened equilibrium between the social, psychological and spiritual world, while at the same time always remaining alert and prepared to unwarranted provocations from outside that strategically intrude into their historically inherited geopolitical space. While at peace with the surrounding others, they are alive to the perpetual need of protecting, preserving and promoting their freedom, dignity and fraternity.

### **Leh Ladakh: Politico-Administrative Reality**

Ladakh is a newly formed Union territory of India, bordering Tibet in the East, Xinjiang in the North, Pakistan (POK) in the West, and Kargil/Zaskar in the south/southwest, all inhabited with villages between 2900 to 5900 meters above sea level. The union territory of Ladakh consists of two districts Leh and Kargil. Leh district is broadly divided into four distinct regions - the eastern plateau of Changtang, the upper part of Indus Valley (known as 'Stod'), the lower Ladakh along the Indus (called as 'Sham') and Nubra Valley of Shayok and Siachen rivers (in between the Karakoram and Ladakh Range). The geo-climatic features of these highlands have also required the Ladakhi society to develop an equally unique culture and lifestyle to adapt to the difficult environment.

The region experiences extremely cold climate. Due to its location and high altitude, the entire place remains cool throughout the year. The winters are always severe and make the region inaccessible, as

road link from Srinagar as well as Himachal Pradesh remains closed due to closure of Zojila and Rohtang Passes because of heavy snowfall. Besides, the temperature falls as low as -30 degree Celsius at several places of the UT. The rainfall is scanty and negligible. This attributes towards making the district a cold desert. However, on an average, 225 days annually remain sunny in the district.

Shakspo, T.S, refers to the region in different names, such as *La-Dwags* which means land of many passes, *Bla-dwags* land of many lamas, *Maryul* the red land and *Mnab-ris bskor-gsum* referring to western Tibet.<sup>306</sup> Norberg-Hodge points out that Ladakh probably derived its name from the Tibetan *la-dags*, meaning “land of mountain passes.”<sup>307</sup> Throughout history, the Ladakhis have experienced cultural collisions and accommodations and are a mixture of three distinct groups, who over time migrated to present day Ladakh - either because of trade or for agricultural purposes. They are; the Dard community from the Gilgit region of Western Pakistan, the Indo Aryans known as Mon from the Kulu region and the Mongolian nomads from Tibet.

The newly formed Union Territory of Ladakh was a single district till 1979 until in June that year it was bifurcated into two districts - Leh and Kargil. The total area of the two districts is about 98,000 square kilometers. These regional highlands are deserts, incapable of supporting human life. Of the 60, 500 square kilometers that remain (when the Aksai Chin is let out of account), less than 300 square kilometers are under crops, vegetables or fruit. The population pressure on the cultivated area is high - almost 6000 per square kilometers. This includes the population of Leh and Kargil towns and the semi-nomadic population of Chang-thang, who does not

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<sup>306</sup> As cited in R. Nilza, Socio Economic Conditions of the Changpas of Ladakh and Recent Changes, (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Unpublished Dissertation, 2008)

<sup>307</sup> Norberg-Hodge, Ancient Future Learning from Ladakh (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991)

live directly off the land and are predominantly dependent on livestock.

The Union Territory of Ladakh is the second-largest UT in India after UT of Jammu and Kashmir, and Leh District is the second-largest district in the country and has 112 inhabited villages, one town and total population size of 133,487. There are 93,770 literates and the literacy rate is 77.20. There are 21,909 households with an average household size of 5.

### **Census Data 2011, Government of India**

<b>Description</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2001</b>
Actual Population	133,487	117,232
Male	78,971	64,306
Female	54,516	52,926
Population Growth	13.87%	30.15%
Area Sq. Km	45,110	45,110
Sex Ratio (Per 1000)	690	823
Literates	93,770	
Male Literates	62,834	
Female Literates	30,936	
Average Literacy	77.20	
Male Literacy	86.31	
Female Literacy	63.56	
Total Child Population (0-6 Age)	12,016	

The nine Community Development Blocks are subsumed under three Tehsils namely Leh, Sumoor, and Khaltse with Leh as the only township in the district, and it's headquartered. The whole district has been declared as a tribal district. Out of a total population of 133,487 in the district, the schedule tribe population stood at 95,875 persons with 47,543 male and 48,314 female spread into 73,789 rural and 22,068 urban as per the 2011 census. While in the year 2001, Schedule Tribes stood at 82.03 percent of the total population, as of 2011, the percentage of Schedule Tribes reduced significantly to 71.80 percent of the total district population.

Leh until recently was one of the two districts of Ladakh region (Leh and Kargil) of Jammu & Kashmir state. After the reorganization Act 2019 was passed by the parliament on — 2019, the state of Jammu and Kashmir was divided into two Union

territories namely, Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir and Union territory of Ladakh, with no legislative assembly, leaving the tribal minority of Ladakh without any political or regional representation and directly under the center appointed UT administration headed by Lieutenant Governor.

Before the reorganization Act of 2019 was passed and Ladakh became a Union Territory, Leh district had two assembly seats represented in the Jammu and Kashmir state; Leh and Nubra and together with Kargil district they have one parliamentary seat. Leh district has 'Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, a democratically elected body responsible for leading the development process in the district. LAHDC Leh emerged on the scene in 1996 as an outcome of the LAHDC Act (1995) which came into force in response to the long-standing demand of the people of the Ladakh region for decentralized governance structures. The Council came into being with the holding of elections on August 28th, 1995. LAHDC has 26 elected and 4 nominated councilors and is headed by a Chief Executive Councilor (with the rank of Cabinet Minister) and 4 Executive Councilors who are elected by the General Counsel for a term of 5 years. At the village level, the governance structure is around a local governance system called Halqa Panchayat consisting of all residents of the village. Currently, there are 93 Halqa Panchayats spread over the nine blocks.

### **The Scheduled Tribes Inhabiting Leh Ladakh**

Ladakh has witnessed tremendous upheavals in the recent past. Political protest demanding special and separate status for the inhabitants of the region since 1949 and articulated very vehemently in 1980 through the All Ladakh Action Committee for Declaring Ladakh a Schedule Tribe area<sup>308</sup> has led the State to notify them as Schedule Tribes within the Constitution of India.

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<sup>308</sup> Van Beek, Martijn, Public Secrets, Conscious Amnesia and the Celebration of Autonomy for Ladakh. In Hansen.T.B and Stepputat. F (2001, Ed).States of



Conferring Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to people of Ladakh came, as a matter of fact, after intense struggles on the side of the Ladakhis. After an unrelenting struggle of over twenty years, beginning April 1969, in which lives were lost and property damaged, the then G.M.Shah Government of Jammu and Kashmir recommended to the Government of India, ST Status to Ladakhis under Article 342 of the Constitution. This paved the way for conferment of Scheduled Tribe status on eight selected ethnic groups identified by the Registrar General of India on the basis of a mini census conducted by him for this purpose.<sup>309</sup> Recognition as ST came into fruition in October 1989, with the President, Government of India promulgating the Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1989, declaring eight tribes of Ladakh as Scheduled Tribes. With the exception of a community of Sunni Muslims by the name of Arghon, all the other communities inhabiting Ladakh, namely Bot-Boto, Balti, Beda, Brokpa (also known as Drokpa, Dard, Shin), Changpa, Garra, Mon and Purigpa were identified as Scheduled Tribes. However, three communities, i.e. Mon, Garra and Beda can claim either Schedule Tribe or Schedule Caste status while the Bot and Balti community can claim only Schedule Tribe status.

Each of these communities although organically and historically linked, articulates their own historical narratives while being somewhat socially entwined. While community distinctiveness is far starker post the Indian State politico administrative categorization process, historically, classificatory systems used to identify those inhabiting Ladakh were extremely blurred. Information about the same culled out from the *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh* and *Ramsay's Practical Dictionary* and the Census data of 1911, 1931 and 1986/7, was extremely complicated as van Beek, traced and showed in his article *Contested Classifications of People in Ladakh An analysis of*

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Imagination Ethnographic Explorations of Post Colonial States. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 373.

<sup>309</sup> Please see Kaul.S and Kaul H.N (2004). Ladakh through the Ages. Towards a New Identity. New Delhi: Indian Publishing Company.

*the Census of Jammu and Kashmir 1873-1941*.<sup>310</sup> Ambiguities on particularised identity persist till today. Van Beek argued that, “people in Ladakh tried to figure out to which ‘tribe’ they were supposed to belong. Some of the names referred to regional identification (e.g. Balti, Changpa, Purigpa), others to occupational identifications (Mon, Beda)...and ‘certain categories (e.g. Balti, Bot/Boto) were effectively filled on the basis of religion ... It is only the official Scheduled Tribe (ST) Certificate, which states the tribal identify of the holder that fixes people’s identities unambiguously”.<sup>311</sup>

The majority community in Leh-Ladakh is the Bot/Boto, a mix race that practices Buddhism with historical affinities to Tibet. In the year 2001, they accounted for 77,662 persons out of a total population of 117,232. They were followed by the second largest community called Balti, who account for 11, 243 persons and Changpa, amounting to 4926. These are the three biggest tribal groups in the district.

The Bot/Boto community is predominantly followers of Buddhism and traces their historical origin to a mixed race of Dard, Mon and Mongolian nomads, which has held strongly to Buddhism as their way of life, faith, practice and religion. Rizvi, referring to the racial composition exhibited by Ladakh’s people, imputes the same to a blending of the Indo-Iranian and the Mongoloid who she infer came as part of the waves of immigration into the country. She adds “Dards, Tibetans and possibly other races too, met and mingled and over time blended to form a new community with its own characteristics; though in central and eastern Ladakh, Tibetan traits

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<sup>310</sup> Please see van Beek, (1997).Contested Classifications of People in Ladakh: An analysis of the Census of Jammu and Kashmir 1873-1941, Tibetan Studies, Vol 1, Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> Seminar of International Association of Tibetan Studies, Graz 1995.

<sup>311</sup> Van Beek, Dissimulations: Representing Ladakhi ‘Identity’. Perplexities of Identification: Anthropological Studies in Cultural Differentiation and the Use of Resources. H.Driessen and T. Otto (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2000): 164-188.

were predominant, culturally as well as racially.”<sup>312</sup> There are also followers of Christianity who also have been identified as belonging to the Bot/Boto tribe beginning 1989.<sup>313</sup>

The second largest tribal community in terms of population is identified as Balti. Historians trace the Balti community to those who followed the Balti princess who married into the Ladakhi royal family in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. John Bray (2005) locates the Balti community as follows:

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century King 'Jam-dbyangs-rnam-rgyal (r.1595-1616) was defeated in a disastrous war with Ali Mir, the ruler of Baltistan (Petech 1977: 33-37). The king himself was captured and imprisoned in Skardu, where he fell in love with Ali Mir's daughter rGyal Khatun. The two were eventually allowed to marry and 'Jam-dbyangs-rnam-rgyal was reinstated in Ladakh: rGyal Khatun was the mother of Seng-ge-rnam-rgyal, and one of several Balti princesses to marry into the Ladakhi royal family in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. A substantial Balti population followed her to Ladakh, and founded the Shia communities in Leh, Shey and Chushot.<sup>314</sup>

Other local narratives tell of a history identifying the Balti community as a name used to refer to the group from ancient times who were the first Tibetan-speaking people who embraced Islam. They were reportedly Buddhist earlier. In history, they are (in Tibetan) referred to as *Balpa* (frog) and *Ti* (water). The literal translation is frog water. Mr. Tashi Rabgyas, a renowned Ladakhi intellectual accounts this to the fact that all rivers flow to Balti and

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<sup>312</sup> J. Rizvi, LADAKH Crossroads of High Asia (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 55 and 129

<sup>313</sup> Van Beek, Public Secrets, Conscious Amnesia and the Celebration of Autonomy for Ladakh. In Hansen.T.B and Stepputat. F (2001, Ed).States of Imagination Ethnographic Explorations of Post Colonial States(Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 376

<sup>314</sup> John Bray (2005) Ladakhi Histories Local and Regional Perspectives. Brill Academic Publishers, quoting Sheikh A.G (1995) A Brief History of Muslims in Ladakh. In RROL 4 & 5 p: 190.

move slowly once they meet. This movement is like that of a frog. This community speaks Tibetan. Their community structure is originally Tibetan but post their embracing of Islam, they have given up the practice of polyandry.<sup>315</sup> For the 1989 classification for Scheduled Tribe status, Balti was used to designate Shia Muslims settled around Leh and Kargil and those living in Batalik area bordering on Baltistan. Those Sunni Muslims who by contrast resided in Kargil and Suru Valley were however classified as Purigpa.<sup>316</sup>

The Changpas who inhabits the cold mountainous regions of Rupshu and Changtang bordering Tibet are high altitude pastoralist and nomadic herds' people living in yak-hair tents, raising mainly yak and goats. Among the Lasakh Changpa, those who are still nomadic are known as Phalpa and they take their herds from the Hanley Valley to the village Lato. Hanley is home to six isolated settlements where the sedentary Changpa, the Fangpa reside. The Changpa speak Changskhat which is a dialect of Tibetan and practice Tibetan Buddhism. Since the year 2000 some from the community, notably most of the community of Kharnak, have abandoned the nomadic life and are settled in Leh town. Nilza (2008) while researching the migration patterns and process among the Changpas-Kharnak currently residing in Kharnakling, Leh, found that there are a number of reasons provided by her respondents for migration to Leh. These reasons range from (i) absence of basic amenities especially in regards to health, (ii) to provide education for children, (iii) difficult way of life harsh weather conditions, (iv) change in the intensity of snowfall, (v) influence from outside, (vi) lack of labour for livestock rearing. The researcher also found that among the Changpas in Kharnakling the traditional systems of social organization is losing relevance

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<sup>315</sup> Tashi Rabgyas. *Ladakh, Tradition and Change*. New Delhi: Published Through Doorjee Tsering, c/o Jayyed Press, Ballimaran, 2004.

<sup>316</sup> Van Beek, *Public Secrets, Conscious Amnesia and the Celebration of Autonomy for Ladakh*. In Hansen.T.B and Stepputat. F (2001, Ed).*States of Imagination Ethnographic Explorations of Post Colonial States*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 375.

especially the role of the ‘goba’ which is reduced to an obligatory post. There are difficulties in conducting religious activities, the monastery ‘thal’ (tax) has also increased over the years and there is decreasing interest in pastoral life.<sup>317</sup>

Historically the earliest inhabitants who identify themselves as Mon or Monyul were the community of expert musicians and carpenters. All the professional musicians, the players of *surna* and *daman* are Mon.<sup>318</sup> It was stated to the author by a renowned Ladakhi historian that they supposedly stayed away from intermarriage with other communities. Historians have assigned this act as an organic process to maintain their racial purity.

Closely linked to the Mon community is the Beda, who was historically Buddhist and are said to be “wandering minstrels”.<sup>319</sup> However, over a period of time many have embraced Islam, while a small population still remains Buddhist. There are unfounded murmuring (rumours) in Ladakhi society that both these communities were considered ‘lower’ among the various groups, historically located in a very nebulous Ladakhi social structure. However one cannot equate their status in Ladakhi society to communities embedded within the caste system as practiced across India. Other groups treat them and each other well and while there were historical reports of hindrance to monastery entry and usage of water from the well, currently this does not prevail. However, they are still endogamous. When questioned on this count, Mr. Tashi Rabgyas identifies these processes as ‘a social evil that has not diluted yet until recently’ (even with the adoption of modern democratic systems).

Another community inhabiting the region is known as Garra. They are Buddhist and are traditionally blacksmiths. They make knives

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<sup>317</sup> R. Nilza (2008). Socio Economic Conditions of the Changpas of Ladakh and Recent Changes, (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Unpublished Masters Dissertation)

<sup>318</sup> J. Rizvi, LADAKH Crossroads of High Asia (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007)

<sup>319</sup> *ibid*

and other iron tools. Mr. Rabgyas relates a short story about a struggle for status between the Garra and Mon as part of Ladakhi folklore. The Mon claimed that since they make the wooden part of the arrow and the Garra make the tip or cet of the arrow, they are higher in status to the Garra. In the debate on who was higher in status, the Garras argued that on the other hand the tip of the arrow was iron, thus they were higher in status. Intermarriage between these communities is still not prevalent. Nevertheless, each community has asserted itself within the democratic system proactively. Earlier the Mon, Beda and Garra were not allowed to become Lamas but later this 'rule' was waived off.

The only other community, although historically settled, but not given Scheduled Tribe status are known as Arghons. John Bray traces the historical movement of the Arghons to:

According to Ladakhi oral tradition (Sheikh 1995), 'Jam-dbyangnam-rgyal granted land to Kashmiri Muslim traders—known as mkhar-phyog-pa or 'court traders'—to settle in Leh, and they received special trade privileges in return for their services to the royal family. For example, the ancestor of the influential Khwaja family was invited to write the king's Persian correspondence with the Mughal governors of Kashmir, while a man called Ismail Zergar was brought to Leh to strike coins. Many of these families intermarried with Ladakhis: their descendants are known as Arghon and form the core of the Sunni community in and around Leh. Their family networks extended to Rudok, Lhasa and Yarkand as well as Kashmir.<sup>320</sup>

The Arghons were excluded from the Scheduled Tribe categorization process in 1989 on technical grounds, pertaining more to their being identified and equated with Hindus and Sikhs as compared to other communities inhabiting Ladakh.

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<sup>320</sup> John Bray, *Ladakhi Histories Local and Regional Perspectives* (Brill Academic Publishers, 2005)

## **Politico-Historical Analysis of Ladakh**

Over the centuries, those inhabiting Ladakh have historically been under tremendous strain from political interference, invasions and wars, economic demands and proselytisation from north, south east and west. History records a number of wars fought with invading groups and among various groups beginning even prior to the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. John Bray identifies the historical location and territorial changes as follows:

From the late 7<sup>th</sup> or early 8<sup>th</sup> century until sometime after 842 AD it was part of the Tibetan empire. From the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century until 1834, Ladakh was an independent kingdom. At its height in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, it extended as far as Rudok, Guge and Purang in what is now Western Tibet. In its final years, its territory corresponded roughly with today's Leh and Kargil districts, with the addition of Spiti. In 1834 Ladakh was invaded by the army of Raja Gulab Singh of Jammu, and it finally lost its independence in 1842. Four years later, it was incorporated into the new princely state of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), which acknowledged British paramountcy within the Indian empire. Since 1947 it has remained part of J&K within the independent Republic of India.<sup>321</sup>

These historical conflicts characterised by alternating political shifts and turns are felt by the community to this day. The reality before the UT status for Ladakh witnessed tremendous pressure being asserted by the Muslim dominated Jammu and Kashmir government on Leh-Ladakh. This had led to tension between the Ladakhis and the Jammu & Kashmir government and also within the local populace within Ladakh on grounds of religious affinity. These subterranean tensions have also manifested in violent conflicts between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in the Ladakh.

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<sup>321</sup>    *ibid*

In the mid 1980s, conflict between Buddhists and Muslims led to the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) calling a boycott of the minority Muslim community in the district. Earlier there had been individual cases of friction, but the first time any signs of group tension were witnessed was in 1986, when clear political demarcations on Buddhist and Muslim lines were drawn. In the following years, beginning with the summer of 1989, fights suddenly erupted between the two groups. While simmering tensions that prevailed historically among the two communities was kept under wraps for a long time, they began to gain a momentous upsurge and spilled out in the public domain. Many observers attribute the same to the perceived discriminatory attitude of the erstwhile Muslim dominated State government of Jammu and Kashmir against Buddhist Ladakhis.

The insidious growing perception among Buddhists, that the then Muslim – dominated Jammu and Kashmir state government was discriminating against them in favour of the local Muslim population made them asserted with a vengeance. Such political assertions by the Buddhist majority spiraled anxiety among minority Muslims who were perceived as being in close proximity to the earlier State Government. Many opine that within the erstwhile state, Ladakh – by far the biggest of its three constituents in terms of size, but correspondingly the smallest in terms of population, and having its own separate historically embedded identity – was not getting its due and never would under the Muslim dominated dispensation.

On this count various incidents have been noted by Kaul (2004) that led to this violent eruption accounted to the “pronounced leanings of successive State Governments towards the Muslims and presence of fundamentalist elements in the region from the valley...against the Buddhist.”<sup>322</sup> Historically some of these policies that aggravated the situation were the “non implementation of the

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<sup>322</sup> Kaul.S and Kaul H.N (2004). Ladakh through the Ages. Towards a New Identity. New Delhi: Indian Publishing Company



Gajendra Commission on Regional Imbalances for a degree college in the region, imposition of Urdu over the local Bodhi language as a medium of instruction, unimaginative planning of projects and its implementation like the Stakna Hydel Project which took over 20 years to complete, absence of representatives from Ladakh in State Cabinet, systematic dismantling of all important forums of Ladakh's development like the Ladakh Affairs Department, unrealistic norms adopted for allocation of Plan funds to the region, ... provision of only one representative for Buddhists in the State's legislature as against three Muslims and the gross disproportionate representation of the Buddhist in the State's services".<sup>323</sup> The sudden flare-up however was imputed to the manhandling of Mr. Rigzin Jora, Joint Secretary, D.C.C.I., Leh on July 7, 1989 in Leh market by four Muslim youths. Mr. Jora later became General Secretary of Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) that spearheaded the movement for more autonomy for Ladakh. After this incident there were major disturbances in Leh Bazaar in which four people were shot dead by the police and a curfew clamped.

Since then, after much political maneuvering and agitation, the Ladakhis (which includes residence of Kargil) did succeed in drawing from the Central Government the demand for their inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes in the year 1989, opening to them some welfare benefits, mainly as regards education and employment within the Indian union. This however hardly solved the problems of their relationship with Kashmir and elimination of the perceived discrimination against Leh Ladakh in terms of representation in the State Legislative Assembly as well as in terms of power and control over their own destiny.

Post the 1989 violence and Ladakh Buddhist Association's (LBA) social boycott of Muslims which was lifted in 1993, there were serious negotiations for the creation of a local council with legislative and fiscal powers that would give Ladakh a certain degree of independence from the State Government. Prolonged

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<sup>323</sup> *ibid*: 303.

negotiations with the Centre bore fruit with the creation and inauguration of the Leh Autonomous Hill Development Council in 1995. In principle this gave the people of Leh district a degree of control over their own affairs, something that they have not enjoyed since the Dogra conquest in 1834.

Throughout the first two decades of the 21 century, the political unease of the 1980s was still deeply embedded in the minds of the Ladakhis. Talks of Ladakhi dissatisfaction with the 'inefficient' and 'sectarian' State Government of Jammu and Kashmir were very much alive. By the late 1990s these tensions culminated into a more overt and concretized demand for Union Territory status or direct rule from Delhi for Ladakh. While the seeds of this demand was first articulated by Mr. Chhewang Rigzin Kloan, President Buddhist Association, Ladakh in a memorandum submitted to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India in May 4, 1949, which however was toned down because (as stated by Nehru) the issue was being discussed in the United Nation Security Council, it was Kushok Bakula, Head Lama of Ladakh who gave the demand a politico historical thrust beginning May 20, 1949. In a press conference in New Delhi on September 14, 1967, Kushok Bakula spoke of irreconcilable rifts with the sectarian Jammu and Kashmir government. He stated that the Ladakhis were tired of the discrimination practiced against them by the Government of Jammu and Kashmir and therefore wanted Ladakh to be brought under the Central administration. This, he stated, was in keeping with the feelings of the Ladakhi people.<sup>324</sup> Over the years, others have also raised this issue, such as in 1973 by Lama Lobsang, Secretary, Ladakh Bauddha Vihara, Delhi.

In the understanding of the Ladakhi, a Union Territory (UT) is conceived as a direct relationship with the union government with special provisions and status assigned due to its constitutional formation and development. There are four grounds on which

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<sup>324</sup> Kaul.S & Kaul H.N (2004) Ladakh through the Ages: Towards a New Identity. New Delhi: Indian Publishing Company. p: 229.

Union Territory status for Ladakh was articulated. Besides the most important and obvious grounds of heterogeneity and distinctiveness in geography, ethics, culture and linguistics, it is also formulated around a historical background of the demand for Union Territory since the early days of the formation of the Indian Union beginning 1949. The third reason is generally attributed to National security; as Ladakh shares its border with two countries with persistent threats and finally the lived experience of being discriminated by the then Jammu and Kashmir government persistently.<sup>325</sup> However, it must be noted that on every occasion, this demand was forcefully brow beaten by the erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir government.

With the idea of direct rule from Delhi having its genesis right from the early days of India's independence, this politico-historical articulation in the form of Union Territory status took concrete shape only in 2002 when the demand was propelled into the electoral domain as a fundamental issue of the Leh Ladakhi population for the people's political survival. This demand brought people from all ideological and political formations into a united platform which called itself the Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF). It constituted of a consortium of all political parties under a single flag conceived to articulate the struggle to achieve a Union Territory status for Ladakh with a distinct anti-Kashmir attitude. Interestingly few of the nominated candidates shifted sides and joined the Indian National Congress (INC). In the elections for Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), Leh in 2005, LUTF almost swept the elections. INC could only win two out of the twenty six seats. Since then, a kind of bipartisan politics begun in Ladakh between the LUTF and the Indian National Congress which altered the political scenes in Leh Ladakh significantly.

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<sup>325</sup> Thupstan Chhewang, 2013, retrieved from <http://www.reachladakh.com/bjps-struggle-for-ut/1818.html>

In 2010, when the elections for LAHDC, Leh, were round the corner, LUTF which still stood for grant of Union Territory status to Ladakh in view of constant discrimination faced by the region for last 63 years in all spheres of life, LUTF merged into the Bhartiya Janata Party on September 2010. The argument put forth for the merger was that since Bhartiya Janata Party being the only party in the country which supports the demand of Ladakhis for grant of UT status to the region, it was imperative to join forces with it to actually realise the cherished dream of every Ladakhi. The LUTF leaders pinned their hopes on the BJP supporting their demand in Indian parliament which is where such a decision could actually be taken. On the day of merger while welcoming LUTF into its fold, Rajnath Singh, president of the Bharatiya Janata Party reiterated his promise to secure Union Territory status for Ladakh. He was quoted to have stated "our party will fight at all levels to secure Union Territory status for Ladakh".

Consequently, the LUTF (now BJP) received a crushing defeat in the hands of INC in the 2010 elections, winning only 4 out of 26 seats. Its founding leaders are now fragmented in BJP, INC and the National Conference. Electorally this is a sort of comeback for the INC who won the first two elections to the LAHDC but was subsequently defeated by LUTF in 2005. By sweeping the 4th elections of LAHDC Leh, the Congress staged some kind of a comeback at local self-governance levels.

On 3rd August 2013, the BJP (previous LUTF) organized a public meeting in Leh to pressurise the state government and centre to fulfill their UT demands. The struggle for Union Territory status in Leh Ladakh received a fillip after the INC led central government in Delhi declared the creation of Telangana as the 29th independent state of Indian Union. While some observers at this point in time stated that the UT demand has lost its sheen since the inception of LAHDC, the demand for UT status to Ladakh was far from over and kept simmering as both key political stakeholders; BJP and INC were yet to give up on such a demand. On the side of the BJP

(previous LUTF) its outspoken leader Chering Dorje<sup>326</sup> was quoted to have asserted “we (Ladakhis) are not opposed to right to self-determination of Kashmiri people. But their choice cannot be thrust upon people of Ladakh. We resent any decision that is imposed upon us against our will and aspiration” and on behalf of the Indian National Congress, its leader Rigzin Spalbar, reassured Ladakhi that his party will continue to take up the Union Territory demand for Ladakh in future at appropriate forums without taking political mileage out of the issue.

Nevertheless, the demand for Union Territory status remained an elusive goal for the Leh Ladakhi populace. A number of reasons were given by local leaders about the inability to attain Union Territory status for Ladakh from the Indian State. One reason was the internal unrest between the Buddhist and Muslim populace inhabiting the area that has sometimes led to misunderstanding and conflict, as observed in the past. According to politically conscious locals, while accepting the outright sectarian nature of the Muslim dominated Jammu and Kashmir government, the larger reason they conceived for non fulfillment of their goal was more to do with shifting framework of political alignments taking place in New Delhi (the seat of the Indian Parliament) and the geopolitical reconfiguration within the region vis-a-vis Pakistan, Afghanistan and other countries with a high Muslim population.

The Indian State, many believed did not want to disturb the current political arrangement with the Kashmir dominated Jammu and Kashmir government. This reverts back to the instrument of accession signed by Hari Singh who ascended the throne of Kashmir in 1925 and was the reigning monarch in 1947. Interpretation and misinterpretation about the instrument of accession signed by Hari Singh, especially regarding a plebiscite to be conducted, persisted as a contentious issue between India,

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<sup>326</sup> Tobdan & Dorje.C. (1996) Historical Documents from Western Trans-Himalaya Lahul, Zaskar and Ladakh. Delhi: Book India Publishing.

Pakistan and the people of Kashmir. Post Hari Singh who on the advice of the Indian government in 1949, yielded the government to Sheikh Abdullah, the leader of a popular political party called the National Conference Party; three wars have been fought between Indian and Pakistan. The J&K state till 2019 functioned by a special status within the Union of India – as per Article 370 of the Indian Constitution which pertains to spelling out details regarding the kind of relationship that the Indian parliament would and should have with the Jammu and Kashmir government. The status of J&K is still debated and remains a controversial issue to this very day.

In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was persistent with its demand to scrap Article 370 that gives J&K a special status. The context then seemed to have rested on some kind of an unstable peace and many of the contending stakeholders were locked in a contentious stalemate. Further, there was also external pressure on the state of Jammu and Kashmir as radical militant groups sought independence for Jammu and Kashmir (J & K) from India. There were reports of foreign militants participating in the struggle and entering J & K from Pakistan.

As witnessed, some Ladakhis felt these militant movements were only gaining ground and could become stronger by the day. It was envisaged that as radical Islamist groups asserted pressure on various states in the region, Jammu and Kashmir would become a more firm target for Islamist radicals in the future.

On this count, the analysis of some politically conscious Ladakhis during this period was that were observed taking place in the region had geopolitical significance that were bound to impact them one day or the other. They also held a strong belief that the Kashmir dominated government is embedded in prejudices against them and it would be foolhardy for them to rest their future on such a government. They argued that they had never identified themselves with Kashmir or Jammu and that they had always been a separate community with a very different history. To them, their historically constituted fears were not made-up existential imaginations but

grounded on historical facts. It is on this count that some of the Ladakhis believed that it is imperative to keep the demand of a Union Territory status for Leh Ladakh alive (with allegiance to the Indian State) even though the region of Kargil might not be supportive of such a move.

In the opinion of some Ladakhis, this strategic demand for a Union Territory status while being able to project Leh-Ladakh as having an organic historical dissimilarity with Kashmir, is also able to open up a possible path towards a future that could set them free in case of murky solutions vis-a-vis the Kashmir political imbroglio. It was common perception that if the Indian State comes to a stage where it would have to let go of Kashmir at any point in history, it would bring Ladakh into India's territorial domain. This was so not only because of geostrategic reasons but more so because the people of Ladakh identify themselves closely with India, more than either with China, Pakistan or Kashmir. Many Ladakhis saw India as a saviour country that would rescue them in times of danger and conflict and it was on these grounds that their loyalty remained with the Indian State.<sup>327</sup>

Thus, when in August 2019, the Government of India moved to separate Ladakh from the state of Jammu and Kashmir and declared Ladakh a Union Territory as on 31 October 2019, many local politicians and community leaders welcomed the move. It was like a whole community becoming suddenly free from historical bondage that seemed impossible to break free from. A yearning realized after years of struggle and resistance.

After the initial celebration and now that things have begun settling down, there are new questions arising among the Ladakhi. There are those who are somewhat skeptical about the central government's intent and effort towards safeguarding Ladakh's Tribal Cultural Heritage and its fragile ecosystem. There are, as is now being

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<sup>327</sup> For details, see, Memorandum submitted to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru by President Buddhist Association, Ladakh on 4 May 1949.

discussed in the community, the fear of the possibility of large scale industrial and mining operations in Ladakh fueling mass migration into the fragile eco system, thereby overtaking the community based tourism industry that is foundational to its people.

All or any of the above possibilities, it is envisaged could damage the tribal identity and harm the age-old preservation of the environment and natural resources by the locals. Some of the Ladakhi have even begun arguing, citing the case of Uttarakhand where the locals can no longer afford to buy land, resulting in their migration to Urban and semi Urban areas, this further fueling displacement of people from their historical habitats.

It is also pertinent to note that currently the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council is left with very little functional framework after the UT administration took over. All official proceedings and decisions on governance in Ladakh have now come from the office of the Lieutenant Governor. There is tension between the two legal bodies who are finding it difficult to coexist as functionaries of the same local system.

Thus it is argued that without a legislative assembly, UT Ladakh and its tribal minority are now left with only a single Member of Parliament in Rajya Sabha and the very much 'weakened' Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council. Many opine that unless the UT is granted 6th schedule Tribal status, the current politico-legal infrastructure does not seem to provide enough constitutional safeguards and representation to protect the cultural Tribal identity of the Ladakhis.

In this context the demands for constitutional safeguards in the form of a Legislative assembly or the 6th Schedule Tribal status is now being seen as imperative. Such powers conferred on the tribal peoples will go a long way in augmenting context-based livelihoods, support the sustainable practices of the community, protect environment, assure ecological balance and safeguard language and ethnicity.



## **Some Concluding Thoughts**

The emerging Ladakhi reality after having attained a historical goal of UT status will greatly be defined by tension felt by the community system on environment, development and mass in-out migration. However this will greatly depend on whether the community will be empowered with a State Legislature or remain a UT. The earlier tension around culture, identity and religion, which used to be part of Leh-Ladakh's history, has subsided. The historical friction with Muslim dominated Kashmir is historically resolved. Yet new issues have begun to emerge.

Even with a UT status, the minority tribal community with a population of less than 300,000 indigenous Tribals would still remain far from being empowered. Any move by the central government to set up large scale industries or mining activities will lead to the mass migration of the workforce which in turn will be a threat to the Cultural Heritage of the indigenous population and their unique agro-based lifestyle outside the city of Leh. With minimal power in their hands and no legislative assembly, the people are left without a voice and thereby are at the mercy of the central government and its Capitalist functionaries.

The market has its eyes set on Ladakh and the tension generated from the demand and supply process is bound to impact the local populace. It has already been observed that the pace of urbanization taking place, driven both by internal and external factors, is exerting tremendous pressure on land, water and food. Also the product of waste generated by urban populations is reaching alarming proportions. Together with this, existing urbanization has brought external cultural influence and hastened the process of lifestyle change and development of the local population. The local community systems are starting to feel the pressure and age old practices at the local level that once held the communities together are starting to disintegrate.

Nonetheless, notwithstanding all of these challenges, the tribal communities of Leh Ladakh are one of the most resilient peoples in

the world, having survived for millennia by adapting to the most difficult terrains and surviving in a most delicate eco-system. Their strong sense of community and their constant preparedness to protect it has always seen them through the most trying times in their very long history. With such characteristics embedded deep within their system, their strides to the future could only be more fulfilling as they stand to protect their rightful geopolitical space as indigenous peoples.

# The Mapithel Dam: Tribal Resistance, Displacement and Livelihoods

Onhring Langhu

*I value the information received from the participants and acknowledge their participation, time, and energy in the process of data collection.*

## Introduction

This Chapter focuses on the lived reality of the people settling in Mapithel Dam. Construction of the dam is considered as part of national development. Large dams are known for producing hydroelectricity, controlling flood, generating water for the irrigation system and water supply for drinking and other purposes. However, it is observed that development planners and practitioners in dam construction overestimate the advantages of dams and are somewhat blind to the expenses and consequences incurred by the large dam constructions.

The resistance to the Mapithel multi-purpose dam project has been going on for the past thirty-seven years (37 yrs), lingering on to this very day. The people have raised the issue of the dam impacting their agricultural land, livelihood, culture, and identity. The construction of the Mapithel dam has also raised many questions concerning the issues of development, displacement and livelihoods of the Project Affected Persons (PAPs). This Chapter focuses mainly on the resistance, displacement and livelihood of the PAPs living in area to be submerged by the Mapithel dam.

The construction of large dams globally has been of significant interest to environmentalist, economist, development planners, practitioners, and researchers. Development projects in India such as large dams are perceived as ‘temples of modern India’, a term coined by India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. As large dams are considered one of the projects of national development in

the country it is embedded in peoples psyche that no matter the social cost, there can be no compromise with large dams. Historically, dam construction has been practised for nearly five thousand (5,000) years'. However, the challenge in justifying their enormous environmental and social impact continues.<sup>328</sup> The World Commission on the dam reports (2000) claims that there has been a rapid increase in the construction of a large dam. The report estimated that at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were over forty-five thousand (45000) large dams in over one-hundred forty (140) countries.<sup>329</sup> The overall physical displacement caused by big dams in the world ranges from forty to eighty (40-80) millions peoples. In India, it is estimated that sixteen to thirty-eight (16-38) millions of people are being displaced by the construction of big dams, especially directly impacting the tribal communities.<sup>330</sup> At present, there are four thousand eight hundred sixty-two (4862) completed large dams and three hundred twenty-one (321) large dams under construction in India according to a National Register of large dam.<sup>331</sup> It is estimated globally that approximately 10 million people are displaced each year as a result of these development project activities.<sup>332</sup> In the post-independence period in India, it is estimated that development projects (five years plans) are displacing almost five lakhs people each year. Among the development projects, hydroelectricity and irrigation projects are the largest sources of people's displacement. The construction of dam in India from 1951-1985 has displaced about two-hundred ten (210) lakhs

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<sup>328</sup> Scudder 2012; Haas and Skinner 2015, Urban et al. 2015 cited in J. Kirchherr, 'Strategies of Successful Anti-Dam Movements: Evidence from Myanmar and Thailand, *Society & Natural Resources*, 31(2) 2018: 166- 182.

<sup>329</sup> World Commission on Dam, *Dams and Development A New Framework for Decision Making*. The report of world commission on dam. (UK: Earthscan Publication, 2000).

<sup>330</sup> *ibid*

<sup>331</sup> Retrieved from [http://cwc.gov.in/main/downloads/NRLD\\_04012017.pdf](http://cwc.gov.in/main/downloads/NRLD_04012017.pdf) National register of large dam retrieved on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2018

<sup>332</sup> M. Cernea, 'Development's Painful Costs', In S. Parasuraman, *The Development dilemma Displacement in India* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), 1-30.

of people.<sup>333</sup> A significant number of those displaced are tribal/Adivasis and other economically marginal rural population who have historically been dependent on natural resources for their sustenance. The 29<sup>th</sup> Report of the Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Tribes notes that even though tribal people are roughly 7.5 per cent of the Indian population, over 40 per cent of those displaced came from tribal communities.<sup>334</sup> An official report on the rehabilitation of tribes, based on a comprehensive study of 110 projects, concludes that of the 16.94 lakhs people displaced by these projects, almost 50 percent (8.14 lakhs) were tribal communities.<sup>335</sup> Most of the Project displaced people in India are given only monetary compensation without proper rehabilitation and resettlement (R&R).<sup>336</sup> The construction of the large dam Projects has caused in many cases extensive loss to the culture, ecology and human survival.<sup>337</sup> The development Projects induced displacement in India and it resulted in landlessness, homelessness, joblessness, marginalization, poor food insecurity, increased morbidity, loss of common property resources and social disarticulation.<sup>338</sup> In India, after independence, the government adopted policies for planned economy focusing on industrial and infrastructure development. The construction of development projects such as the big dams, mining projects, factories, and industries have been given priorities since then. The construction of the dam for harnessing water supply, irrigation and power

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<sup>333</sup> S. Kothari, 'Whose Nation? The Displaced as Victims of Development'. *Economic and Political Weekly* 31(24), 1996: 1476-1485

<sup>334</sup> *ibid*

<sup>335</sup> The Government of India, Working Group on Development and Welfare of Scheduled Tribes during the Eighth Five-Year Plan (1990-95), 1993.

<sup>336</sup> P.S. Judge, 'What Goes Wrong with Rehabilitation': A Sociological View Point. *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 53(1-2) 2000: 161-176.

<sup>337</sup> Pearse-Smith, The Return of Large Dams to the Development Agenda: A Post-Development Critique. *Consilience: The journal of Sustainable Development*, 11(2) 2014: 123-131; S. Bhaumick, "Tripura's Gumti Dam must go". *Ecologist Asia*, 11(1) 2003: 84-86.

<sup>338</sup> M. Cernea, 'Development's Painful Costs', In S. Parasuraman, *The Development Dilemma Displacement in India* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), 1-30.

generation was considered a need for India as a nation to develop. The development projects such as large dams in India are perceived as national progress and as a symbol for modern development during that period, argued.<sup>339</sup> However, development projects, it is observed, displaced people from their ancestral home and cause loss to the livelihood activities by submerging their agricultural land, and ecology.<sup>340</sup> On this count, Bisht argued that large scale development projects often result in massive displacement of the population, not only physical dislocation but also impact on people's livelihood and women's empowerment.<sup>341</sup> Nehru was supposed to have said to the ten thousand facing the grim of displacement in Orissa in 1984 while laying the foundation for the Hirakud Dam that, if you have to suffer, you should do so in the interest of the country'.<sup>342</sup>

Northeast India consisting of eight (8) states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim is known for its richness in natural resources such as water, forest, land, wildlife's and mineral resources. The region is known as the hub for generating hydro-electricity and also has been tagged as the country's 'future powerhouse'.<sup>343</sup> The Central electricity authority in 2013 has estimated 42.54 percent of the country's hydropower potential in Northeast only.<sup>344</sup> At least one hundred sixty-eight (168) large hydroelectric projects with a total installed capacity of 63,328 MW are proposed for the region by Central

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<sup>339</sup> A.R. Chowdhury, 'Decommissioning dams in India: A Comparative Assessment of Mullaperiyar and other cases'. *Development in Practice*, 23(2) 2013: 292-298.

<sup>340</sup> Pearse-Smith, 'The Return of Large Dams to the Development Agenda: A Post-Development Critique'. *Consilience: The journal of Sustainable Development*, 11(2) 2014: 123-131

<sup>341</sup> T.C. Bisht, 'Development-Induced Displacement and Women: The Case of Tehri Dam, India'. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 10 (4)2009:301-317.

<sup>342</sup> A cited in A. Marino, 'The Cost of Dams: Acts of Writing as Resistance in Post Colonial India. *Citizenship Studies*, 16(5-6) 2012: 705-719.

<sup>343</sup> The tag has been proactively used for the region since the Northeast business Summit in Mumbai in July 2002

<sup>344</sup> For details, see, Central Electricity Authority report 2013

Electricity Authority, 2001.<sup>345</sup> The construction of big dams has displaced thousands of people and will displace many more in the future with the successful implementation of these development projects.

In the Manipur context, the completed big dams seem to have failed their objectives in generating hydro-power and in supplying water as envisaged. The two big dams (Khuga dam and Sinda dam) in Manipur have failed to fulfil their purpose of flood management, hydro-electricity generation and irrigation.<sup>346</sup> The two multipurpose dams (Mapithel dam and Tipaimuk dam) which are under construction are being carried forward without learning any lessons from the failure of the other two dams.

It is observed that in Manipur, most multi-purpose dams are constructed in tribal areas. The dam construction has displaced the tribal communities in the past and it will continue to displace them in future. It is estimated that Khuga dam in Manipur had displaced two thousand two hundred ninety-five (2295) tribal peoples.<sup>347</sup> In this backdrop, it is important to understand the idea of dam construction in Manipur state and examine why people are against the construction of multi-purpose dams in the State.

It is crucial to analyze the narratives and experience of the Project affected persons (PAPs) critically. This chapter raises some pertinent questions: Why are the people against the construction of Mapithel dam multi-purpose project? How the constructions of Mapithel dam multipurpose project affect the tribal communities living in the Mapithel dam site and area? What are the people's narratives and experience concerning displacement and their

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<sup>345</sup> N. Vigholika Dams and Environmental governance in Northeast India. Retrieved from [http://trpervis.nic.in/test/doc\\_files/Dams\\_and\\_Environmental\\_Governance\\_in\\_NE\\_India.pdf](http://trpervis.nic.in/test/doc_files/Dams_and_Environmental_Governance_in_NE_India.pdf)

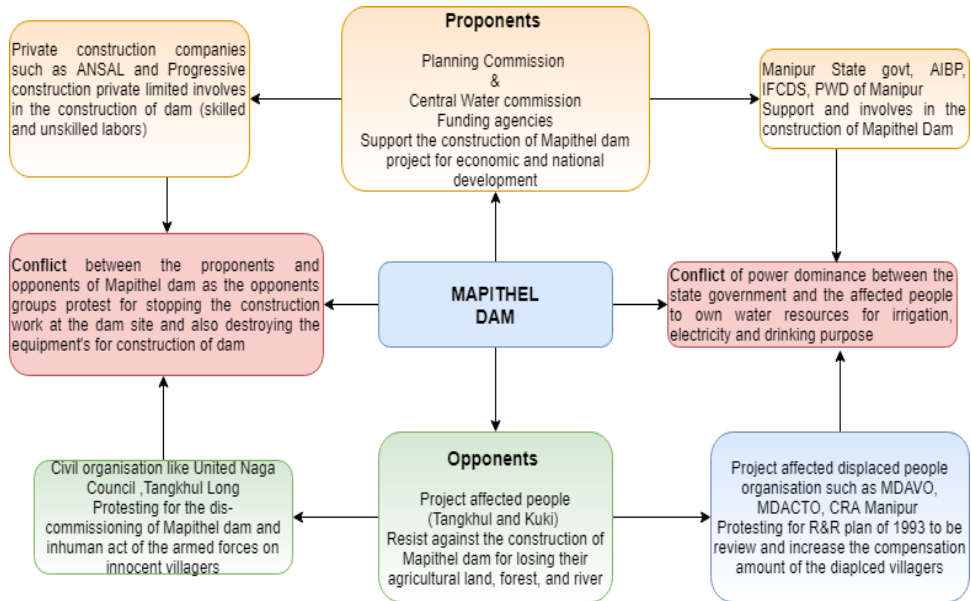
<sup>346</sup> Jiten Yumnam and Pushpa kojiam, People Assessment of Mapithel (Imphal: Centre for Research and Advocacy, Manipur, 2014).

<sup>347</sup> S Thangboi Zou (2011) Journal of North East India Studies Vol 1(1). 36-60 <http://www.jneis.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/1.1.3.pdf>

livelihood?

## Concept and Framework

### The Political Ecology of Mapithel Dam



## Method

Part of my quest to get answers to these questions led me to the Mapithel Dam areas project such as Chadong, Ramrei (Lamlai Khunou), Riha, Thoyee and Louphong which were situated upstream. This took place in the year 2016. I had reviewed relevant secondary documents such as online newspaper, existing R&R plan,<sup>348</sup> report on social impact assessment of Mapithel dam was retrieved from different NGOs and individuals working in the field. I had contacted an NGO based in Manipur working on development issues<sup>349</sup> who had relevant documents and articles. This helped me to understand the issue of Mapithel dam to a greater extent. I interacted with civil organisation such as Mapithel Dam affected organisation (MDAVO) and Mapithel dam affected Ching Tam organisation (MDACTO) engaging actively in organising and mobilising people against the construction of

<sup>348</sup> Rehabilitation and Resettlement plan

<sup>349</sup> Centre for Research and Advocacy Manipur has been working on Social and environment impact of Mapithel dam



Mapithel dam. They were also protesting to review the R&R plan of 1993 and the compensation rate. I also met leaders of MDAVO and MDACTO and discussed the issue with them in detail.

### **Situating the Context of Mapithel Dam**

The Thoubal River or YangwuiKhong River <sup>350</sup> is one of the largest rivers in Manipur. It originates from the western slopes of the Siroi hill ranges in the Ukhrul district at an altitude of about 2000 meters and flows through the Thoubal district lower down in the valley before joining the Imphal River at Irong Lethal. According to the PAPs, an investigation for construction of Mapithel dam Project was conducted in 1976. The primary purpose of constructing Mapithel dam multipurpose Project was to make use of the water resources for hydro-power, water supply, irrigation and flood management. The survey was conducted by the Manipur state government along with the assistance of CWC,<sup>351</sup> CSMRS and G.S.I.<sup>352</sup> The feasibility report of this multipurpose project was submitted to CWC in September 1976 and the planning commission approved the project in May 1980 for Rs. 47.25 crores and initiated the construction of the project in 1991.<sup>353</sup> There are fifty-six (56) villages inhabited around the YangwuiKhong/Thoubal River.<sup>354</sup>

The construction of Mapithel dam has displaced some tribal communities<sup>355</sup> living near the dam sites. The directly affected

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<sup>350</sup> Taken from Tangkhul's Naga dialect YangwuiKhong 'Yangwui' means a place name in Ukhrul district from where the river started to flow and 'Khong' Meaning River.

<sup>351</sup> Central Water Commission an Apex organisation of water resource management in India

<sup>352</sup> Central Soil and Minerals resources station and Geological survey of India

<sup>353</sup> IFCD & Government of Manipur, Thoubal Multipurpose Project: Rehabilitation Plan for the Outlets (Imphal: Irrigation and Flood Control Department, 1998)

<sup>354</sup> Centre for Advocacy and Research word press  
<https://cramanipur.wordpress.com/2018/03/19/5-reasons-why-mapithel-dam-spells-disaster-for-manipur/>

<sup>355</sup> The tribal communities comprise of the Tangkhul Naga's and the Kuki's

villages such as Chadong, Lamlai Khunou, Riha, Thoyee and Louphong are located at the upstream of the dam site. The village Chadong has been submerged completely under the water along with their agricultural land and forest. The construction of Mapithel dam in many ways has affected the lives of the tribal people (Kukis' and Nagas') living within and around the dam site areas.

This map of dam site is generated using Google earth software, the location of Mapithel dam is 24°49'25.7"N 94°08'29.6"E. The shown villages are located mostly in the upstream of Mapithel dam.



### **Some Insights on Tribal Resistance**

Ngaranmi (60 yrs) from Chadong village stated that the beginning of resistance against Mapithel dam began in the year 1985 with the formation of a local organization Mapithel Area Chingshang Organization (MACO), Manipur East district now Ukhrul district. The primary objective of this organization was to halt the construction of Mapithel dam and draw the attention of the Manipur state government to stop its construction. MACO claimed that the Government of Manipur (GOM) failed to take prior informed consent of the village authority and PAPs. The construction of Mapithel dam took place in 1990 without Free Prior and Informed consent from those to be affected by the dam

construction.<sup>356</sup> There was no proper environmental impact assessment (EIA), Social Impact Assessment (SIA) and Livelihood Impact Assessment prior to the construction of a dam in 1970s and 80s. But the world commission on environment and development (WCED) has clearly stated that prior informed consent should be sought before any development projects are implemented. In 1990 the Mapithel Dam Affected Village organization (MDAVO) was formed by the PAPs. This organization was formed primarily to protest against the construction of Mapithel dam by the PAPs. The GOM was compelled to signed an R&R plan of 1993 MoATC <sup>357</sup> agreement with MDAVO due to their strong resistance against Mapithel dam construction.

According to the MoATC, the process of the R&R plan and monetary compensation was to be given entirely within two years of its agreement. However the R&R plan of 1993 was not implemented properly by the government. For instance the monetary compensation was given in piecemeal and without any rehabilitation and resettlement program for PAPs. In 1998 a new R&R policy was formulated to provide rehabilitation and resettlement to the PAPs displaced population but little was done in this regard. The downstream project affected organization known as Mapithel Downstream affected Ching-Tam organization (MDACTO) was formed in 2008 as the GOM did not involved them in the R&R plan of 1993. They joined the protest led by

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<sup>356</sup> N. Kipgen, 'Dissenting voices from Margin Mapithel DAm in Manipur'. Economic and Political Weekly, 50 (39) 2015

Also refer to Jairath Vasundhara (2011), The struggle against Mapithel dam in Manipur India. Ritimo.org <https://www.ritimo.org/The-Struggle-against-Mapithel-Dam-in-Manipur-India>

Also refer to Centre for Research and Advocacy (CRA) , Manipur word press <https://cramanipur.wordpress.com/2018/03/19/5-reasons-why-mapithel-dam-spells-disaster-for-manipur/>

<sup>357</sup> Memorandum of agreement terms and condition which was signed between the GOM (IFCD) and PAPs. The monetary compensation agreement amount of one Lakh per acre (agricultural land), fifty thousand per acre (homestead land) and twenty-five thousand per acre forest or Jhum land was agreed upon.

MDAVO to re-review the R&R plan of 1993. They demanded that the GOM provide them monetary compensation as their agricultural lands were also submerged due to the dam construction. The PAPs demanded the review of R&R plan of 1993 as the allocation of project budget had increase. The GOM constituted an expert review committee to look into the matter of R&R plan in 2008. However, without any progress the GOM brought in arm forces and the dam site became a militarized zone. The PAPs stage a protest on November 3, 2008 injuring many people including women because of the police action to disperse the protestors.

The United Naga Council (UNC) leaders and Naga frontal activist were prevented from reaching the Mapithel dam site by the police and security personnel with the imposition of 144 CrPC<sup>358</sup> at Chadong village dam construction area.<sup>359</sup> The upstream PAPs and downstream PAPs resistance against the Mapithel dam construction has in many ways brought in conflict, injuries, stress and militarization. The GOM were not ready to negotiate after the incident. The dam site has been militarized and the movement of the people around the dam site is being restricted.

One person from Chadong village who did not want to be name argued that “the construction of Mapithel dam in Manipur has violated their rights to live with dignity given in the Article 21 of India Constitution. The construction of Mapithel dam has brought in land conflict, violence and displacement which disturbed the peaceful co-existence of different tribal communities”.

The constitution of India, Article 371-C, has given special legislation, and Judicial power to the Hill Area Committee (HAC) of the tribes in Manipur State to governed themselves and protect their land, resources and culture from outsiders. However, the

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<sup>358</sup> Section 144 CrPC of the criminal procedure code empowers a magistrate to prohibit the assembly of more than four people in the area

<sup>359</sup> E-pao Imphal, February 05 2015 UNC (United Naga Council) Manipur Protest Against Mapithel Dam <http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=26..060215.feb15>

construction of Mapithel dam, it can be argued has violated Article 371- C of the Indian constitution given to the tribal communities of Manipur. Article 371-C empowers the tribal communities to govern themselves. Further the GOM has also violated Article 3 of UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) which emphasise on Free prior informed consent (FPIC) before the construction of any large developmental project.

India also practices the doctrine of eminent domain <sup>360</sup> in planning, implementing and construction of development projects. The Article 31 and 300-A of the Indian constitution stated that the government has a supreme power to acquire land, property and resources of any individual for the general public interest in India but with proper compensation, as stated in Article 31(2). The Land Acquisition Act 1894 (LAA) which continued to be the force for 119 years till 2013 to acquire land for development projects in India and based on the principle of the State's eminent domain recognizes only individual ownership and treats all biodiversity and common land as State property.<sup>361</sup> In 2013 the Indian parliament enacted the Right to Transparency, Just compensation in Land Acquisition Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013 (LAR&R 2013) to provide better rehabilitation and resettlement plans for the PAPs. Rehabilitation should not be limited to its economic components. However, the government needs to look after individual specific social, cultural and psychological impact caused by dam and displacement to prevent them from further marginalization.

## **Displacement**

The construction of Mapithel dam in Yangwuihong River has

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<sup>360</sup> Umamaheswari. R & Dr. A. Sree Latha (2018) International Journal of Pure and Applied Mathematics Vol 120(5) P. 1771-1780 The absolute power of the state to owned land for 'public interest' or development by paying compensation

<sup>361</sup> W. Fernandes et.al (2016) The development dilemma: Displacement in Meghalaya 1947-2010 North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati PP. 4-6.

induced development and displacement of the tribal communities. The Mapithel dam construction has submerged acres of agricultural land, homestead land and the forest-covered area near the dam catchment area and beyond. The complete construction of Mapithel dam will submerge at least 778 hectares of agricultural land and 595 hectares of forest land.<sup>362</sup> The blocking of Yangwuihong River has inundated and submerged 2000 hectares of agriculture land in the villages of Chadong, Riha, Ramrei, Thoyee, Senkai and Sikibun.<sup>363</sup>

It is observed that the construction of Mapithel dam has submerged and displaced the tribal communities of Chadong villagers (Upstream village), Louphong villagers (Upstream), Ramrei villagers, Maphou villagers (Construction site) and other neighbouring villages. The dam construction will further affect 44 villages within the catchment areas of 565 sq. Km if the water level keeps on increasing. The details of the monetary compensation agreement under MoATC of 1993 for the “clearance of land” are given as follows: for each acre of ‘Agriculture wetland (paddy field)’ rate was Rs.1,00,000; for ‘Ingkhol (homestead) land’ the rate per acre was Rs.50,000 and for ‘Forest/Jhum land’ the rate per acre was Rs.25,000.<sup>364</sup>

It is estimated that around 2860 population and 713 households has been displaced at present. The number of displaced populations will increase as the water level keep on rising especially, during monsoon season. The details of the displaced villages and population as reported by village elders of Chadong and Ramrei stood at 2860 peoples of 713 households. In Chadong village, 1037 peoples of 240 households were displaced. In Ramrei/Lamlai

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<sup>362</sup> Kojiam Pushparani Jan 26, 2014 Land and Its People: What’s in Mapithel Dam  
[http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news\\_section.opinions.Opinion\\_on\\_Building\\_of\\_Tipaimukh\\_Dam.Land\\_and\\_its\\_people\\_Whats\\_in\\_Mapithel\\_Dam\\_By\\_Kojiam\\_Pushparani](http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.opinions.Opinion_on_Building_of_Tipaimukh_Dam.Land_and_its_people_Whats_in_Mapithel_Dam_By_Kojiam_Pushparani)

<sup>363</sup> Jiten Yumnam July 8 2015 Mapithel dam: An insider look. International rivers people, water, life. <https://www.internationalrivers.org/blogs/328-22>

<sup>364</sup> Source: MoATC R&R plan of 1993 (MDAVO, 2008)

Khunou, 1823 peoples of 473 households were displaced. In Louphong village, households and number of displaced peoples was not available.

The PAPs from Chadong, Thoyee and Louphong informed that they had been relocated two to three times without alternative arrangement from the GOM due to the increased water level at the dam site. The PAP villages were informed by the GOM to relocate their villages from the dam sites in the neighbouring villages without providing them proper R&R programs which have violated the R&R plan of 1993 agreement which the GOM agreed to provide proper rehabilitation and resettlement for the PAP.

One of the Project affected individual P. Mahanmi (Lamlai Khunou village chief) stated that “A compensation for agriculture land was provided after signing a MoATC (1993) between the GOM and the MDAVO. It was agreed that the compensation amount to be provided within two years. But the compensation amount was given in a piecemeal instalment basis and only to 85 per cent of the total amount was to be given to us”. Moreover, the individual claim that the homestead land and forest/Jhum land community land was not compensated properly. The land compensation amount was not given to all the PAPs. Therefore, the displaced people staged a protest at the dam site demanding the review of the MoATC signed.

The Mapithel dam construction company official claimed that five of its workers were killed by the unknown armed group in 2008<sup>365</sup> at the protest site. The killing of the workers at the dam site is condemnable on humanitarian ground. The killing of the workers led to the high surveillance and movement of people was restricted within the dam sites. Further the GOM declared the dam site as ‘disturbed area’ and imposed AFSPA (Armed Forced Special power

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<sup>365</sup> For details, see, <https://www.ritimo.org/The-Struggle-against-Mapithel-Dam-in-Manipur-India>

act).<sup>366</sup> Post the killing of dam workers incident, several leaders and PAP involved in the protest were detained by the armed forces as prime suspects. One of the PAP of Chadong village claimed that many innocent people were detain and given inhuman treatment behind the bar. Subsequently the State government did not entertain any meeting and negotiation with the PAP organization and the individuals. The displaced villagers from Louphong and Chadong and Nongdam Kuki especially the pregnant women experience serious health issue due to the unwanted smell emerging from the water reservoir. The villagers situated within these three villages could not breathe in clean air and consume clean water because; the air and water were contaminated due the release of waste materials from the dam site.

The submergence of villages' schools, health-care centre, creates additional burdens to the PAPs as no basic alternatives amenities facilities have been arranged for them. Militarization in the area has caused hindrance for the movement of the people freely. The school children are compelled to go to Imphal for their education which is 27-30 km away from the dam sites. Manipur state is also situated in seismic Zone V, which is the most earthquake-prone Zone area according to India Seismic zone report of 2001. In case of earth quake occurrence there are high chances of wiping out the entire population located at the downstream areas of the dam site. The downstream area or a village which is inhabited by Meiteis, Kukis and Tangkhuls communities might experience scarcity or water, pollution and flood in times of dam reservoir break down especially during monsoon season. People have to cross the Yangwuihong River to reach Chadong village through boat services which is in time dangerous and costly. Recently three

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<sup>366</sup> It is an act of the parliament of India passed on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1958 that grant special powers to the Indian Armed force to detain and kill any person who are against the Indian government. Because of this act many innocent people had lost their lives.



tourist feared dead as boat capsizes due to storms.<sup>367</sup> There has been many incidences of boat capsizes in the past claims the Chadong villagers.

## **Livelihood**

The construction of Mapithel dam has impacted the livelihood of the PAPs immensely. The displaced PAPs practice agriculture as their primary source of livelihood and income generation. The other sources of livelihood include Jhum cultivation, vegetable farming, cattle rearing and food gathering from the nearby forest area. The river Yangwuihong also provide fishes, stones, sands and pebbles for the local community. The tribal villages' at the dam site livelihood activities include collecting of sands and pebble, fishing and farming. However, the submergence of agricultural land, river, and community grazing ground for cattle's has destroyed the livelihood activities of the tribal communities completely. A woman from Riha village Ningamla claim that the

“Yangwuihong River provides us with sand, stones, and pebbles in the time of flood and fishes for our sustenance. The riverbank has rich soil fertility (alluvial soil) which is good for vegetable crop farming. But now after the dam construction surviving is difficult as the entire river banks have submerged underwater and we are living from hand to mouth with the loss of our livelihood activities”.

The collecting of sand or pebbles as a livelihood activity should not be encouraged. The rivers to continue its natural flow needs sand, stones, and pebbles to sustain its course. However, the villagers did not have any alternate sources of income generation programme. The women folks are the worse affected amongst the other group of people as their sources of livelihood practices are completely threatened. Both men and women folks especially women are

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<sup>367</sup> The Indian Express Manipur: Three tourists feared dead as boat capsizes due to storm. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/imphal/3-feared-dead-as-boat-capsizes-inukhrul/articleshow/69093443.cms> Access on 19-05-2020

compelled to go deep into the forest/jungles to collect firewood, wild berries, and fruits for their daily family sustenance. This daily activity of the villagers has led to the overexploitation of the forest resources. They continued to do so as there have been no other alternative livelihood activities to sustain their lives. The case was different prior to the construction of Mapithel dam.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The Indian economic reform programme in 1991 under the leadership of Narashimha Rao government focuses explicitly to develop the restrictive trade and industrialization. There was a paradigm shift in the socialist welfare model of India to neo-liberal economic framework.<sup>368</sup> The neo-liberal economic framework leads to the creation of free markets by expanding the role of private and foreign investors in funding development projects in India. World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) have been investing funds for project related to natural resources and hydroelectric power in Northeast India.<sup>369</sup> India is the largest recipient of loans from the World Bank. India's pursuance of Look East Policy (LEP) to expand trade and commerce with South-East Asian countries impacts Manipur vividly with series of large scale 'development' projects initiated in its terrains and frontiers<sup>370</sup> in terms of roads, tourism development, hydroelectric-power, etc. This large scale development projects<sup>371</sup> has continued to alter the demographic, socio-economic-political scene of the NE region in general and Manipur state in particular. For instance, a large amount of trees

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<sup>368</sup> McDuie-Ra, D. (2016). *Borderland City in New India*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

<sup>369</sup> World Bank Financing concerns in India. The Imphal free press  
<http://www.ifp.co.in/page/items/52988/world-bank-financing-concerns-in-indias-north-east>

<sup>370</sup> See ADB Imphal ring road controversies by Jiten Yumnam (e-pao)  
[http://www.epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=education.Jobs\\_Career.ADB\\_Impthal\\_ring\\_road\\_controversies\\_By\\_Jiten\\_Yumnam](http://www.epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=education.Jobs_Career.ADB_Impthal_ring_road_controversies_By_Jiten_Yumnam) Access on 09-01-2020

<sup>371</sup> This Large Scale development projects are the development projects which need a considerable numbers of resources, asset, policy, investment and result to be benefiting large masses such as Mega dam projects, Railway projects, Highway Projects, Oil Mining etc.

has been destroyed, and land is acquired for the construction of Asian highways, National highways, dams, oil and coal mining development projects.

The tribal communities have been resisting the neoliberal and capitalist model of development in the region. Jiten (CRA) argued that 'Development' should ensure equilibrium and sustainability of the natural resources and the people. But in the case of Mapithel dam multipurpose project brought in destruction to the environment and people more than development. 'Development approach' should ensure equity benefit both for the project proponents and PAPs. The neo-liberal economic paradigm in India needs interrogation. The people seeks answers whether the proposed resource-led strategy, based on the building of a large number of dams, will bring about the type of development that people in the Northeast stand to benefit from or aspire towards.<sup>372</sup>

The resistance movement by the PAPs and civil organisation against the construction of Mapithel dam has delayed the construction work at the project sites. The project has also disturbed the equilibrium of the state and local ecology. It also violates the rights of the PAPs by displacing them from their ancestral land and affecting their livelihood without any alternatives. Standhope Kashung (Chadong village) and Themson (Ramrei village) stated that

“.... loss of our land means loss of our livelihood, culture and identity. We will fight back and assert our right to live in our ancestral land.”

“.... the place where I grew up practising both wet paddy field and Jhuming cultivation, hunting, fishing, are no longer practice.”

The Mapithel valley is known for its rich agricultural land and one of the fertile lands in the district of Ukhul. The submergence of

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<sup>372</sup> B.G. Karlsson, *Unruly Hills: Nature and Nation in India's North-east*. (New Delhi: Esha Beteille Social Science Press, 2011).

this agricultural land by Mapithel dam has affected the livelihood practices of the tribal communities and their cultural practice as well. Rockson Jajo (Secy MDAVO) from Chadong village asserts that “Land defines their identity, history, culture and worldview. It is sacred for them as their ancestors are buried in this land for many generations now”.

The land has been and continues to be the most valuable resource for cultivators, especially the tribal communities in Northeast India. All tribes treat their land as both their sustenance and centre of their identity.<sup>373</sup> The displacement of people from their ancestral land means loss of their history, identity, and cultural practices. The agricultural practice of Tangkhul tribal community is also very much affiliated with their cultural, traditional practices and festivals. The Tangkhul Naga tribe since their forefathers have folk/traditional songs sang at different occasions. They have songs that are related to their specific festivals celebrated in sequence throughout the year, starting from Luira-Phanit (Luigai-ni) seed sowing festival to Chumpha, a ritual festival by custom and tradition”. “The popular folk song titled as “Kazing Kumura” means a new year has come. The song invites the village settlers to come forward for festivity amid of green forest, beautiful flowers and lovely songs of the cuckoo. This song is usually sung during the Luivaphanit, (Yumnam & Koiyam, 2014). The tribe celebrates the traditional annual seed sowing festival ‘Luira Phanit known as (Luigai-ni)’,<sup>374</sup> post plantation festival ‘Mangkhap Phanik’,<sup>375</sup> first

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<sup>373</sup> Walter Fernandes et al. (2019) Ownership, Management and Alienation North Eastern Social Research Centre and Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development.

<sup>374</sup> Post –plantation festival celebrated in July or August. Mangkhap Phanik means abstinence from lavish eating, drinking and merrymaking within the ambit of religious significance.

<sup>375</sup> Post –plantation festival celebrated in the month of July or August. Mangkhap Phanik means abstinence from lavish eating, drinking and merrymaking within the ambit of religious significance.

harvest festival ‘Dharreo’<sup>376</sup> and post-harvest festival ‘Chumpha Phanit’<sup>377</sup> annually. These cultural festivals are all affiliated with their agricultural practices. Since the submergence of their agricultural land most of these cultural festivals and practices cease to stop because it does not have any relevance without their agricultural land. The project affected villagers argued that there is no more significance in celebrating these cultural festivals anymore. Ngahathing (Ex-chief Chadong) village stated,

“... land defines our culture, identity, and history. Our history, culture and identity are embedded in our land.”

“... we have become a refugee in own land.”

A Land is a sacred thing for the tribal communities, and it defines their worldview and history. The submergence of Chadong, Louphong and Ramrei village land has also submerged their ancestral burial ground which they share their spiritual connection for ages. Many villagers cried by seeing their ancestral burial ground submerging under the dam reservoir. The villagers believed that they would soon lose all their spiritual connection with their ancestral/forefathers.

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<sup>376</sup> It is also known as a festival for first harvest and more of thanks giving to God. It is celebrated during the late autumn in October by offering best harvest of Crops to God.

<sup>377</sup> Post-harvest festival it takes place during the winter in the month of November. It is an offering to god by the wives and womenfolk of the families for the lasting of harvested food crops and the crops stored in the granaries. The families do not eat the new harvest food crop until the end of the festival. During the festival male usually, go out for hunting and fishing to escape teasing from womenfolk.

# Ground Realities of the Eastern Konyak in the Indo-Myanmar Border Area

Vinoto H Shohe

‘When You Go Back, Write, Share and Tell People about Our Struggles and Experiences in the Border Area’ – **Cheno**

## Situating the Context of Eastern Konyak

Border studies currently have broadened into new subject domains, geographies and multiple fields. This chapter discusses the reality of the Eastern Konyak inhabiting the Indo-Myanmar border. People living in this particular border area experience extremely harsh socio-economic conditions and their political status is often unstable. They hang in the ‘periphery’ with their basic rights suspended. Their existences are barely acknowledged and their access to other societies and the world at large is crippled. They are also disregarded because of different political affiliations and agendas that tend to perpetuate in the border areas. Their voices and experiences tend to be invisibilised and they remain away from the public gaze of dominant societies and political regimes.

The lack of infrastructure is stark in this particular area. Though there has been development and changes in other parts of the society, these regions in the borderlands remains stagnant. The educational system seems to stand still for the past many years and their health care system is near defunct. This often causes unnecessary deaths. Other basic needs such as electricity, transportation and water supply are rarely met. It takes a minimum of two hours of walking in hilly terrains and thick forest from the last Indian village to reach the borderlands.

## Nagas in Myanmar

The Nagas in Myanmar are usually categorised as Eastern Nagas, Burma Nagas or Nagas of Myanmar Occupied Nagalim. They mostly inhabit the Sagaing division and Kachin state and their territory is marked by Kabo valley in the south bordering to the Chin state, Kachin on the north and the Burmese on the east.<sup>378</sup> Constitutional changes in 1974 sliced the Naga territory into smaller units that included only one district i.e. Khamti with five different township; Khamti, Homlin, Layshi, Lahe and Namyung unlike the ancestral territory which was larger and wider. Again in 2008 the territory was further reduced into only three towns - Leshi, Lahe and Namyung which were marked as the Naga territory by the name Naga Self-Administered zone. The fall of Naga territory under the Burmese administration began with Anglo-Burmese Yandaboo treaty in 1826 and later in 1953 the Indo-Burmese demarcation in Kohima on the Naga territory by Shri Nehru and U Nu, the then Prime Ministers of the two States.<sup>379</sup>

The Naga Self-Administered Zone under khamti district is one of six self-administered areas formed under the 2008 constitution, and the only one in Sagaing Region. The constitution gives self-administered zones and divisions their own administration known as a leading body with some responsibility of governance. Under the constitution, the president has the authority to amend the boundaries of a self-administered zone on the recommendation of the chief minister of the region or state.<sup>380</sup>

The fence between Nagaland and Myanmar's Naga Self-Administered Zone, which comprises of Leshi, Lahe and Namyung townships in Sagaing Region has been condemned by the Indian side of the border. They claim that the fence will obstruct traditional activities and customary laws as well as the application of Free

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<sup>378</sup> Myo Aung, <http://www.nagasinmyanmar-burma.com/>

<sup>379</sup> *ibid*

<sup>380</sup> <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/12977-naga-zone-expansion-plan-sparks-protests-petitions.html>

Movement Regime (FMR); an agreement reached between India and Myanmar in 1967 when the border was formally delimited and demarcated enabling all ethnic groups living along the border to travel up to 16 kilometers on either side without visas. The FMR allows freedom of movement for an estimated 300,000 people, including many Nagas.<sup>381</sup> There were also issues raised by the Khamniungan (tribe) Naga, who were mostly located in the Indo-Myanmar border about the division of land. They asserted that since the land belongs to them, it would be difficult to go to Myanmar where their cultivation and fields are. They resisted the idea of border fencing arguing that this would restrict their movement completely.

According to the locals, there were altogether 19 villages under the *Chen* area inhabited by the Konyaks in Indo-Myanmar borderland who are known as Eastern Konyak or Konyak from Burma. Their traditions, culture, festivals etc. are similar to that of the Konyaks from Nagaland India. They speak *Chen* language with a partial mix of Burmese especially in the context of school education. They are mostly engaged in agriculture, which happens to be their means of survival. Among these 19 villages, Lakho and Khanmoi are the most populated.

Most of the Naga population in Burma falls within khamti district of the region Sagaing. Under that, the Eastern Konyak Naga in particular is located in the township of Lahe. They stay closer to the India border and Montown of Nagaland India. It says that the socio-economic condition of the people in Mon especially in the border area lags behind as compared to the other districts in Nagaland. As it is located in the remotest part of Nagaland, its economic development has not been satisfactory. Lack of proper infrastructure is also one of the important reasons for the backwardness of an economy as developed infrastructure. Many of the villages in these Border areas are un-surfaced and still

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<sup>381</sup> Frontier Myanmar <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/we-dont-want-the-fence-residents-in-uproar-over-plan-to-divide-naga-communities>



unconnected by road. For these villages, the only means of connectivity is by the foot road. Housing, toilet and safe drinking water facilities are a major concern for the Border Areas of the Nagaland.<sup>382</sup>

### **Border Studies: Some Issues**

Concerning border studies, theorizing has proven a challenge. Scholars who have attempted to theorize about ‘borders’ encounters a mystifying number of perspectives, variable disorder and access of values attached to those variables, individualizing and unique circumstances that make it problematic to engage in the kind of theorizing that can advance beyond mostly descriptive work.<sup>383</sup> The issue of theorizing in border studies remains an open challenge to border scholars which is not only a pending task but necessary, specifically because the optimistic dialogue on a borderless world, mostly a phenomenon of the 1990s has fallen flat and there is a renewed importance assigned to borders both in the political and in the policy world and that even today borders continue to matter, by most of the scholars in the domain of border studies.<sup>384</sup> The structural problem to border theorizing stems from the fact and reality of approaching borders and borderlands cases from the individual disciplines such as international relations, geography, environmental science, economics, demography, etc. and from one’s own geographical locations. In addition, the methods that most of the scholars use within the single context where the study, is confined to one particular geographical area, focused on single case study that undermines the overall goal of border theorizing.<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> J.K Gogoi, Goswami (2009), Project report on problems of border areas in north east India: Implications for the thirteenth finance commission, Dibrugarh: Dibrugarh University

<sup>383</sup> Philip Kitcher (1993), *The Advancement of Science*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

<sup>384</sup> Daniel Drache, *Borders Matter: Homeland Security and the Search for North America*, in Payan, Tony ‘Theory-Building in Border Studies: The View from North America’. *Eurasia Border Review*, 5 (1) 2014: 1-18.

<sup>385</sup> Tony Payan, ‘Theory-Building in Border Studies: The View from North America’. *Eurasia Border Review*, 5 (1) 2014: 1-18.

Newnam however argues that it is possible to develop a theory of bordering that will circumscribe various types of border and boundary experience. But the only way is to create a common language between the different disciplinary languages including geographers, political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, economists and others under a common set of theoretical constructs and frameworks which can be used as a generalized explanatory model for understanding changing border or boundary phenomenon.<sup>386</sup> Others have also argued that single analytical framework is not possible but encourages a multi-disciplinary nature of boundary studies. Scholars like Houtum and Naerssen used certain sociological concepts such as bordering, ordering and othering to generally understand borders.<sup>387</sup>

## **Emerging Socio-economic Trends and Challenges at the Borderland**

Below I will discuss some of my experience with the Eastern Konyak Nagas around three key domains. The first describes the economic condition of the community, the second engages with their social reality and the third attempts to problematise few core areas of concern of a Naga village at the border.

### **I. The Economic Condition**

#### **Income of the Family**

The income of the majority of the population which is around 80 per cent is below Rs.3, 000. Though some has an income above 3,000 to 5,000, this finding clearly presents the reality and living standard of the people in borderland. With this small amount of income there is not much that can support them and enhance their economy. Their sustenance is only through their actual harvest from

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<sup>386</sup> David Newman, 'On Borders and Power: A Theoretical Framework', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 18 (1) 2003:13-25.

<sup>387</sup> Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen, 'Bordering Ordering and Othering' in Payan, Tony (2014). 'Theory-Building in Border Studies: The View from North America'. *Eurasia Border Review*, 5 (1) 2014: 1-18.

the field/farm per year. Apart from the food resources they harvest from the farm, monetary income is mainly used for buying toiletries, children education, and medicine. The overall income of the family in the borderland among the Konyak tribe is extremely low and that without any or minimum support from the government. Hence, with the absence of provision from the state their income also remains stagnant which results in huge economy gap with those in the main stream.

### **Economic Gap between Borderland and Non-borderland**

Along with other difficulties there is definitely a huge economy breach between the people in borderland and the so-called mainstream. During my fieldwork, I found that tribes in the borderland feel more inferior to other tribes in Nagaland. They expressed their grief in their financial struggle (besides food items from the field) and are not able to maintain their own family unlike the others. This gap can also be seen further in terms of education, availability of other materialistic resources, health etc. The economic gap is enormous that if one compares it in terms of years, the gap will be not less than 40-50 years. While the other parts of the Naga community and society continue to develop, the condition of the people in borderland remains immobile.

### **Job Opportunity**

There are minimal job opportunity and outreach services other than agriculture. One of the reasons for the failure of economic growth in borderland specifically among the Eastern Konyak Naga is because there is a lack of opportunity. Most of the youths gets married at the early age and engage themselves in the field to support the family because there are no other options. From the young age around 7 to 10 years old, they start to go to field and help their parents in the farm. This kind of traditions and cultures are followed by everyone because as they grow up they depend on agriculture and hence, one is expected to be acquainted and well experience in the field. One reason to get into addiction of alcohol and opium is also because of unavailability of job and opportunities

to explore themselves. The entire village does not hold any job in the state of Myanmar. Their total dependence is on agriculture, forest, land and other natural resources which have become their only job for many generations till date.

### **Neglect and Marginalization**

Majority of the people I spoke to agrees that the lack of Burmese education, ignorance from the government, lack of communication and transportation are the root cause of the failure of development. However, some specified particularly on issues such as ignorance and exclusion from the government. Lack of education in Burmese medium is added to the failure of economic growth because the government has made it mandatory to have education in Burmese medium if one has to apply for job. This means no older generation is eligible except those new who just started their education in Burmese medium. In addition, road connectivity and the lack of transportation is another factor that contributes to the failure of economic growth. And moreover, the region is marked as conflict zone and hence less concern from the government as well. There is no proper recognition and role played by the government when it comes to development in the border area. Adding to it, the location of the Eastern Konyak is also at the extreme border of Myanmar, it is completely isolated from the 'mainstream' and thus the development cease to reach these areas.

## **II. The Social Reality**

### **Family**

Family plays a very crucial role in all aspects of life among this community. They prefer to live mostly as joint family. Men are the head of the family and chores like carrying water, gathering wood, cooking and traditional grinding of maize is often done by women. Over the years men have also started to help except for cooking and grinding. The fire plays a very important role, as they structure their fireplace usually in the middle of the house in every household. One of the reasons given is that being a big family everyone gets a space

to sit nearby the fire in a circle. However, another important reason is that they surround the fire from all the sides signifying their unity and oneness. Also, one of the respondent recalled that ‘according to their ancestor’s belief, fire in the middle of the house keeps the roof strong and lasting’.

### **Tradition and Culture**

Konyaks from Myanmar traditions and culture are similar to that of Konyak from India (referred as west Konyak). The former identify them self with the later and in fact, they were together until the demarcation and division of the border. It is only the line of border that has divided them and not on any other aspects. Clan system is very significant and necessary to their life. Usually even the settlement is based on clan system i.e. to live or build a house besides each other. The structure and the style of housing are similar in the entire village. Their kitchen is always in the middle and has an open space which they call it as “*machang*” (similar to corridor). The food is prepared and served by the women and they have culture of piercing their ears (both male and female). They celebrate Aoleng (festival) in their own village for 6 days. Some of the activities done during this festival are sports, dance, folk songs, hitting of log drum by the elders (morung) and feast etc. However, this celebration is different from what they did around 4 decades ago; it has been more Christianized in its practice today. Every village has councils and Angh is the head of the village. The village councils includes, chairman, secretary and members. By occupation, they are all farmers hence their daily routine is to go to farm but apart from farming, they also do community work together when there is need. Usually men carry gun (local made), machete (shanglu), and machete shield (shangkho) which is tied and hang on their back.

### **Alcohol and Opium**

Use of alcohol and opium are seen as social evil among the Eastern Konyak Naga. Introducing of opium among the Konyak tribe has a long history. The British could not get the better of the Konyaks in

warfare when the former ruled India. To add to their woes, they were a prize for the headhunting Konyaks. When British force did not work, they resorted to craft and somehow managed to get these tribal's addicted to opium and made them weak and distracted. Hence, the proud and fearsome tribal's were easily overrun. Today, society continues to pay a heavy price for this. Different union and churches have taken matters into their own hands and banned the cultivation and consumption of opium in the 1990s. Their efforts have brought changes and the opium consumption has declined.<sup>388</sup> However, unlike the Konyak from India, more likely opium is still found in the villages around Indo-Myanmar border. Though addiction of opium is seen as harmful and drain of wealth in a person's life, they still cultivate because it also gives them opportunity to earn a little amount of cash and take care of their necessities. Furthermore, the development of intensive agricultural practices in absentia of a broader pro-poor rural development strategy has greatly increased farmers' vulnerability to poor harvests and indebtedness. The need for cash and the vulnerability of farming households to debt has also emerged. Within this context, growing opium or working on poppy farms has become an important mechanism for managing risk.<sup>389</sup> Some also grow and cultivate poppy in this area though it is restricted, as this is also another form of ways to stabilize and sustain their economy. My participant pointed out that "though opium is seen as social evil and destruction in the society, at the same time it is hard to stop someone because it is also one of the sources of income for the local people".

### **Livelihood**

As responded by the local, "technically, there is not much resources to improve their income apart from agriculture". Traditionally, the

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<sup>388</sup> <http://kunuzum.com/2015/24/opium-the-weapon-of-choice-by-the-british-to-defeat-the-konyaks-of-nagaland/>

<sup>389</sup> Meehan, Patrick. (2017). Opium and 'Development' in Myanmar: the political economy of a resurgent crop. <https://www.twai.it/magazines/opium-and-development-in-myanmar/>

mountain inhabiting people perceived and managed the environmental resources in their habitats for their basic needs. The forest is the most important resource system in the region. Also, land is the most valuable resource as shifting cultivation is the mainstay of the community. The forest plays a crucial role not only in their economic life but also in their sacred life.<sup>390</sup> These lands can be individual, clan and village at large. There is complete dependence on nature for survival among the tribes in the borderland. They often go to farm and work for nearly 12 hours a day. They cultivate Mang (maize), shi (millet), chula, poi & khan (potato), yam (toh), chilly (sore), beans (vathroi), soya bean (longfe), pumpkin (vauchu) and many others. In addition, some of the fruits found in this villages are, Banana, Peach, Pears, Wild Apple, Lemon, Passion fruit, Mulberry and other wild fruits. Maize is their staple food they have the traditional way of grinding maize and millets and cook as alternative to rice. Along with agricultural produce some also generate the income from own domestic animals e.g. cow, pig, mithun, fowl etc. Furthermore, other source of income is through cardamom farming (few families), opium cultivation (few), carpentry and also weaving though not much can be seen today. They are all self-dependent, for generations they have been surviving without the help of external force even to the point when their village was burned down four times. However, they say, “little that we had around the village has also been burned down and now to get even a proper wood for household needs we are forced to go far and deep in the forest.” For daily survival, they depend on the forest but in terms of monetary and other necessities there is still a huge gap, which is also evidently visible in their living condition.

### **Development Deficit**

“We don’t know anything of what is happening in other parts of the world”, said one of my respondents. Development crisis is best illuminated from the people in borderland especially Indo-Myanmar

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<sup>390</sup> T.B. Subha and G.C. Ghosh (2003), *The Anthropology of Northeast India*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, p. 334.

border. If we locate the geographical distribution of eastern konyak along with the other community, they also inhabit in one the most remotest area of the state. Though this tribe (Konyak) is one of the most populated tribe in Nagaland (India), few are located in Indo-Myanmar border (or within the state of Myanmar). Thus, with less population their voice remains insignificant and developments in this area are extremely poor. Being geographically in the frontier they do not receive much attention for development but rather vulnerable. Their voices are insignificant to those in power and who rule over them. Hence, they are less known and remain helpless even in terms of basic human needs such as electricity, transportation, hospitals, education, connectivity to outside world etc. The development vessel is never enough to accommodate their needs and they remain marginalized. The representation and the priorities for development are more less more focused and centered towards the better-known community outside border. Also being in a conflict area there is less attention for the community and likewise the development.

### **Lack of Transportation and Road Connectivity**

My respondent posits that “we can't comprehend how difficult it is to us because of lack of transportation and road connectivity”. One of the common problems that the entire population faced is the lack of transportation and road connectivity along with poor educational and health system. Lack of transportation and communication are the key factor that hinders the development in this area. This issue is no more a mere subject but leads to the fall of education, health, economy and overall failure of development. Burmese government has not reached their area so far in terms of road connectivity and transportation. The taxi from Mon town to Naga village (Eastern Konyak, Indo-Myanmar border) has stopped post the political conflicts between one of the Naga military group and Indian army. Politically, Indian government can't reach them because of laws and agreement, and Burmese government might help them later in the coming years but on top of its poor economy they also see these



areas as disputed. Hence there is more negligence. Furthermore, in the name of independence they have suffered and even lost lives. Not that they blame any political parties or skeptical about freedom but even if they get independence, if there's no peace and development in the border area and its communication and relation to the outside world it doesn't make any difference to them.

### **Educational Crisis**

The educational sector of the Nagas in Myanmar had suffered greatly under the dominion of larger political party. There are not many possibilities for the Nagas to study and hence lack competence in relation to others. Though they recently started a government primary school in Burmese medium, overall there is an extreme lack of education both in the village and in the border areas. Few children work as a domestic helper in the Indian side of the border and manage to go to government run school. But now this has also decreased since the medium of instruction is not in Burmese and job prospect become less. In addition, though some of them have Indian education, it is not recognized in Myanmar and likewise not possible to apply for any kind of job. The Burmese government has made Burmese language compulsory in the educational institution. It says that to get job one must have education in Burmese medium. Nevertheless, people in the border areas also see English medium equally important to communicate to other parts of the world. Apart from this upcoming present generation who are pursuing their formal education in Burmese medium there is less opportunity for others to get government job since they lack Burmese structured/medium education. One of the respondents said, "We always thought we will be part of India, similarly we pursue after the Indian education (English) but today we come under the territory of Myanmar and unfortunately Indian education/certificate is neither recognized nor valid." They believe that education can enhance the socio-economic growth. Hence, the need of proper educational system is crucial not only to one particular village and community but also border as a whole.

## **Health System**

Issue of health is another important concern in the borderland. Lack of hospital causes unnecessary death in the border areas. There is no health centre though the respondent said they receive some basic medicines once in 3-4 months. This area is prone to scrub typhus, Tuberculosis (TB), malaria, dysentery and jaundice etc. From 2015-17, every village reported on an average death of 10-20 people because of Scrub Typhus/Typhoid since they were not aware or taken to hospital immediately. People in the border also depend on the herbs and wild plants, which is use as medicines. Concerning delivery (childbirth), usually it takes place at home and sometimes it takes 2-3 days. During menstruation, women in this region use cloth, which can also cause health complications if not hygienic. Since they exercise their vote, they are expecting Burmese government to bring development and changes in their village and border area at large. Promises before the election is not new in their society and similar situation were faced by them (Konyak) in their previous election.

## **Conflict**

“We seek and long for peace in our areas, we don’t want our children to experience what we have faced in the past. With hope, we contemplate for a better future in the border area” recalled one of my participants. Democratic conflict is not only the problem in the borderland but Myanmar itself is a victim of these struggles since beginning their independence from colonial empire. Though they got freedom from British rule the new government (military rule) after 1962 brought much chaos and unrest in the country. However, since the rise of National League Democracy from 1988 that came up in opposition to military, the situation is better. And yet the overall dominant role in politics is still vested in the hands of military. Along with Nagas in Indo-Myanmar border many other ethnic groups have political conflicts with the central government.

Unfortunately, some of the villages in the border areas has been burned down four times by the Indian and Burmese army

respectively i.e. in June 1981 and August 1982 (Indian army) and May 2000 & October 2001 (Burmese army), where not only lives were taken but other resources were also destroyed which affected their economic growth till date. Many from the age groups of 20-35 years at present are said to be born in the jungle and fields after the militarization and atrocities. Villagers run towards the field and hid there until the situation calms down. One of the respondents stated that “during my high school days everyone takes their own belongings and run to the jungle. People hardly stays at home as they were scared of armies especially they are terrified to meet Indian army. However, the situation is better now as we can settle down in our village though at the same time we also can’t assure what will happen the next moment”.

These villages and the other surrounding area are also prone to conflict between Indian and Burmese army and the Naga military. Hence, they are more vulnerable and always at receiving end. Often, they (villagers/locals) are trapped in between the armies. They are always assumed and misunderstood as giving security and supporting the Naga military, which also results of being tortured and put into trouble by the other two national armies. Whenever there is conflict it gets more difficult for them to buy thing from the border ‘Chenmoho’ which is located towards Indian side and is the only shop in the border area where they can get their necessities such as rice, toiletries etc. The safety of the village is not guaranteed neither it is properly established. When there is conflict between different military groups, the locals/villagers suffer the most. During the interview one of the respondents said, “We don’t know what will happen in the next one hour, our life is always at risk”. The very idea of Naga Independence is also question by the respondent that even if there is independence how far it will help the people in the border areas. All that we need now is peace.

### **Outreach Services and Opportunities**

“Our ears are both eyes and ear” said one respondent. This is in the context of radio connection that they get sometimes. By this, he

meant that the only ways to know about the world outside is through radio. They cannot see but only hear which is also not frequent. There is no opportunity other than farming/ agriculture in the borderland. Their outreach services and connectivity to outside world is still in destitute condition and there is not much resource to improve their income apart from agriculture. Lack of outreach services is in fact one of the major concern of the people in borderland including Eastern Konyak Naga. Most of the youths are school dropout whose daily routine is to go to farm for agricultural work and help their family. These areas also have different varieties of food and vegetables but there is no possibility to sell them outside the village or border. It is not practically applicable because there is no transportation and proper road connectivity. Even if they carry a bag or two the income they get will not be sufficient with the amount of labor they invest.

In context of education, there is limited or minimum opportunities, often children drop their school at an early age and join the family in agriculture. They said “Burma has ignored us in education (formal) meanwhile others have gone 40-50 years ahead we still lack much behind”. This also create more space in terms of job opportunity, more or less the occupation among this indigenous group for many generations has been only farming and no other services.

The road connectivity is also inadequate, for instance to go to market towards Myanmar the nearest is Leshi township. However is it very expensive for one to go there, they to hire two-wheeler that cost minimum 5000 Indian rupee to reach the town (half-day journey) or else the other option is to walk. Even today, some of them go by foot to town where they sleep and rest in some village on its way as it takes approximately 2 days. However, if one has to go to nearest town i.e. Mon towards India it is more cheap and less time consuming. Nonetheless, there are security issues as one has to cross Indo-Myanmar border and it is a conflict zone. Opportunities

and other services are enormously lacking in border areas among this tribe that also leads to the failure of socio-economic growth.

### **III. Some Core Areas of Concern of a Naga Village at the Border**

#### **Establishment of Proper Political Structure**

The Mon district predominantly inhabited by Konyak (west) comes under one of the most underdeveloped district in the state of Nagaland. The Eastern Konyak in the border area of Myanmar is even worse in condition. For generations they have dwelled in the hills who knew nothing about the border and that it will be divided at some certain point of time. There was no such nation like India & Myanmar then and all they know was their community and the world within. Their life revolved around the system and structure of their traditions and cultures. However, with the coming of so called the modern state there were changes and along with that the new idea of state also brought division, inequality, and oppression in the society. Those in the border areas were more affected as being in the periphery and in isolation. Since then the indigenous people in the border area continue to remain marginalized. India and Myanmar has its own internal political issue, which also affects the condition and situation of the people in the border area. But in this larger political struggle and adding to worsen the life in border areas is the Naga political issue both with India and Burma. The partial politics of Eastern Konyak falls under the larger umbrella of Naga political conflict.

Today, anticipating the freedom of greater Nagalim, Eastern Konyak who is part of the larger struggles of Naga awaits for that moment though one cannot envision the result of this struggle. Borderland is also one such area that pay scant attention and less interest to settle down or even a visit both outside and within their own community because of multiple political conflicts that often occur in the area. The present researcher does not intend to criticize nor blame any political party but it is evident and visible that political conflict both in the border area and mainstream has

contributed so much and is the root cause of the failure of socio-economic and political growth in the borderland. It has kept people in isolation from development and no comprehensive work has been done among this community or even around the border areas. Hence, one of the first and foremost necessities in the borderland is to set up proper political structure. There is also a need of recognition as it may bring changes in the socio-economic, politics and over all aspects of development. Though the Naga area in the land of Myanmar is considered as Self-administered area, in reality they are deprived of their rights, oppressed, subjugated and exploited by the larger political power. Eastern Konyak being the case, they are going through that aching situation but their voices are neglected and ignored.

### **Internal Division and Social Tension**

Western Konyak and Eastern Konyak as we know today were once known by one name i.e. Konyak. This particular tribe is often acknowledged for their bravery and skilled artisans. They are well known because of their ability and skills in making guns. However, during the colonial period, there was a huge destruction against this tribe and the Indo-Myanmar territorial line separated them into two nations. Periphery is a geographical construct based on the politics of colonial rationality. For two nations i.e. India and Myanmar, officially, a border exists but for the Konyak Nagas, they still believe that there is none. It is merely a convenient line drawn by a British cartographer in the last days of the Raj who perhaps knew the tribes, but didn't show much care which side of the line they were on and consequently along with the other Naga tribe Konyaks were also divided. In addition, up in the highlands of Mon and border areas as known today, the British still have much to answer. Opium, they say was brought and introduced into the Naga hills to subdue the tribes and distract the Konyaks from accumulating heads, particularly British.<sup>391</sup> The issue of opium is not only some lame

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<sup>391</sup> Rahul Goswami, Opium in the Naga Hills  
<https://www.magzter.com/articles/120/268383/5ab10dcfe0912>

narratives but also leads to the socio-economic life of Konyak Naga at large. Cultivation of opium is one of the major sources of income in most of the areas in Myanmar. Though not as extreme like other parts, the Naga self-administered area is also influenced and practice opium cultivation which in a way is colonial structured. Addiction and consumption of opium is seen as social evil among the Eastern Konyak Naga. However to stop this cultivation in reality is rigid if not impossible as it also linked to their income. In 1990's there was a wave to ban the opium that includes even border areas and its surroundings however post that movement there was death, sicknesses and fall of economy since there was no other alternatives, proper rehabilitation or even counseling. Hence, cultivation of opium re-opened though they continue to encourage bringing to an end till date. Till today, they're trapped in this colonial politico administrative structure and this is not an isolated case of Konyak alone but major issue in the land of Myanmar mostly inhabited by different ethnic groups. Whether the state has sufficient to provide sustainable livelihoods, so that farmer has an alternative than to growing poppy. Hence, the issue is not to eradicate or stop opium cultivation completely but to first identify the alternative that will help the people to improve, enhance and sustain their livelihood. This issue is not just an individual but community as a whole that needs a vigorous support from the government.

### **Border Fencing and its Impact on the Indigenous People**

The state demarcation of the border fencing will definitely seize tribal land, culture, identity and agency. The only way to identify themselves with the larger Konyak is through the accessibility they have by road crossing the border. Also for any kind of necessities, Mon town is nearest and reasonable shorter as compared to Lahe town towards Myanmar, which is expensive if one do not opt to go by foot. In such context, the state process results into tribal land loss, a division of villages, destruction of ecological livelihood

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activities, restriction of movement, migration, displacement which has direct implications on social, economic, political and cultural lives of Eastern Konyak and others in the border area. Indigenous people in the border areas are conditioned to protect their traditional lands and not be divided again from outsiders. The issue of border fencing is at halt now but for how long will the dominated group continue to impose and scour the traditional way of life of the people predominantly border areas. The issue is severe and thus there is a need of sensitivity from both the nation i.e. India and Myanmar that it may protect the identity and land of the indigenous people between the borders. Border fencing may also cause some certain blockage in the economy system. Hence, it not only affects their social life but economy growth as well.

### **Identity Dilemma**

The identity of different ethnic groups is also at stake including Eastern Konyak Naga. The Burmese military has attempted and is still pursuing to make Burmese mandatory. There is so much of discrimination and injustice done to different ethnic groups in the context of identity. This concept to bring all under the control of military/ Burmese also reflects the same idea of the colonial empire. Hence, though Myanmar as a nation was liberated from the colonial power it is still trapped under that political structure of colonial empire and that same concept of rule and domination has captured the state even today. The indigenous people in the borderland only remain a puppet under the superiority of the larger dominant group. There is only exploitation rather than development and draining of wealth/natural resources rather than provision. In fact, out of their poverty they're even made to pay also to different militancy group. The government ideology and its phrases towards the people in the border area that to be there as Burma/Burmese and not as tribe and there should be no division in Myanmar (*this are words from a respondent as told to them by the government*). However, is this not another form of domination and suppression? It is possible that the state will be uniform since there are multiple ethnicities inhabiting the



land of Myanmar? In fact, it is majority of the different ethnicity group that has formed the nation what we know today as Myanmar. The idea of nationalism or to capture and overpower someone's identity and impose their own is nothing but identity genocide. Today, the identity of the indigenous people especially in the border area is at stake. This struggle is not only relatable to Nagas in the border area but also includes all other ethnic groups inhabiting the land in Myanmar.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The root cause of the failure of socio-economic growth among the Eastern Konyak Naga in Indo-Myanmar border is deeply rooted in the downfall and improper structure of the political system. It is evident that border areas are always in conflict because of different political ideologies. In such context, how do we locate the situation of the people is vital. Historically, they have been deprived of their rights; first, as being geographically isolated, second, neglected by the government for decades, third, conflicts in the border areas, fourth, they fall under the larger struggles of Myanmar government (India partially) and Naga political issue. Furthermore, most of them didn't had a proper education which in return couldn't do much at a larger platform, adding to it, their existence were and is hardly acknowledge by the state. Gerfert said border and state should complement each other<sup>392</sup> however this has failed in Indo-Myanmar border inhabited by different ethnic group that includes Eastern Konyak Naga. Rather than complementing each other, the state dominated and ruled over them (border).

The issues in the border areas are also ignored and neglected by the state and are not given much attention and opportunity. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, concept of Laissez faire was also not relevant in the context of Myanmar because it also brought enormous distinction between those in the power and those who

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<sup>392</sup> S. Gerfert (2009), Cross-border cooperation, Transforming Borders: Overcoming Obstacles, Netherlands: University of Twente.

were made weak. Even today, in many parts of Myanmar huge area of indigenous land has been exploited by different private companies including the state military for the greed of various natural resources. One of the major affected places is Kachin state that is bordered with Burma Naga in the northern part of Myanmar. Privatization in a way has brought inequality among the society and people in the borderland are affected the most. Burma with its autocratic rule and the concept of total control is not likely to bring development among the ethnic groups. Worse affected will be those residing in the border areas. Hence, the idea of communitarianism where both the state and the people take equal responsibility and participation can bring forth many changes and overall aspect of development in the border areas.

Today, people in the border area towards Nagaland are also looking forward to the upcoming general election that it may bring some changes and development. There is so much of expectation from the villagers towards different political parties though it can only remain an empty promise after the election. In the previous election majority of them cast their vote in support of NLD which stands for democracy but how far has the present government initiated and assisted their support towards the ethnic group in Myanmar and also the people in borderland is questioned and criticized by many. Most of the ethnic groups have lost their trust in the present government i.e. NLD because not much has been done in their areas. Overall performance of the present government was not able to achieve as expected by the public, which may also lead to their defeat in the next election (said by the respondents). The question now is which government will take up the issues of border areas, the dominated autocratic military rule or the democratic party of Myanmar?

In conclusion, justice in social, political and economy, liberty of thought and expression, equality of status and of opportunity and promotion is the need of the hour in the border areas. While Burmese education is made necessary and that everyone should

adapt to it, this should also not destroy the culture and language of other ethnic group. The economic status of the people must significantly improve. Alongside, roads should be built but with sufficient safeguards that it should not be opened up for any kind of exploitation but for the benefit of the community in the borderland. Borders are actually intended to systematize the mobility of goods, services and human however when the roots are shattered, the delivery of (humanitarian) assistance and protection monitoring is also substantially reduced such is the present context and condition of the tribe in the Indo-Myanmar border area. The hegemonic practices of the majority in the mainstream has overpowered and suppressed the socio-economic and political status of residential homogeneity in the border area. Colonization has come and gone, nationalization is shadowing its place for many decades, but what we need in the border area at this hour is localization and contextualization. There is a need of 'bottom up' process of change and not traditional 'top down' where the reality and experiences of the people are the centre of development and not exploited in the name of development by the larger dominated group.

# The Adivasi Communities in the Tea Industry of Assam

Gaurav Sarma

## Tea Industry in Assam

Tea comes from the biological term *Camellia Sinensis*. This plant was native to Upper Assam and it is said that the Singpho people had already been drinking it (although unprocessed) when Robert Bruce discovered it for the British Empire in 1821. The Anglo-Burmese war ended with the signing of the Yandabo treaty in 1826 marking the beginning of colonial conquest in Assam for production of tea which subsequently led to the breaking of Chinese monopoly over the commodity. The tea industry in Assam contributes more than half to the annual tea production of India.<sup>393</sup> It is largely dominated by big companies that carry forward the colonial legacy of plantations, taking pride over a past which almost seems like floating in an incongruous hangover that fails to reconcile itself with the present world order. This incongruence manifests itself in the unprecedented crisis that the industry is facing today due to factors ranging from climate change, rising production costs, labour absenteeism among others. As it grapples with these issues, the most vulnerable group in this transformative and volatile landscape are the Adivasi communities working in the plantations whose livelihood solely depends on the garden.

## History and Labour Recruitment for the Tea Industry in Assam

Assam was an agricultural society with a diverse, composite culture of communities living together when the tea industry was established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The industry developed parallel to

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<sup>393</sup> For details, see, [http://www.teaboard.gov.in/pdf/Area\\_Production\\_2015\\_16\\_pdf4832.pdf](http://www.teaboard.gov.in/pdf/Area_Production_2015_16_pdf4832.pdf)

the agricultural society and did not have much effect on it economically and socially. Vast tracts of land were lying uncultivated and uninhabited which led to unhindered procurement of land for the establishment of the industry. Now the need was of large-scale manpower to clear the dense forests and wastelands to be made suitable for the cultivation of tea for which the local Nepali people formed a major workforce along with some other tribes like the Bodo and the Kachari people.<sup>394</sup> Once the industry was set up, the Assam Company imported Chinese workers to work in the plantations at double the wage that was to be paid to the local Assamese workers employed in the plantations. After the Chinese labour force was withdrawn in 1843, local people were the sole source of labour till 1859.<sup>395</sup> The Kachari people from the Darrang district formed the major part of local labour, joined by the agricultural workers in the off-season. However during these years, there was always a tension between the demand for labour and the total supply of labour in the plantations. The incumbent labour force always fell short and did not exceed 10,000 when the actual need for labour was about 16,000-20,000. Nevertheless, the wages at the time were not that low as the local people had considerable bargaining power and they could go back to agriculture. The population of Assam was too low to cater to the tea industry and eventually the local people did not want to work as they could sustain themselves through agriculture and farming and did not feel the need to work in the plantations which were anyways paying them less than any other work in agriculture or the government services. Moreover for the planters, employing local people meant paying high wages while the strength of the population willing to work was pretty low. These setbacks which emerged in Assam at the dawn of the tea industry set the colonial rulers thinking of the future of the labour-intensive industry. It is then that the British

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<sup>394</sup> P. Chatterjee, *A time for Tea* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2003).

<sup>395</sup> B. S. Kar, 'British Colonial Policy of Immigration in Assam (1826-1910),' *Pratidhwani A Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2012.

decided to import labour.<sup>396</sup> But the question remains- from where and how?

### **Adivasi Communities in Assam: A Brief History and Context**

The Adivasi communities comprising of tribes like Santhal, Gond, Munda, Kharia, Oraon, among others were primary inhabitants of the Chotanagpur region which includes the present day states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Orissa. They were historically self-sufficient segmented tribal societies living and sustaining through agriculture and forest produce, which was the primary source of livelihood. The economy of these communities was not centered on money as they could sustain themselves from the forest itself. They claimed their rights over the forest land in which they were living. But the penetration of colonial capital made these communities vulnerable and at the same time the British were also in the hunt for cheap labour. These communities turned out to be an easy target through the draconian policies of land taxation and revenue collection which threatened the self-sustaining livelihoods of the people.

Importing labour for the tea industry which covered most parts of Assam and North Bengal, where a single tea plantation can hold 600 hectares of land, was a humongous task in itself. There had to be mechanisms set in place to smoothen up the entire process. This mechanism which triggered one of the largest migrations in history not only served the interests of the tea industry but the British Empire as a whole- the land revenue policies. These peasant and hunting-gathering societies holding customary land rights were systematically alienated from their own lands by the British administrative land revenue policies which gave absolute power to the *zamindars* to collect taxes. Many communities who depended on the forest for their livelihood did not have such huge reserves of

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<sup>396</sup> R.D. Gupta, 'From Peasants and Tribesmen to Plantation Workers'. Economic and Political Weekly, 1986.

cash required to pay the heavy taxes.<sup>397</sup> 'Labour Catchment Areas' were identified based on overpopulation and poor vulnerable people who could be easily lured.<sup>398</sup> Consequently, during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the recruitment drive overlapped with famines in the region and this made people desperate and readily volunteer to migrate to the plantations. They were promised better lives in a far-off land of which they had no idea and how would they, as the tea industry was itself a new colonial project being undertaken in Assam. They were caught in an agro-industrial setting premised on capitalism but showing signs of feudal characteristics at the same time.

The recruitment process was carried out in phases backed by legislations to legitimize the entire process.<sup>399</sup> Recruitment officers known as '*sirdars*' were employed to successfully relocate the people by setting up 'labour lines' (small hamlets found in tea estates of Assam). The draconian Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 1859 ensured that the workers stayed till their contracts got over.<sup>400</sup> Thus, an indentured system was in the making within a landscape of 'patronization' and 'order', reinforcing the colonial rationality of 'civilizing the uncivilized'.<sup>401</sup> People were brought to Assam, cramped in boogies of trains and settled in the segregated 'labour lines' of plantations. They were provided with a small plot of land which was somehow enough to meet daily needs. The living conditions were abysmal which only catered to the subsistence needs. Labour was recruited on a contractual basis. But people did not have any idea how to return to their homeland from the remote corners of the tea plantation in Assam. Thus, once the contract

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<sup>397</sup> P. Chatterjee, *A time for Tea* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2003).

<sup>398</sup> R.D. Gupta, 'From Peasants and Tribesmen to Plantation Workers'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1986.

<sup>399</sup> B. S. Kar, 'British Colonial Policy of Immigration in Assam (1826-1910)'. *Pratidhwani A Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2012.

<sup>400</sup> Guha, A. (1977). *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam*. New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research.

<sup>401</sup> P. Chatterjee, *A time for Tea* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2003).

officially ended, most of the families chose to settle in the gardens itself.

The import of labour changed the entire demographic pattern of Assam in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Adivasis today constitute around twenty (20) % of the total population of the State out of which around seventeen (17) % are engaged in the tea industry (Saikia, 2009)<sup>11</sup>. The tea industry today employs around seven (7) lakh people in Assam alone.<sup>402</sup> The wage of the workers, since the colonial period was kept very low as the planters had to reap profit and compete in the international markets.<sup>403</sup> Though the situation has somewhat improved in the post-colonial era, the colonial structure of the plantation still prevails in the form of denying just wages and adequate living and working conditions for workers.

### **Identity Formations of Adivasi Communities in Assam**

The Adivasi communities found themselves in a peculiar situation after arriving in Assam on the promise for better livelihoods. They were suddenly caught in an agro-industrial setting premised on capitalism but showing signs of feudal characteristics at the same time. This setting operated in isolation and there was very little contact between the Assamese and the Adivasis. This is when the construction for identification of these communities began among the Assamese society. This process gave birth to categories like 'coolies' and 'tea tribes'.<sup>404</sup> The category 'tea tribes' began to be used widely. And eventually the identities of all the distinct tribes having their own unique cultures were consumed under a reductionist industrial umbrella category known as the 'tea tribes'.

This is where the identity assertion of the Adivasis becomes so fundamental for the emancipation of the communities. But

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<sup>402</sup> Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/854331/in-assam-a-panel-has-been-set-up-to-fix-the-minimum-wages-of-assams-tea-workers-but-will-it-help>.

<sup>403</sup> P. Dutta, 'Women Tea Plantation Workers of North Bengal and the Politics of wages and other entitlements'. *The International Journal Of Humanities & Social Studies*, 2015

<sup>404</sup> Sharma, J. 'Lazy' Natives, Coolie Labour, and the Assam Tea Industry (London Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1287-1324.



unfortunately, in the tea plantations of Upper Assam, the Adivasi communities are slowly losing grip over their languages and cultural practices. The people mostly converse with each other in Sadri (which is the common language spoken among the Adivasi people).<sup>405</sup> This loss of culture, some people argue, is because of the mixture of different communities in the tea plantations of Assam. This might be a reason why in Upper Assam- where there is a mixture of Adivasi and other communities (especially the Oriya) - most of the Adivasi people cannot speak their mother tongue and generally converse in Sadri, while in lower Assam where this kind of a complex mixture has not taken place, Adivasi communities have managed to retain their language and culture to some extent. This might be due to several factors like being out of the plantation structure, development of awareness among the community due to education, close proximity to their ancestral land, etc. But this sense of consciousness is lacking among the Adivasi communities of Upper Assam. But again, communities residing in Upper Assam have mostly been restricted to the plantation structure. These factors are creating a confused scenario among the people in Upper Assam. However, these confusions might dissolve when this all-encompassing exonym 'tea tribes' is dismantled and the workers are recognised as people having distinct culture and identities. Adivasi people today are asserting their Adivasi identity and in the process also creating a strong 'social capital' of intellectuals, political activists among them.

### **Plantation Economy**

The tea industry in India, particularly in Assam is inherently colonial in terms of its underlying economic (trade) structures and social relations within a plantation. 'Plantation' as a concept is a colonial construct which was created for the cultivation of cash crops. Today in a post-colonial setting, a majority of the tea being produced in

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<sup>405</sup> W. Fernandes, 'Assam Adivasis: Identity issues and Liberation'. *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 2003.

Assam for the market comes from the plantations which are organized into rigid enclave-economies. These enclave-economies have certain characteristics which essentially suited colonial interests and which still survive to this day, not as an anachronism but evolving; over time.

One of the pre-requisite for any industrial setting is the reproduction of the conditions of production as well as the social formations.<sup>406</sup> This is the basic premise of an enclave-economy, where labour power is given the means to reproduce itself through the ‘historical minimum’-wages and by fulfilling other subsistence needs. Another characteristic is that in an enclave-economy, the market is always externally oriented and this is one of the reasons why the plantations can operate in isolation from local market centers. Local market centres develop nearby as the workers’ labour-power does not possess any exchange value which is to say that they cannot buy what they produce unlike a traditional capitalist structure.<sup>407</sup> This is precisely the reason why internal mechanisms are in place within the plantation itself through which labour constantly reproduces itself. They are provided with the minimum subsistence needs within the plantation like a weekly market or a health clinic.

The plantation structure is not only on the realms of the physical but also occupies the individual mental reality. Through the suppression of history and culture, the plantation structure colonized the minds of the Adivasi people and inserted within them an ‘inner plantation’<sup>408</sup> such that they internalized the oppression in their minds on the face of colonial civilizing mission. This internalization created the ‘other’ through institutions like the colonial schools and establishing binaries of ‘modernity’ and

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<sup>406</sup> L. Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. In L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-186.

<sup>407</sup> A. Dupuy, *Slavery and Underdevelopment in the Caribbean: A Critique of the Plantation Economy Perspective*. Springer, 1983.

<sup>408</sup> Coined by Kamau Brathwaite

‘primitiveness’. The people were stripped off their distinct cultural identities and reduced to ‘workers’. This is one of the greatest victories of the plantation economy. Therefore, it is these very foundational structures, which makes plantation as a concept gravely unjust for the workers who produce tea. This is the reason why there is a need to take the plantation as a unit of study and understand it in totality; because the very plantation structure shapes the socio-economic reality of the working communities living in it.

## Tea in the Global Context

World Production (*Source: Tea Board of India*)

Country	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016 (P)
China	1789753	1924457	2095717	2248999	2350000
India	1126330	1200410	1207310	1208660	1239150
Kenya	369562	432453	445105	399211	474808
Sri Lanka	328397	340026	338032	328964	292362
Vietnam	174028	180325	175000	170000	165000
Indonesia	137769	136856	135721	129293	125500
Others	769492	781284	802735	796395	815858
<b>Total</b>	<b>4695331</b>	<b>4995811</b>	<b>5199620</b>	<b>5281522</b>	<b>5462678</b>

World Export (Qty. in M.Tons) *Source: Tea Board of India*

Country	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016 (P)
China	321785	332416	301484	324956	328692
India	208260	219060	207440	228660	216790
Kenya	430205	494347	499380	443461	480330
Sri Lanka	306040	309199	317885	301316	280874
Vietnam	144028	140325	132000	133500	127000
Indonesia	70071	70842	66399	61915	50000
Others	295100	294635	301724	305569	293887
<b>Total</b>	<b>1775489</b>	<b>1860824</b>	<b>1826312</b>	<b>1799377</b>	<b>1777573</b>

The two tables above aptly show India’s position quite apparent in the global tea market. India has been the second largest exporter of tea after China. However, it is the absorbing and thriving domestic market which ensures the stability for the Indian tea industry. As it becomes evident from the data, India exports a negligible amount of

its total tea production. For example, in 2016, production was 1239150 m.tons out of which 216790 m.tons got exported. Kenya and Sri Lanka on the other hand exports most of their total production. The relation between production and export patterns are important because export quality production makes the tea industry more progressive and sustaining in the long run as certain standards have to be maintained like labour standards, land-use, environment, etc. which can be neglected in the domestic market.

### **Estimated Apparent Consumption of Tea in India<sup>409</sup>**

*(Figures in M.Kgs)*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Domestic Consumption (Estd)</b>
2013-14	911
2014-15	932
2015-16	951

*Source: Tea Board of India*

### **Legal Apparatus in Regulating Working Conditions**

The Plantation Labor Act (PLA) of 1951 was passed by the Parliament to provide for welfare and regulate the conditions of work in plantations all over India except Jammu and Kashmir. ‘Plantation’ as defined (in relation to its applicability) according to the act is “any land used or intended to be used for growing tea, coffee, rubber, cinchona or cardamom which measures 5 hectares or more and in which fifteen or more persons are employed on any day of the preceding twelve months.” However, the State Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, declare that the provisions of this Act can also apply to any land used or intended to be used for growing any other plant, even if it admeasures less than five hectares and the number of persons employed are less than fifteen (15) (PLA, 1951). In that sense, the State Government is empowered under the Act. The act recognizes plantation as a self-sufficient unit which contains offices, hospitals, dispensaries, schools, etc. The Act regulates all major aspects from

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<sup>409</sup> Estimated based on ORG India study report.

registering and appointment of Chief Inspectors to ensuring adequate healthcare, education, living and working conditions of the plantation workers. The Act states that the statutory benefits like healthcare and education must be exclusive of the wage calculation.

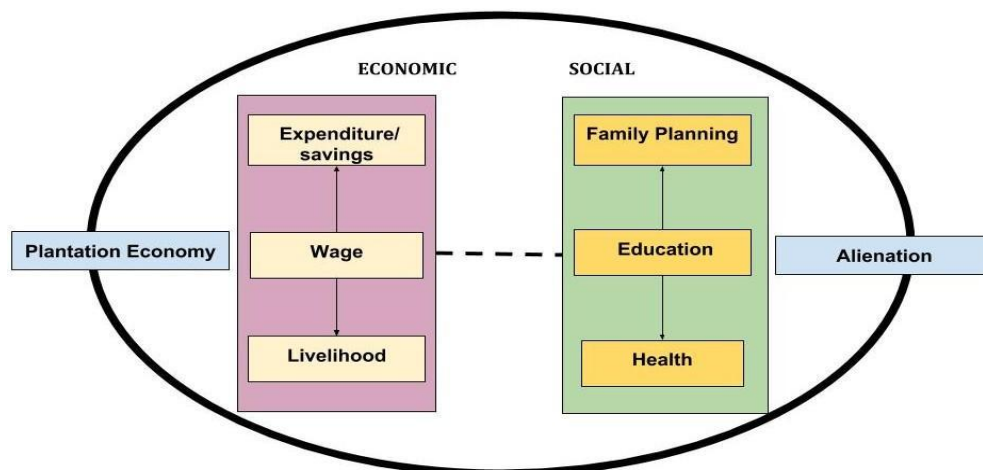
According to the act, a “child” is someone below the age of fourteen (14), an “adolescent” is someone who is between fourteen (14) and eighteen (18) years of age and an adult is someone who has completed eighteen (18) years of ages. A “family” is seen as the worker’s spouse and the dependent children below the age of eighteen (18) years and also includes, “where the worker is a male, his parents’ dependent upon him”. A “worker” can be a person who is employed for any kind of skilled, unskilled, manual or clerical work. A plantation is liable to employ a welfare officer where there are three hundred (300) or more workers in a plantation and the state government has the authority to prescribe duties and qualifications for the same (PLA, 1951).

The Assam Plantation Labour Rules, 1956 are detailed rules framed by the State government which lays out the procedure for implementation of the provisions under the Plantation Labour Act like welfare, maternity benefit, etc.

There are numerous other legislations (other than the PLA) which apply to the tea industry in some way or the other, but the PLA has been paramount and solely applies for regulating welfare conditions in the plantation sector. The Workmen’s Compensation Act, 1923 which applies to plantations, does not prove to be of any substantial benefit to the tea industry as the nature of work is different from other industries and occupational accidents are few. Similarly, other legislations like the Minimum Wages Act, 1936, the Industrial Employment Standing Orders Act, 1946 and the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 does not apply to the plantations to a great extent. This is the reason why the need for a separate Plantation Labour Code was

felt necessary which came out in the form of the Plantation Labour Act, if it meets the criteria of a 'plantation' under the act.<sup>410</sup>

### Socio-Economic Conceptual Framework



### Understanding the socio-economic Scenario in Plantations

India is the second largest producer and exporter of tea in the world. The country has also been witnessing annual domestic consumption increase year after year by approximately 15 million kg annually. The country exports approximately 200 million kg tea globally and imports around 22 million kg annually to meet the high domestic market demand for tea.<sup>411</sup> Yet despite this equilibrium of the market forces of production and consumption, the stakeholders in the tea business keep on stressing on the frail and monotonous argument of how the tea production costs and labour costs are increasing, thereby affecting positive growth of the industry.<sup>412</sup>

The Plantation Labour Act, which regulates welfare in the tea industry, has clearly laid out provisions for the socio-economic development of the workers settled in the tea plantations. These

<sup>410</sup> A. Gaffar, *The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 and The Assam Plantation Labour Rules, 1956* (Guwahati: Assam Law House, 2015).

<sup>411</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.teaboard.gov.in/TEABOARDPAGE/MjA=>

<sup>412</sup> S. Bhowmik, 'Living Conditions of Tea Plantation Workers'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2015.

include facilities for potable drinking water, adequate housing and sanitation, primary schools, hospitals with certified medical officers, crèches, canteens, etc. for every plantation. But these provisions are explicitly violated by the management running the tea plantations so much so that these violations have become normalized. Considering the fact that most of these basic provisions have never been implemented<sup>413</sup> in the tea plantations and even if done so, the functioning of these facilities can still be speculated, the management's claims of costs involved for their implementation is clearly speculative. "The non-implementation of acts is mainly because of the indifference of the state governments and of course the plantation companies".<sup>414</sup>

The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 came into force as a social regulatory mechanism in the plantations of India. Unlike new forms of regulations and certifications which often operate from the West and work closely with the management when it comes to setting social standards on labour, the PLA is rooted in the context where the plantations are located and is independent of any affiliation with the management as the legislation is legally enforceable. It works in close proximity to the plantation system, unlike the new forms of neo-liberal regulatory institutions, as checks and balances to the inequities in the plantations. If the PLA is enforced in its vitality, it could be one of the best tools for social regulation thereby ensuring that the plantations are socially just to the people living and working in it.<sup>415</sup> State regulatory mechanisms like the PLA have a lot of scope to improve the existing conditions in the gardens. But it is quite unfortunate that the PLA is being violated from the government's end too, let alone the management. Labour inspectors and officers under the Labour Department of Assam Government

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<sup>413</sup> G. Bharali, *Labour Unrest and Social Insecurity of Plantation Workers: A Case Study.* (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2004).

<sup>414</sup> S. Bhowmik, 'Living Conditions of Tea plantation Workers.' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2015.

<sup>415</sup> S. Besky, 'Colonial Pasts and Fair Trade Futures.' In M. M. Sarah Lyon, *Fair Trade and Social Justice- Global Ethnographies* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 97-122.

are considerably few in relation to the total number of registered tea plantations.<sup>416</sup> Even if labour inspectors are present, they do not conduct inspections and audits on time. Regular audits are important in ensuring sustainable welfare which is lacking in the new forms of regulations. A study conducted by the North-East Research Centre in Guwahati in 2004 found grave violations of the provisions under the Plantation Labour Act and almost non-existence of the entitled provisions in some of the gardens out of the 172 tea gardens of Assam in which the research was conducted.<sup>417</sup>

The workers are paid deplorable wages at Rs.137<sup>418</sup> (for permanent workers) in the tea industry of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>419</sup> Bhowmik argues that wages are considerably high in the tea growing regions of the South, while it is much lower in the Northern regions of Assam and West-Bengal, despite the fact that the region shows positive signs in realizing productivity and prices. Low wages have been justified in the North by arguing that the plantations in the South do not provide the in-kind benefits and if the value of ‘perks’ are included with the in-hand cash, the difference between the wages of two regions is actually negligible.<sup>420</sup> He further states that the productivity per kg of made tea per worker is 705kg in Assam, 817 kg in West Bengal, while it is only 613kg for Tamil Nadu and 688kg for Kerala.<sup>421</sup> Moreover, the auction price of tea is also very high in the Northern States compared to the Southern States. Despite such

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<sup>416</sup> D. Ghoshal, D. Thousands of young mothers in India are paying with their lives to produce your cup of tea. (24 July 2016). Retrieved from <https://qz.com/740660/thousands-of-young-mothers-in-india-are-paying-with-their-lives-to-produce-your-cup-of-tea/>

<sup>417</sup> G. Bharali, Labour Unrest and Social Insecurity of Plantation Workers: A Case Study. (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2004).

<sup>418</sup> The wage has now been revised to Rs.167 at the time of publishing.

<sup>419</sup> P. Dutta, ‘Women Tea Plantation Workers of North Bengal and the Politics of wages and other entitlements’. *The International Journal Of Humanities & Social Studies*, 2015.

<sup>420</sup> S. Bhowmik, ‘Living Conditions of Tea plantation Workers.’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2015.

<sup>421</sup> *ibid*



promising signs of productivity, the workers are not paid a wage that is commensurate to the labour that they put in. This has a significant impact on their purchasing/consuming power and this is the reason why in-kind components are so crucial for the well-being of the workers.

The Public Distribution System in the tea industry is one of the oldest forms of food distribution system in the country. The food grains are supplied directly from the Food Corporation of India (FCI) godown to the employees through the PDS quota under APL scheme.<sup>422</sup> The tea industry has been providing to its workers food grains at a highly subsidized rate of 47paise/54paise per kg rice and wheat respectively. In total, 35kg of rice and wheat are provided per month. However, there have been attempts by the centre in recent times to scrap this significant component of ration which is exclusive of wages and compensate it with cash.<sup>423</sup> This move also involves the alteration of the definition of “wages” in the PLA through the Plantation Labour Bill, 2016. But this does not seem like a viable option because there is already widespread malnutrition among the people working in the tea plantations and in that sense the ration component is anyways not helping the people much, but the ration at least ensures a regular minimum supply of food in the family. According to the medical director from Assam Medical College, nine out of ten patients from the tea plantations turn out to be malnourished.<sup>424</sup>

Assam accounts for the highest mortality rate in India at 300 per 100,000 live births in 2011-13.<sup>425</sup> In the major tea growing districts in Upper Assam (Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat and

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<sup>422</sup> B. Saikia, 'Development of Tea Garden Community and Adivasi Identity Politics in Assam'. Dialogue, 2009.

<sup>423</sup> S.B. Pisharoty, Centre to Amend Plantations Act. New Delhi: The Wire, 2017.

<sup>424</sup> J. Rowlatt and J. Deith, The bitter story behind the UK's national drink. (8 September 2015). Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34173532>

<sup>425</sup> Retrieved from <http://niti.gov.in/content/maternal-mortality-ratio-mmr-100000-live-births#>

Golaghat) where the Assam Medical College also happens to serve, maternal mortality ratio was 404 per 100,000 live births, resembling Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>426</sup> Anemia and Thalassaemia has been a common health problem concerning the Adivasi communities in the plantations of Assam.<sup>427</sup> These factors directly affect the maternal and infant health. Besides, respiratory diseases like tuberculosis are also very common. The tea garden workers have also seen epidemics like gastroenteritis and tuberculosis time and again which is an outcome of abysmal living conditions without adequate water supply.<sup>428</sup>

The overall socio- economic condition of the Adivasi communities in the tea plantation of Assam has also been shaped by the administrative status of the Adivasi communities. The majority of the Adivasis in Assam come under the Other Backward Classes (OBC) while the same communities in the Chotanagpur region come under the Scheduled Tribes. The Adivasi communities have been demanding the ST status in Assam. Since the nature of the status question is political, consecutive governments have tried to play on the promise of granting the ST status and several local communities in Assam have also come out in strong opposition to this demand. If these communities get the ST status it would certainly make considerable impact on improving the socio-economic conditions of the people. The status question is also seen as a form of identity assertion by the Adivasi people.<sup>429</sup> The Adivasi communities were a major vote bank for the Congress until 2014 when the Adivasis voted for the BJP. This was a shock for the

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<sup>426</sup> D. Ghoshal, D. Thousands of young mothers in India are paying with their lives to produce your cup of tea. (24 July 2016). Retrieved from <https://qz.com/740660/thousands-of-young-mothers-in-india-are-paying-with-their-lives-to-produce-your-cup-of-tea/>

<sup>427</sup> A.B. Teli, R. Deori, & S.P. Saikia, 'Haemoglobinopathies and  $\beta$ -Thalassaemia among the tribals working in the tea gardens of Assam'. *Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research*, 2016.

<sup>428</sup> U. Misra, 'Assam Tea: The Bitter Brew'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2003: 3029-3032.

<sup>429</sup> I. Sharma, 'Tea Tribes of Assam- Identity Politics and Search for Liberation'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2018.

Congress and they knew that the people were becoming aware and frustrated for their demands to be met. The people made a strong statement that the Adivasis cannot be taken for granted. Yet after BJP came to power, the demand for ST status is still pending.<sup>430</sup>

The denial of the basic welfare measures have resulted in sporadic incidents of violence in some tea estates across Assam. Although it is difficult to establish a direct causality between both these factors, the incidents can be seen as the eruption of long-accumulated anger of the people towards the management. These incidents include gherao and burning down executive bungalows, killing executives from the management, etc.<sup>431</sup> These are results of long-term historical neglect and were very much avoidable if welfare measures were undertaken adequately and workers were paid on time. These incidents have made tea garden managements and state alert from time to time and made them re-look at the complexities involved in dealing with labour and the general population has formed varied perceptions on the Adivasi people. Ideally after such sporadic outbursts of incidents, the management and the state should have worked together, but this has not happened and the workers find themselves sandwiched in between the management and the state that pass on the blame to each other pertaining to implementation of the Plantation Labour Act and its provisions. The management argues that their cost of production out of which labour cost which accounts to almost 55% of the total cost, has been increasing substantially.<sup>432</sup> While the state argues that ensuring welfare measures is the managements' responsibility. All these processes have only widened the gap between workers, management and the state.

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<sup>430</sup> I. Chakravarty, 'Assam's tea tribes: The group that could swing the election is too disaffected to care' (3 April 2016) Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/806082/assams-tea-tribes-the-group-that-could-swing-the-election-is-too-disaffected-to-care>

<sup>431</sup> Misra, Assam Tea: The Bitter Brew, 2003. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/Assam-tea-estate-tense-after-killing-of-owner-wife/articleshow/17786881.cms>

<sup>432</sup> *ibid*

The general Assamese society seems to hold a deep-rooted prejudice towards the Adivasis which has stigmatized the Adivasi community settled in Assam. The 2007 incident that led to brutal attack on the Adivasis gathered for a peaceful protest demanding ST status in the state capital was justified as retaliation by the local people against vandalism carried out by the protesters.<sup>433</sup> Though people are quick to condemn violent behavior of the Adivasis in several incidents like setting the owners' house on fire in Tinsukia district or protesting against the management, they do not look deeper into where this kind of violent behavior stems from and what could possibly make them commit such ghastly acts.

Due to their existing socio-economic condition, people are not aware of their rights which reflect back in terms of poor development indicators like healthcare and education. Moreover, it is quite naïve and un-professional on part of both the management and the State to not see investments in social welfare and well-being as a catalyst for increasing worker productivity. Investing on the wellbeing is very important because the Adivasi communities make up the very foundation of the tea industry. It is only them who have nurtured the tea industry and the fate of the industry also lies with them. Wages are abysmally low in Assam as compared to the Southern states. The argument that the in-kind benefits amount up to the wage in the South is flawed because a fixed amount is already being deducted for ration, thereby reducing the base wage even further from Rs.137/126 respectively. The other benefits combined also, do not make it more than Rs.200 per person<sup>434</sup> while the basic minimum wage in the Southern States is more than Rs.250 which again keeps on rising according to the variable dearness allowance (VDA) considering the rise in the cost of living in the wage calculations. Cost of living and inflationary factors are also not considered in Assam.

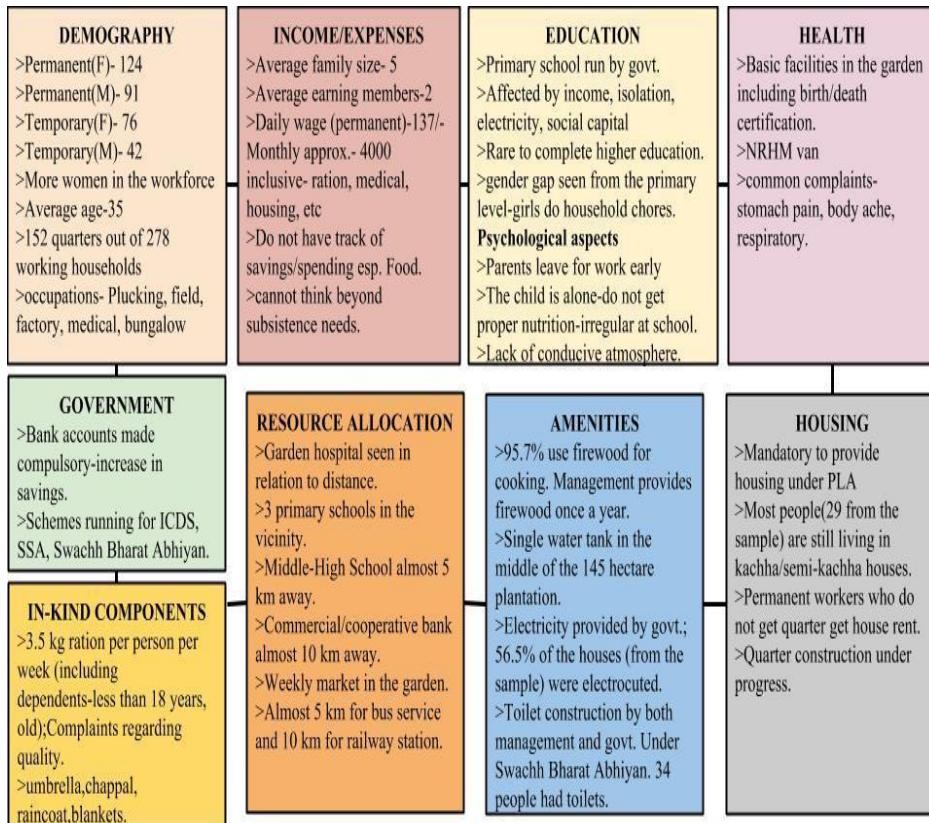
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<sup>433</sup> U. Misra, 'Adivasi Struggle in Assam'. Economic and Political Weekly, 2007.

<sup>434</sup> Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/854331/in-assam-a-panel-has-been-set-up-to-fix-the-minimum-wages-of-assams-tea-workers-but-will-it-help>

There have been numerous studies and research in tea being carried out by different agencies like the Tea Board, but the area which has largely been neglected is labour and welfare. There has not been any rigorous research which holds companies accountable for implementation of social welfare provisions in the gardens. The Tea Board's primary focus is on conducting 'tea research', but one can only wonder why 'research and development of labour', which constitutes a primal role in the functioning of tea industry, should not come under tea research. It is only the external actors who have always focused on social welfare and held the companies accountable. This is to say that labour welfare has historically been seen as the least priority area in tea research and by the industry in general. Even today, when there is a constant search for the long-term sustainability of the industry, the very people on whose shoulders the tea industry is sustaining itself are neglected.

**Indicators representing socio-economic reality in a tea plantation of Assam**



Source: Author

## **The Centrality of Wage**

Tea plantations comply with the minimum wage set by the bilateral agreement between the Consultative Committee of Planters Association (CCPA) comprising a body of employers associations and Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) the largest union under Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) representing the tea workers of Assam. One can look at this compliance as necessary (on management's part) for the constant reproduction of labour by allowing room for subsistence living. And therefore, it is only when we move beyond the 'wage and statutory compliance' and look at how these shapes the consumption expenditure and living condition of the workers, we get a sense of the crisis. The minimum wage for un-skilled work in Assam is Rs.250 and the tea industry which comes under the organized sector pays its workers as low as Rs.137. It is wrong to argue that tea plucking and manufacturing is un-skilled work. Tea plucking involves refined skills and it is needless to say that workers in the factory need to possess certain skills to carry out their specific tasks. However, it can be seen in the recent past that the government is slowly getting involved in the wage settlement in the plantations. This can have a positive outcome for the workers. The present government has made it mandatory for all the workers to have bank accounts for direct wage deposits. This move has gained widespread support among the people as savings have become relatively easier for the families.

In the study it was found that most of the people did not have any track of their daily spending. Another interesting aspect is that even if the primary working member in the household was a woman, the wage was mostly in control of the man. This factor has significant implications on spending. It was felt that the women were more conscious of spending and education of their children than the men. Moreover, they are the ones who were found to be managing the household chores including the kitchen, yet in most cases they did not have much idea of the expenditure on food items. Alcoholism was seen as one of the major factors leading to an uncontrolled

expense of the family. The usual outsider's perception on alcohol consumption in the tea gardens is that people remain poor since they spend too much money on alcohol. However this is only looking at the problem at the level of mere common sense. On the contrary, it can be argued that it is chronic poverty and abysmal conditions in the garden which push people into alcohol addiction. Hence, there is a need to understand the circumstances that lead people into the daily habit of alcohol consumption in the plantations. The labour intensive tea industry demands toiling physical labour. People come home to poor housing conditions without proper sanitation. These factors need to be considered while looking at the problem of alcoholism. Moreover, the local drink which is popular among the Adivasi society called '*badiya*' has been an integral part of Adivasi culture and many people do not consider it as alcohol. But another variety of home-made drink which is popular among the workers and is much more harmful is the '*chulai*'. But, the point which needs to be stressed is that preparing alcohol in the household has been an age-old occupation and an alternative source of income for the families living in the plantations. While the selling of alcohol should not be promoted, there is also a need to look for alternatives which would supplement selling alcohol for better livelihoods.

Currently, agitation in demand for the increase in wage has been going on led by the All Assam Adivasi Students Union (AAASU). This agitation started in the later months of 2017 strategically eyeing the 2018 panchayat elections to pressurize the government for an increase in wage to Rs.350.<sup>435</sup> Such a huge leap from Rs.137 seems impossible considering the past increments in wage at a difference of not more than Rs.10-15 every year. Many people working in the tea gardens believe that wage is at the core to all of their problems and if the wage is set in a manner that considers the everyday cost of living in a household, the situation could be much better. The

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<sup>435</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.sentinelassam.com/story/guwahati-today/0/aasaa-for-rs-350-as-te-workers-daily-wage/2017-10-31/1/324466#.WfIN1ehubIU>

involvement of the government in wage settlement is needed and there is a renewed sense of hope among that people that the government is starting to get involved especially since the setting up of the Minimum Wage Advisory Board<sup>436</sup> (under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948) to re-look at the current wages in plantations and recommend changes for the same along with the introduction of bank accounts and by setting up a panel to fix the minimum wage.

### **Alienation in Tea Plantations**

The 2007 incident in Guwahati is a very symbolic event in the history of Assam. It is symbolic in the sense that this event brought the Adivasis and the local people into close confrontation with each other for the first time in the capital of the State. There was certainly a sense of uneasiness when the Adivasis came out to demand for their rights and more so, as they had come out of the structure of the plantations that they have long been confined to. The Adivasi communities has been living in isolation from the mainstream Assamese society because of geographical, occupational as well as cultural factors. This event brought the Adivasis into close contact with the mainstream society and resulted in a shift in power equations. Events like these bring out rather overtly (which otherwise stay covert in the lived experiences of the people) the phenomenon of 'isolation' and 'alienation', and without trying to understand these, it becomes difficult to grasp the socio-economic reality of the Adivasis in totality. Isolation is so stark that even the genetic and transmittable health problems that the plantations of Assam breed stay within the plantation itself. These health issues can very much come under control if adequate prevention measures are undertaken within the plantation.

The survival of the colonial structure of the plantation economy and the existing socio-economic situation in the plantations has to be seen in relation to the concept of alienation. Alienation can be looked at in various ways when we try to understand the socio-

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<sup>436</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.thedialogue.co/minimum-wage-tea-workers-way-ahead/>



economic condition of the people. The most primary form of alienation that the Adivasi communities face in the plantations is that of geographical and material alienation. Tea plantations were set up in the erstwhile uninhabited regions of Assam because of which towns came up and started to prosper catering to the needs of the tea industry. However, the coming up of towns was a gradual process and it still did not change the fact that the plantations operated in considerable isolation. The people living in the towns still do not know much about the functioning nor the people working in the industry. This is the reason why there has been least contact among the Assamese and the Adivasi people. This form of alienation has always worked in favour of the industry which has kept the workers unaware of the outside world, which in turn has also resulted in a lack of awareness among the people living outside the plantations to the exploitations in the industry. The workers are also materially alienated from their own labour. They do not know where the tea is sold or how is it sold or on what price is it sold. This form of alienation has led to horizontal inequality in the supply-chain. Besides, there is alienation at the community level too. The Adivasis have been historically reduced to mere workers in an industrial setting and this has led to an alienation of cultures and identity. Different tribes have got mixed in this historical process which has led to losing their distinct tribal identities. All these forms of alienation are manifesting in the Adivasi youths of today as they are increasingly moving out of the tea plantations in search for better opportunities and livelihoods.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Tea industry is a highly-women centric industry.<sup>437</sup> Women from almost every household are usually employed in the garden. But when it comes to the control of the money that they earn, it is always in the hands of men. The point being, it is very important that women have control over the money because they are the ones

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<sup>437</sup> R. Rasaily, *Women's labour in the tea sector: Changing trajectories and emerging challenges* (Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies, 2014).

who know the daily expenses of the family better than men. Women workers should also be part of the wage negotiation processes as they can actually portray the actual cost of living in the households. The recent Minimum Wage Advisory Board also does not have any women representatives, let alone any Adivasi women. In a women-centric industry with alarming mortality and infant mortality rates, women should be part of the decision-making process.<sup>438</sup>

Stakeholders (especially from planters associations) argue that the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 is outdated in the present times and there is a need to re-think/ re-look this institutional regulatory mechanism which has over-burdened the tea companies, ultimately leading to losses hampering the industry.<sup>439</sup> If such is the case, then there is also a need to re-look at the tea industry which is inherently colonial in its structural formations and has been functioning on the colonial construct of 'plantations'. So as plantations are still very much a reality, the legislation which was passed to regulate the conditions of work in these plantations should also exist. And the question of whether the Act is applicable to the present times should only occur if the plantations do not exist anymore. If the proper implementation of the Plantation Labour Act is not possible in the present times, then there is need to think beyond the idea of the plantation structure instead of doing away with the legislation itself. The point being that it is about time the tea industry came out of the colonial hangover and learned to innovate. And at the very axiological premise of innovation is developing trust for the people who are working in the tea industry. For instance, rise in labour costs could easily be diverted towards the workers by helping them become self-sufficient through opportunities for alternative livelihoods. The tea industry has to overcome the 'fear' that is at the core of the suppression workers face, which is the fear that anything

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<sup>438</sup> J. Satpute, Minimum Wage of Tea Workers: The Way Ahead, (20 December 2017) Retrieved from The Dialogue: <http://www.thedialogue.co/minimum-wage-tea-workers-way-ahead/>

<sup>439</sup> For details, see <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/troubles-brewing-in-indias-tea-sector/article21979485.ece>

more than fulfilling subsistence needs would make the workers leave for better opportunities. Of course workers would want to leave, like in any other capitalist enterprise. But it is the acceptance that workers have every right to leave, will actually result in better social welfare policies. In fact, this ‘fear’ is also colonial which once got translated into draconian legislations by the British.

The realization that better wages and living conditions translates into greater worker productivity is surprisingly missing in the tea industry. It is evident today that workers are already migrating to metros in search for better jobs and there is widespread absenteeism in the tea gardens. Instead of arguing that the workers will move out of the gardens, there is a need to enhance the working environment such that they do not have to go looking for jobs in the metro while also respecting their right to do so. The point being, all these forms of colonial thinking must be done away with. There is a need to think discursively and find ways that shift the existing colonial structure of the plantation economy towards developing socially fair methods of trade which is rooted in the context and addresses the needs of present times. Until we build a value-chain in which a grower/worker has an authority for his/her produce and gets in return the fair price for their tea sold at the open market, the tea industry will always be on a crisis.

The tea industry needs to transform its productive processes in a manner whereby it seeks to uphold the 17 sustainable goals under the UN Development agenda by ensuring that the workers enjoy the four principles of decent work- dignity, equality, fair income and safe working conditions.<sup>440</sup> It is important to look at cash, in-kind components and the provisions under the PLA like housing, potable water, etc as a step towards a ‘living wage’<sup>441</sup> rather than a mere ‘subsistence wage’. The tea industry is not a free labour market

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<sup>440</sup> For details, see <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm>

<sup>441</sup> For details, see, <https://utz.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Living-wage-guidance-document-UTZ.pdf>

where anyone applies for a job. It is a few particular communities who have been serving the tea industry for generations. Therefore, the implementation of the Plantation Labour Act in its spirit is not only a way for ensuring a decent standard of living for the workers but towards correcting a historical wrong meted out towards the Adivasi communities for generations.

# The Long and Treacherous Journey of Chakmas from CHT to NEFA: Of Painful Memories and Endless Hardships

Utpala Chakma

## Introduction

The partition of Bengal between India and Pakistan in 1947 led to an unprecedented crisis for Chakmas, both in India and present Bangladesh. It not only caused pain in the lives of the affected people but turned a whole community with their own state into stateless peoples. The division of Bengal and other parts of India was agreed upon by prioritizing two major religious groups; Hindus and Muslims. This invisibilised other groups like the Buddhist. The wishes of other religious communities to decide their faith were not considered. It was an imposition implemented on those groups who were not even counted while making decisions on the divisions on the basis of religions.<sup>442</sup> The aftermath of the partition on the basis of religion proved fatal to those who do not belong to the majority religion.

One such case is of the indigenous peoples of Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT). Their number slowly started shrinking in population with outsiders outnumbering the indigenous peoples. The CHT became a breeding ground for Muslim Bengalis, where 98.5 percent of the people were Buddhist during 1947.<sup>443</sup> The power politics played through developmental projects strategically displaced the indigenous peoples from CHT rendering them to a state of minority in their own land. Majority of them becoming stateless and were spread across South Asia.

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<sup>442</sup> D.K. Chakma, *The Partition and the Chakmas*. (Photi.in, 2013)

<sup>443</sup> C. Prasad, 'Between Nation and Nationality'. *Dialog* (Quarterly Journal Astha Bharti), 2012

The struggle of the Chakmas who migrated to India was not easy; it was a brutal struggle for sheer survival in a foreign habitat, with new people, in a new place, with different culture and a changed environment. Huge number of people lost their lives during the journey to India. This loss was due to fatigue, diseases and infections that they acquired through the journey from the new environment and with limited medical facilities available to them. They had least awareness of where they were going, yet they journeyed on following the authorities who took them. In this way a few finally settled in a particular habitat. The exact figure of the Chakma population who migrated to India is not clear; however as per the study conducted by Chunnu Prasad (2012) the number is approximately 40,000. This same figure was also noted in the book 'Stateless in Southeast Asia'.<sup>444</sup> An article by Alzazeera published in June 2012, titled 'Little Cheers for Chakmas in India' stated the figure to be as high as 100,000. Nonetheless, as per 2001 census, the present number of Chakmas in India is 60,000. This was identified by the registrar general, Government of India, 2001.

Settling down in a new place was tough for the Chakmas, however, they accepted the fact that they had to reside in a new place and start everything afresh with no hope to return back to their ancestral lands. As per the Chakma community leaders, they were given the choice of settling in forested land and given paddy, fruits and vegetables seeds to start their lives afresh. The nearest communities to Chakmas are Singphoo, Khampti and few of the Nagas.

After some 20 years of settling down, the locals of Arunachal Pradesh began to resent against the Chakmas. The state political bodies tried various means to drive the Chakma away from Arunachal Pradesh. There were cases where houses were set on fire, facilities being withdrawn, students deprived of education, withdrawal of public funded hospitals, denying the issuance of basic

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<sup>444</sup> D. K. Singh, *Stateless in South Asia: The Chakmas Between Bangladesh and India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010)

documents like birth certificates, medical certificates, permanent residential certificates, Schedule Tribe certificates and so on.

The Chakmas became the object of hate and were labeled as 'intruders', 'refugees' and were threatened that they must vacate Arunachal Pradesh. These processes experienced by the Chakmas are a manifest of the partition. They remained in a state of uncertainty to this very day and there are very less people who can empathies with their statelessness.

### **The Context**

The Chakmas continue to live in continuous fear and uncertainty in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. The state is firm on its stand to keep the Chakmas at bay and make the state free from Chakmas. They are identified as refugees by the local communities. Nonetheless the Chakma kept struggling and pleaded for a citizenship status as going back to the CHT is not really an option after nearly 55 years of leaving the place. The Chakmas have a difficult life. It is not known till when they will have to continue living in such a state without any basic rights as citizens even though they were recently allowed to vote in the 2019 general elections.

They live in forested and mountainous regions and practice shifting cultivation, moving from one place to another periodically. In some of the areas these shifting cultivations are done by paying tax to the land holders who are from the Naga, Shinphoo or Khampti tribes. These taxes are usually for paddy.

Despite the fact that the Chakmas have kept on staying in the state, they have kept languishing over no fault of theirs as they themselves did not volunteer to come to Arunachal Pradesh but were brought to the place as a compromise. The withdrawal of essential facilities like livelihood opportunities, employment, exchange permit and taking back the use of ration cards have made it truly troublesome for the Chakmas to survive. They are also confronted with incessant quit notices issued by local student bodies and the response from the Center to figure out the issue seems to be in a state of

abeyances. The Chakmas in the hope of becoming India citizens are constantly seeking the attention of the central government.

## **The History of Early Days of the Settlement in State**

### **The Journey: Narration**

The early days of settlement of the Chakmas started from late 1964 when they arrived from erstwhile Pakistan till 1969. For some the journey took from months to years to settle. The reason for not reaching the destination at the same time was because the journey involved several batches of groups, and also the place of destination was unknown. It is said that almost 40,000 Chakmas arrived by the end of 1964. They came in groups of forty to hundred. During the migration period, they were taken to several other places before they actually settled in Arunachal Pradesh. Some were taken to Bihar as elicited from the discussion that happened with the people who are now settled in Jyotipur village. Evidently, the Jyotipur village was nicknamed as '*Bihar Para*' because the Chakmas who settled in that place were first taken to Bihar and then later came to Arunachal in 1969. As per the villagers who are in their 60s, they stated that they left Bihar because they found that the environment and atmosphere did not suit them; it was too hot and the land was dry.

It is evident that the Chakmas were given freedom to choose places settlement. One of the option was called by Chakmas '*Aronyokanoon*,'<sup>445</sup> this particular name do not suggest any present existing name of a place. But the Chakmas were aware that such a place was very dangerous and it has '*rakboshi trees*.'<sup>446</sup> The Chakmas avoided going to this place. Some believed that the place is Andaman Islands. Finally after arriving in Arunachal Pradesh, they found the place suitable. Group wise they began settling along the stream which is currently called Dhing Nadi. This stream has now

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<sup>445</sup> This came out during interview with Chakma leaders

<sup>446</sup> As per narration from Kironmoy Chakam, this particular term was given by the Chakmas to Rubber trees, Chakmas believe that rubber trees degrade people's health and make people die early.



turned into an enormous river. The Chakmas settled near the stream because it was a clean source for fish, water and many other wild vegetables which grew along the stream.<sup>447</sup>

Back then in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), the situation of the Chakmas became precarious as they faced displacement due to the construction of the Kaptai dam. People who have experienced it states of enormous hardships being experienced. Sumendralal Chakma<sup>448</sup> shares his experiences in East Pakistan before coming to India. He used to stay in the Majshuri village (name of a village in Bangladesh) and the dam construction started in 1958. The Chakmas could not imagine that the dam will bring destruction. Completion of the dam led to the submersion of huge fertile agricultural lands of the Chakmas and they roamed here and there for a while in search of a place to live. They stayed in their relatives' villages like Hajolong, Sijog Duor (names of villages in Bangladesh) for a while but they had to keep moving as there was not enough land to cultivate. Further living under the Pakistan government was not easy. He states

“it was difficult to live there, there was no justice for us. Whenever there used to be even a small conflict between us (Chakmas) and other communities we did not get justice, it was a biased government. They even disrespected our women whenever they find opportunity”.

He further narrates about the beginning of the journey to India.

“During 1964 I was around 32 years, we heard that people were going to India, then we also left for India. In the beginning we entered into Demagiri in Mizoram. The Indian government gave provision (rice) and made camps in 15 km gap. They made us into groups with one group leader in each group. The government also gave vehicles for the elderly,

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<sup>447</sup> Due to lack of written documents and not able to access the resources, this information was collected from the Chakmas who travelled from East Pakistan to India.

<sup>448</sup> He passed away a year after this interview.

children, and the sick people were also provided with medical facilities. We reached till Aizwal (capital of Mizoram) all by foot, from there we reached Dolai camp Kashar district (Assam).”

Hironmoy Dewan also shares a similar story about the journey. He narrates how they were given rice for several days by the Indian government. The Chakmas continued their journey by staying for months in the camps. Sumendralal also narrated that they stayed for ten days in Doali Camp before moving to Baldalpur by trucks. From Badalpur they were sent to Ledu camp by train. He also adds as a continuation of the story

“reaching Ledu (Assam)camp we stayed there for six months, in the Ledu camp we faced lots of difficulties, food and ration was not enough, no medicines, many people died, everyday lines of dead bodies can be seen taken in the four shoulders, it was the daily picture there. We heard that there were lots of corruption done by the local government and the big officials in Ledu on the rations and provisions for the refugees”.

The incidents in Ledu camps stayed in the memory of most of the refugees. Hironmoy’s experiences similar events to that of Sumendralal Chakma, and notes “After reaching Ledu camp we stayed for five days, there were many deaths due to shortage of medicine and food”. The headman of Shantipur too agrees with these historical events. Sumnedralal continues

“staying like that in Ledu for six months we had no clue where we will go next. Few days later we came to know that we will be taken to NEFA. This NEFA we did not have the slightest idea of what it is. We could not imagine the place also where it will be. Then we were taken by trucks, busses to Maio”.

Some groups had to stay for six months in the Ledu camp as in the case of Sumendrala Chakma while the group of Hironmoy stayed

for only five days. As groups arrived on different dates, so those who reached early had to wait for the others to arrive and once all of them gathered together in Ledu, they were then taken to NEFA.<sup>449</sup>

### **The Settlement and Neighbours**

The Chakmas settled over four Blocks - Maio Circle, Diyun, Lohit and Bordumsa. Sumendralal says “reaching Maio I saw no traces of people houses, shops, but one or two (Singphos) can be seen in a day or two who come out in search of food. It was all ‘oranyo jungle’ (thick forest) all over.

Chene Gum the village head man of one of the Singphos Bosti gives his perspective of how he remembers the Chakmas. He states

“The Chakmas came in 1964 when I was young, can’t say how old I was but I use to carry 12/15 kg of load at that time. I was studying in class 3. Udanga Moni (Chakma leader) Chaudhry (Circle Officier) and other government official came to P.C La (village Gaon Bura), came to my father regarding the Chakma people’s settlement issue and they said that Chakmas and you have the same religion, your tradition is also same, they are much like your people, in looks and food habits and much more, give place to them by your side, you will make a good living together. There were lots of barren place as well and after those discussions the Chakmas were given place in Diyun, Deban, Maio and other Blocks but not the En-Pen area”.

At the time of settlement, it was called NEFA. It is evident that the settlement took place with proper communication and responsibility of the Indian government. Hironmoy recalled pointing to the grounds below noting “there were big bamboo groves as big as the houses in the place we have our houses now”. Describing the forest cover he further adds “the sun and moon cannot be seen due to the forest thickness, the trees branches almost created canopy”, He tells

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<sup>449</sup> North East Frontier Agency is currently Arunachal Pradesh.

about the wild life nearby “wild elephants and other animals were lots in the jungle, we had feast everyday”. Describing the land he states “it was plain everywhere you look, it was a beautiful place, the elderly Singphoo leaders about five six of them discussed and agreed to leave the land from Namsai to Diyun Nala (water stream) for us we became very happy seeing the land and place”.

The Chakmas availed ration for one year from the government as they were new settlers. They even got saplings of fruits trees and paddy to cultivate which the government provided so that they could have a normal life. Primary schools were started in every village. Health centers and basic administration offices were set up for the Chakmas. Diyun town was a product of these policies and programmes. Many of the Chakmas were also offered jobs. The Chakmas were fearful to take these jobs, relying more on agriculture. There were many youths who were given training in the Army even though they did not know how to read and write. They were even taught Hindi and Bengali scripts since they came from East Bengal. Somehow the familiarity with the scripts made it easy. But many of those Chakmas who were married were reported to have run away from the camps. Later the unmarried people were given Army training. This too did not work out, as the unmarried people started to get married and left the jobs.

The Chakmas who came from East Pakistan were ‘innocent’. They did not have much knowledge of documentation, since the concept of documentation was not prevalent among them, and they never felt it necessary except for the few learned leaders. Even today many are without any documents. They have not preserved their identity cards (migration and refugee identity cards).

The schools played important role in the development of the Chakmas. The children who were born during the migration period and also the ones who were in their early childhood during 1964 before coming to India began going to schools. The parents were not very keen about children’s education. Those who could study from the government school became the first generation learners.

There were also many dropouts that took place before the primary level. Women's dropout rate was much higher than their brothers. Hardly 10 to 15 people could study till college. The one who became dropout before matriculation got married and later began to value education and have made effort to educate their children.

From 1964 till 1980 the Chakmas did enjoy a peaceful life. They engaged in cultivation without facing any problems. The agitation by local bodies against Chakmas started during late 1980s, after this the local government started acting upon the Chakmas by taking away the rights and privileges that they had enjoyed so far.

### **Withdrawal of Government Support**

Problems began in late 1980s. Political, social and financial rights were withdrawn by the administration. License to individuals were withdrawn and those licenses issued to the Chakmas in the late 1960s were seized in 1994. Opportunities were closed for Chakmas and many fell into an endless loop of destitution.

In October 1991, the state government stopped issuance of ration cards to Chakmas, a large number of whom live in extreme poverty. Initially the Chakmas had ration cards but they were taken back in 1992 after the wave of refugee boycott movement by indigenous groups. The license for shops and business were also taken back, resulting into many shopkeepers from Maio town having to leave the place and finding temporary residence in other Chakma villages. For those few who stayed back as they could not afford to buy land in other place, they lived in constant fear and anxiety. However whenever some kind of communal problem arises, they come down to the Chakma village to stay for few days and when the situation becomes stable they return back to their homes.

Schools which were built for the Chakmas were closed down, the health facilities which were provided before were only kept only in

the paper records to show that the Chakmas are availing those facilities but in reality, it was not operational.<sup>450</sup>

## **The Present Situation: The Lives of Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh**

### **The Education of the Chakmas**

The Chakma children suffered less than the elder ones who did not go to school but were busy in cultivation and other livelihoods. Generally, the Chakmas were not educated when they came from East Pakistan. But the need for education was felt as time passed and the people began sending their children to schools. Now majority of the children are enrolled in schools. However Chakmas face problems on this count, with no basic facilities, no books, lack of infrastructure and difficulty to get admission into schools.

For other students, free books are provided in the school. The Chakma students even though poor have to buy these books. This is an obstacle in their pursuit of education. During the period 2000-2007 the students had to even carry their own table and sitting benches and spend their own money to make a table for themselves and also for other arrangement to sit in the class.

The shortage of schools in the Chakma villages creates a lot of problem for the Chakma students. There is only one secondary school for the entire Diyun circle with 8 villages. The population of the village is tentatively in the range of 300 to 400 households. Each household have at least two to four School going children. The school is overcrowded. The Bijoypur Block students also need to join in the Diyun secondary school as they are not allowed to take admission in the nearby school in the local area where the local communities are in a majority. Those students coming from Bijoypur have to cross a river called Dihing Nadi which is huge and often very dangerous. Every year many people die drowning in the

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<sup>450</sup> C.Prasad, 'Students Movement in Arunachal Pradesh and Chakma-Hajong Refugees Problem' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(15) 2007: 1375-1378.

river while crossing as it has only handmade local small boat made out of wood by the Chakmas themselves. The capacity that the boat can carry is maximum ten people. There are students also from Diban area, Diban is the most interior and inaccessible area of the Chakmas. It is far from the Diyun circle. The road is old and worn out. It takes one whole day from morning to evening to reach Diban by foot. There are no schools in Diban. There are few private primary schools run by the Chakmas themselves. These students after fifth standard go to Diyun.

During the school admission period each year, the numbers of students seeking admission increases. The teacher student ratio is known as 1:300 in one class. In such a situation, education does not take place smoothly due to limited number of teachers. The students also lose interest in the study as the teachers cannot maintain class attention due to the number of students in the class.

### **Poor Economic Condition and Livelihood**

As there is no other employment opportunities apart from selling forest and farm produce, the women are burdened with more work and responsibility to feed the family. Most Chakmas are landless or have just some land but not enough to cultivate. They also depend on forest and mountains for food and crops. In weekly markets Chakmas sell their farm produce and other food gathered from the forest. This is one source for their. Another activity they are engaged in is rearing livestock. However livestock is also not for commercial selling as keeping a huge number is not feasible due to lack of space. Some elderly people know how to weave bamboo baskets, most of the needs of everyday life are made by themselves. In every season, peoples earning source changes.

### **Rainy Season Affecting the Livelihood for the Chakmas**

During the rainy seasons, it is very difficult for all the people to live. Since all the work is done outside the house, like getting vegetables from the forest, collecting fire wood, fetching water from the river, self constructed hand pump, plough field, engage in jhum

cultivation etc. The rainy season is almost throughout the year with only few months of break during the October to February.

To bring to light some of these struggles I will discuss the case of one of the Chakma ladies. This is the case of a woman in her forties who is the bread earner of her family. She does business by buying local vegetables and goods from the Chakmas and transport it to Assam to sell it there. During the journey, she faced lot of problems in the check gates as they have huge bags of heavy vegetables to carry. With this hard work she also admitted her son in a private college in Assam for quality education in spite of all the odds she faces. She shared her experience about doing business as follows:

“I take vegetables from here to Tinsukia (Assam). We sell the goods in Tinsukia. We give the goods to the vegetable seller over there and we sell in wholesale to them. For a week we gather vegetables from weekly markets also from villagers then we take these vegetables to Assam”.

The journey to the market in Assam takes four to five hours from Arunachal, so they have to go early in the morning so that they can come back by evening. Sometimes when it is not possible to come back then they stay in lodges. The money they earn also gets spent in the lodgings and paying for bus fare. The women many a times hire vehicles on their own forming group when there are no public vehicles available. There are lots of check gates they have to go through to reach the markets in Assam.

She further adds that her husband can help her in the business by collecting the goods from the villages, carrying these goods in a bicycle. She also tells about the difficulties of the business for the men and the women noting

“Women make good business, since it is difficult for men. Men are more prone to harassments in the gates and also are looked upon suspiciously. Also they cannot get good price so we need to do it. It is from this business only that we are able to educate our children. I have two children, one is in



Tinsukia studying in 11th standard, another is in Guwahati with his uncle, he is doing his graduation I try to give good education to my children, so that in future they do not face difficulties like us, I want them to have a good future”.

### **Struggle to get Quality Education**

Leaving home behind for education, leads to absence of psychological support, financial support and devoid of parents care for the children. The Chakma children have to leave their home during childhood in order to study. The parents look forward to send their children to good school to avail good education. According to the parents who themselves have not come out of the place and have not seen much of the outside world, the schools out of Arunachal are good where their children can study. They try to find means to send their children out, even though the children won't leave the parents if they are very young. Now almost at least one or two children from the household are pursuing study from outside. Those of the children studying are not supported financially by the parents but by the organization they live in. The children are taken by middle men from the community or to the organizations that are generally faith based organizations.

Those children studying may or may not get good facilities, many would be exploited and it so happened also that children were taken in huge numbers in different schools and hostels in different parts of the country, after few months some of them ran away and come back. After coming back, they tell their story about how they escaped the situation.

### **Concluding Remarks**

When the suffering is more intense and it goes beyond one's ability to withstand the pain, one breaks down and becomes lifeless like a dead person without complains. When a 'being' is demean beyond the mind's capability to withstand the indignities that life throws on a person, there is sorrow and hopelessness. When the future looks bleak and there seems no way out of the concrete conditions that

one is trapped in, there is a meaninglessness to life that only one who experiences the situation can begin to comprehend. When fear becomes the norm and one is living in constant threat of being expelled from a location because one is devoid of any human rights, an anxiety sets in that becomes the being itself.

Belonging to a stateless people is a life in perennial crisis of proportions that cannot be easily comprehended. It is like an existential catastrophe that persists with no sense of hope for the future nor dignity about the past. The present is marked all over by violence, rape, murders and sexual exploitation. Its like life is suspended in mid air, neither falling and crashing nor rising and flying. The only thing that one possesses is life itself, nothing more and nothing less.

The Chakma community in Arunachal is a Stateless peoples. Forced to move out of their historical habitat because of a dam built in the name of development, they have had to move from one place to another in order to hold on to life - the act to survive at any cost. Attempts to change the situation does not seem possible with resistance from other communities who also seem to have their own political stand and position on the realities of the Chakmas.

What the future holds the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh, I cannot say, but this much is important to state, that the story of a 'stateless' peoples must be told.

# Cultural Changes and Marginalisation of Lambada Community in Telangana

Venkatesh Vaditya

## Introduction

The Lambadas/Sugalis or Banjaras are one of the Scheduled Tribe communities spread across Telangana and Andhra Pradesh states in South India. As historical account goes, they are not the autochthons of South India and they were unsettled nomads of North India. They are believed to be originated from Marwar region of Rajasthan. In the absence of mechanised transportation system in the bygone era, the transportation skills of Lambadas were well appreciated. With the advent of British rule, the Lambadas were compelled to give up their traditional occupation of transporting goods owing to introduction of mechanized transport system, laying roads and rail lines by the then the colonial State. As a result, they lost their livelihood sources and compelled to take-up such activities, which was considered by the colonial state as criminal occupation. In the post-independence India, along with other communities they were de-notified, since then, tremendous changes have taken in their occupational structure. Culturally, Lambadas represent a different ethnic community, Lambada women are known for wearing colourful embroidered attire. One distinctly finds the absence of custom of dowry in traditional Lambada marriages. With the material changes in the recent past, they are coming out of their Adivasi (primitive) worldview, which had inbuilt egalitarian value practices and it has been affecting the community in adverse terms.

The Lambadas, a semi-nomadic tribe, is made of various groups found throughout India and most of them are predominantly located in the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in South

India. They tend to live in small isolated groups; many are now engaged in farming and cattle breeding. Due to their isolation, most are not well educated and are very poor in some instances. Compared to other groups in the area, the Lambadas are tall with fair complexion, have aquiline noses, and classical Nordic features. They are the largest Scheduled Tribes<sup>451</sup> (STs) of Telangana and said to have originally originated from Rajasthan; they were engaged in business of collecting, carrying and supplying goods to the travelling and invading armies during pre-colonial period. During the peace time, they were transporting the goods to the nearby markets, it is amply clear that their chief mode of transportation was supported by the cattle. Mr. G. A. Grierson writes that, ‘the Banjaras are the well-known tribe of carriers who are found all over Western and Southern India. The language that is spoken by Lambadas is known as “Gor Boli” or Lambadi’.<sup>452</sup> It is further noted by him that the Banjari dialect of Southern India is mixed with the surrounding Dravidian languages. European Roma Gypsies said to have been migrated from India and it is not out of the place to mention them here. For that, it is observed that, there are many cultural similarities between the Roma Gypsies and Banjara Lambadas.<sup>453</sup> There is almost 90 percent similarity with regard to their language, costumes, and lifestyle and food habits. A world conference of Banjara Romas was held in Germany in 1980. A delegation of Gor Banjaras from India under the leadership of Ramsingh Bhanawat was present in the conference.<sup>454</sup> Commemorating the historical links, the second International Roma festival was organised in Chandigarh in 1983. Shyamala Devi makes an attempt in her work to ‘understand the

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<sup>451</sup> Certain indigenous Communities have been recognized constitutionally as Scheduled Tribes and State Affirmative Action has been extended to these communities in India.

<sup>452</sup> G. A. Grierson ‘Linguistic Survey of India, in Edgar Thurston, ‘Castes and Tribes of Southern India,’ Vol-4, (Madras: Madras Government Press, 1909), 208.

<sup>453</sup> D.B. Naik, *The Art and Literature of Banjara Lambanis* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 2000), 4.

<sup>454</sup> See Motiraj Rathod, ‘Ancient History of Gor Banjara’, retrieved from [http://www.banjaratimes.com/mgcontent18022\\_18026.gif](http://www.banjaratimes.com/mgcontent18022_18026.gif) (accessed on 22 December 2016).

culture and heritage of the highly dispersed and persecuted 'Gypsies' in Europe and elsewhere leads to the Ghor/Banjaras of India, with whom they share a common cultural heritage.<sup>455</sup>

The nomadic communities like Lambadas have been historically on the constant move. In spite of that, they could evolve a distinct and rich cultural ethos of their own. It seems that with a settled life only one could have evolved such a rich culture like any other settled community. Wherever they migrated as nomads, they retained their identity and adapted to the immediate mainstream cultures. However, with the process of assimilation or acculturation they are able to preserve their separate cultural identity for centuries. This in turn has led them being called differently in different parts of the country. According to a Report submitted by the All India Banjara Study team, it is learnt that, the Banjaras are known by at least 26 different names<sup>456</sup> and have at least 17 sub-groups<sup>457</sup> across various states of India.<sup>458</sup> The Lambadas also claim themselves as Kshyatriya Gorvamshiya tribe. There is need for in-depth research in this regard. As has already been noted, with affect of constant acculturation process, the Lambadas have developed a tendency towards Sanskritisation or Hinduisation. These tendencies are more visible especially, among the Lambadi of South India.<sup>459</sup> In addition,

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<sup>455</sup> For details see, B. Shyamala Devi, 'A comparative study of some aspects of the socio-economic structure of Gypsy/Ghor communities in Europe and in Andhra Pradesh, India', *Intercultural Education*, 6 (3)1996: 15-23.

<sup>456</sup> 26 different names of Banjaras are:

Banjara, Banjari, Vanajara, Banjare, Binjari, Brinjari, Lamban, Lamani or Lambani, Lambada, Lambadi, Laban or Labana, Labhan, Labhanis, Labhana or Lobhana, Baladia, Ladenia, Sugali, Gwar or Gauria, Gwaria, Gavaria or Gamalia, Gavara, Phanada, Kangi or Kangashiya, Shirkitaband, Shirkiwala, Shingade-Vanjari.

<sup>457</sup> 17 Sub-Groups of the Banjaras are: Gor, Mathura or Mathure, Dhadi, Sanar, Navi, Dhadia, Shingadya, Maru, Bamania, Bagora, Digora, or Gigora, Charan, Badi, Bajigar, Jogi or Bharava, Rohidas and Dhan-Kute.

<sup>458</sup> D.B. Naik, *The Art and Literature of Banjara Lambanis*, op. cit., 2.

<sup>459</sup> Universally they worship goddess Shakti in all her forms like (i) Durga, (ii) Kankaali, (iii) Tulja Bhavani, (iv) Maryamma, (v) Hingala, (vi) Amba or Masori and (vii) Mathral or Seetla. In addition, they have a strong belief that the dead persons would also become gods and goddesses.

they are known for believing in several blind faiths.<sup>460</sup> They have very low value-orientation; fatalism is part of their common sense, they rely on their fate, which indicates their lack of scientific outlook and approach. Majority of them believe, 'every event in man's life has already been settled and determined by his fate.'<sup>461</sup>

### **I. Lambadas: Their History and Their Historical Contribution**

In Telangana and Andhra Pradesh states, the Lambadas are called by at least four different names. One is *Sugali*: this is said to be a corruption of the word *supari* (betel nut), because they formerly traded largely in this commodity. The name Banjara and is probably derived from the Sanskrit word *Vaniyakarakas*, a merchant, or through the Prakrit *Vanijjaara*, a trader. The derivation of Labhani or Labani, etc., is obscure. It has been suggested that it means salt carrier from the Sanskrit *lavanah*, salt, because the tribe carried salt, but this explanation goes against,<sup>462</sup> Siraj-Ul-Hassan's account, in his opinion the name Banjara is supposed to be derived from the Persian *Berinj Arind* it means 'dealer in rice'. Some derive it from Sanskrit *Banij-a* merchant. The Banjara have other names, as Lamani, derived from the Sanskrit *Lavana*-salt' *Wanjari* from *Vana*-a forest; and Lambadi, from *Lamban*-length, which probably refers to the long line or terrain in which their bullocks move. Their tribal name is *Gobar* - a man.<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> There are a number of Bhagats, bhopas and Janyaas and priests of some God or goddesses whom ignorant Banjaras often consult them as Gods or Goddesses are supposed to speak through them. These Bhagats use "Chhumantar" magic method to convince the people that the evil spirit can be driven away or the disease can be cured. Many of them are exploiters of the ignorant Banjaras. See for Details Ramesh Arya, History and Belief of Deccan Tribal Lambadis, <http://www.banjaratimes.com/32401/32527.html> (Accessed on 10 August 2016).

<sup>461</sup> R.K Samanta and L. Shyama Sundar, 'The Lambadis: Their Socio-Psychological and Agro-Economic Characteristics' *Man in India*, 65 (3) 1985, p. 275.

<sup>462</sup> Edgar Thurston (1909): *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, op. cit., 207.

<sup>463</sup> Syed Siraj-Ul-Hassan, *Castes and Tribes of the Nizam's Dominion*, Vol-1 (New Delhi: Vintage Books, 1990), 16.

<b>Table-1</b>			
<b>District-Wise Lambada Population in Telangana</b>			
<b>Years</b>	<b>1911*</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>2001</b>
Mahabubnagar	12863	198531	246810
Ranga Reddi	-	89509	123753
Hyderabad (including Atrafi Balda) @	4095	12618	17145
Medak	3975	80170	118642
Nizamabad	1819	110496	142355
Adilabad	5379	77263	103303
Karimnagar	6095	48960	51157
Warangal	53558	297737	368446
Khammam	-	218127	271373
Nalgonda	38065	255769	320959
<b>Total</b>	<b>125849</b>	<b>1389180</b>	<b>1763943</b>

@ Atrafi Balda used to be the Hyderabad Nizam's Private Lands, the revenue that was generated were used for maintenance of Nizam's family.

\*Source: Syed Sirajul Hassan (1920): "Castes and Tribes of the Nizam's Dominion", p.27.

**Source:** *Tribes and Tribal Areas of Andhra Pradesh (Basic Statistics)*, Government of Andhra Pradesh (2004, 2008).

<b>Table 2</b>		
<b>District-Wise Lambada Population in Andhrapradesh</b>		
<b>Years</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>2001</b>
Srikakulam	235	43
Vizianagaram	276	49
Visakhapatnam	416	822
East Godavari	305	455
West Godavari	6097	7223
Krishna	41687	53232
Guntur	59171	76825
Prakasam	12667	16290
Nellore	561	572
Chittoor	18070	22274
Kadapa	14541	18257
Ananthapur	75790	87727
Kurnool	22901	30235
<b>Total</b>	<b>252717</b>	<b>314004</b>
<b>Telangana</b>	<b>1389180</b>	<b>1763943</b>
<b>Andhra</b>	<b>252717</b>	<b>314004</b>
<b>Andhra Pradesh Total</b>	<b>1641897</b>	<b>2077949</b>

**Source:** *Tribes and Tribal Areas of Andhra Pradesh (Basic Statistics)*, Government of Andhra Pradesh (2004, 2008).

In south India, the Lambadas predominantly inhabited in undivided nine districts of Telangana and they are sparsely distributed in Guntur, Krishna, West Godavari and Nellore districts of coastal Andhra Pradesh. Various census reports show that, there has been a constant growth in Lambada population in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh state. According to the 1961 census, their population was 96,174, the 1971 census report indicates their population at 1,32,464 mark. Both the census of 1961 and 1971 of Lambada indicates the population in Andhra and Rayalaseema regions, because Lambadas in Telangana were not enumerated as STs since they were not part of ST list. Lambadas in Telangana regions were enumerated as STs since 1981 census. As a result the population of Lambadas that reflected in census report increased many fold. According to the 1981 census, their population has been recorded as 11,58,342 people. The same for 1991 reports their population risen up to 16,41,897. The 2001 census report records their population at 20,77,947. In Telangana state alone, their population according to 2011 census was 20,46,117.<sup>464</sup> Literacy among the Lambadas was recorded as 15.22 per cent (both male and female) during 1991 census and it was recorded in 2001 census at 34.33 per cent. Level of female literacy has been recorded as very low among the Lambadas. According to the 2001 census, mere 20.80 per cent female literacy was recorded compared to their male counter-part at 47.02 per cent. Region-wise distribution of their population in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh shows that they are predominant in Telangana region. According to 2001 census, out of 20, 77,949 state's total Lambada population 17, 63,943, is inhabited in the Telangana region. Rest of the 3, 14,004, are inhabited in Rayalaseema and Andhra districts (see table 1 and 2). Not only they are in good numbers in Telangana state, but also even Lambadas actively participated in the famous peasant armed resistance in

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<sup>464</sup> Govt. of Telangana, Tribal Welfare Department,  
<http://twd.telangana.gov.in/tribal-profile/> (Accessed on 5 May 2017).



Telangana known as 'Telangana Armed struggle (TAS of 1946-51).<sup>465</sup> Generally, they live in exclusive settlements called '*tanda*', and maintaining their cultural affinities and ethnic identity.

### **Lambadas and their Traditional Occupation: The Colonial Account**

The Banjaras, as historical account goes are not the autochthons of South India and they were unsettled nomads of North India. It is generally recorded that the Banjaras originally have come to the south with the Moghul army. Highly fascinated by their spirit of adventure and honesty, the Moghul kings appointed many of them for the supply of food grains to their army.<sup>466</sup> Natesa Shastri writing about the "Lambadis of Bellary" goes on to say that they 'ha[d] a tradition among them of having first come to the Deccan from the north with Moghul camps as commissariat carriers in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Their carrying trade has been recorded by almost all European travellers'.<sup>467</sup> Hassan provides proof of Banjara trade caravans with the help of various travellers' account, taking Mandeslo's account in 1638 A.D. he describes the account of trade in Deccan of Banjaras buying wheat and rice in the markets of the Deccan towns and carrying them to Hindustan in caravans some times of ten thousand animals. In the accounts of Sir A. Wellesley who campaigned in the Deccan, the Banjaras were frequently mentioned as suppliers of food and forage to his forces. 'Many thousands of them' says Abbe-Dubois, 'were employed by the English for transporting their provisions' in the last war with the sultan of Mysore.<sup>468</sup> It is noted by Wilks that, the travelling grain merchants, who furnished the English army under Cornwallis with

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<sup>465</sup> For details see, G. Bhadrū, 'Role of Lambadas in Telangana Armed Struggle: with Special Reference to Dharmapuram Village in Jangoan Taluk', in A. Satyanarayana et. al (Eds.) *Retrieving the past: History and Culture of Telangana*, (Hyderabad: Department of History, Osmania University, 2005), 164-178.

<sup>466</sup> H.V. Nanjundayya and Ananthkrishna Iyyer (1928): 'The Mysore Tribes and Castes', Vol-4, in D.B. Naik, *The Art and Literature of Banjara Lambanis*, op.cit., 6.

<sup>467</sup> S. M. Natesa Sastri (1905), *Calcutta Review*, in Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, op.cit., p. 219.

<sup>468</sup> Syed Sira-Ul-Hassan, *Castes and Tribes of the Nizam's Dominion*, op. cit., 17.

grain during the Mysore war, were Brinjaris, and, he adds, 'they strenuously objected, first, that no capital execution should take place without the sanction of the regular judicial authority; second, that they should be punishable for murder.'<sup>469</sup> Orme mentions the Lambadis as having supplied the Comte de Bussy with store, cattle and grain, when besieged by the Nizam's army at Hyderabad. In an account of the Brinjaris towards the close of the eighteenth century, Moor writes that:

In times of war they attend, and are of great assistance to armies, and, being neutral, it is a matter of indifference to them who purchase their goods. They marched and formed their own encampments apart, relying on their own courage for protection; for which purpose the men are all armed with swords or matchlocks.<sup>470</sup>

They came into the Deccan (South India) as transporters of supplies or merchandise for the armies of Delhi emperors in their raids in the South early in the 17th century. They became a useful medium of transaction between the South and the North during periods of peace until 1850s. In the 18th century, they had also taken up service under the Maratha rulers of Satara, the Peshwas of Poona, the Nizam of Hyderabad, and the British during Mysore and Maratha wars. Some of the Lambadas returned to the North but some stayed behind and carried on petty trade with their pack-bullocks.

Taking Khafi Khan, a contemporary Mughal chronicler *Muntakhab* into account Eaton writes that, as early as 1708 Papadu popularly known as Sarvai Papanna who is considered as social bandit in Telangana region during late 17<sup>th</sup> century in Deccan history from the Social History point of view, Eaton Says:

If he acted like a king, he had actually become a parvenu landholder. For we hear that he raided passing Banjaras

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<sup>469</sup> Historical Sketches of the South of India: Mysore, in Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, op. cit, 213.

<sup>470</sup> Moor, 'Narrative of the Operations of Little's Detachment against Tippoo Sultan 1794', in Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, op. cit, 210-211.

(itinerant grain carriers) and seized their cattle, which he put to work plowing his fields for him. Since he is said to have seized between 10,000 and 12,000 head of cattle for this purpose, the agricultural operations he controlled must have been extensive.<sup>471</sup>

The Lambadas have strong ecological connections. Domesticated animals form an integral part of their economy, especially cow and oxen. As they were constantly on the move, they did not have any domicile. Wherever they settled down, they were granted the domicile of the respective states. Lambadas are physically strong and hard-working people. Moreover, they believe in the principle that the sweat of the brow gives the bread. Occupation wise colonial anthropologists projected them as both trading and a community that had a high tendency for the petty crimes. Apart from supplying provisions to the armies the other common occupation of the Lambadis of Mysore is said to be ‘the transportation’. They specialised in transporting in the hill and forest tracts which were thought to be difficult to access for grain and other produce on pack bullocks of which the Lambadis kept transporting on large herds.<sup>472</sup> While writing about the occupational structure of Banjaras, Hassan reports that, ‘they are the grain and salt carriers, cattle breeders and cattle dealers, found all over Dominions... they have no settled homes, but led a wandering life in bands, each band being under a hereditary leader styled *Naik*, to whom implicit obedience is yielded by the men’.<sup>473</sup> In the Madras Census Report, Lambadas are described as a class of traders, herdsmen, cattle-breeders, and cattle lifters, found largely in the Deccan districts, in parts of which they have settled down as agriculturists. In the Cuddapah district, they are said to be found in

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<sup>471</sup> Eaton, Richard M, *The New Cambridge History of India: A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761 Eight Indian Lives*, (New York: Cambridge university press, 2005), pp. 165-66.

<sup>472</sup> In Report on Public Instruction, Mysore, 1901-02; and Mysore Census Report, 1891, in Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, op. cit., 214-15.

<sup>473</sup> Syed Siraj-Ul-Hassan, *Castes and Tribes of the Nizam’s Dominion*, op. cit., 15.

most of the jungly tracts, living chiefly by collecting firewood and jungle produce.<sup>474</sup>

### **Lambadas and their Historic Contribution: The Colonial Representation**

Contribution of Banjaras in the pre-colonial and colonial India is well appreciated phenomenon. The Banjaras in the capacity of wandering grain and salt merchants have rendered invaluable service to the country. They visited the most secluded regions and lone hamlets, collecting the small quantities of grains, cotton, wool and other commodities obtainable, and brought them to the larger markets. Their value, as carriers and collecting merchants, in times of scarcity and great demand, was incalculable, for no other means could bring in the small stores of the outlying hamlets. Captain J. Briggs, in 1813 writes about the contribution that the Lambadas have made to the Deccan, he states that:

As the Deccan is devoid of a single navigable river, and has no roads that admit of wheeled traffic, the whole of the extensive intercourse is carried on by laden bullocks, the property of the Banjaris.<sup>475</sup>

Banjaras contribution was well recognised by the Nizam of Hyderabad. Syed Siraj-ul- Hassan, in his “Castes and Tribes of the Nizam’s Dominions”, reports that, the two clans of Charan Banjaras: Rathods and Vadyas or Badityas are chiefly found in H.H the Nizam’s Dominions, the Rathods occupying the Maratwada districts adjoining Berar and Badityas abounding in Telingana. Both these clans are said to have come to the Deccan with Asaf jah, the *Vazir* of Shah Jahan, who campaigned against Bijapur around 1630. The Rathod Banjaras under their naiks Bhangi and Jhangi, had 1,80,000 bullocks, which formed the army commissariaite of the *Vazir* and, in order to keep up the supply of

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<sup>474</sup> Manual of the Cuddapah District, in Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, op. cit, p. 215.

<sup>475</sup> In S. M. Natesa Sastri, Calcutta Review, 1905, in Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, op. cit, p. 219.

grain and fodder, they secured from him the following prescriptive rights engraved in golden letters on a copper plate:

“Ranjan ka Pani, Chappar ka ghas;

“Din ka teen Khun Maff,

“Aur jahan Asaf Jah ke ghore

“Wahan Bhangi Jhangi ke bail”<sup>476</sup>

(Bhangi and Jhangi may freely have, pots of water and grass for *chappar* (roofs): three murders a day will be pardoned, because where Asaf Jah’s horses (cavalry) are, there are Bhangi’s and Jhangi’s bullocks).

Hassan writes that the plate remains in the possession of the descendants of Bhangi’ who are still recognised by the Hyderabad court: and on the death of the representative of this family, his successor receives a *khillat* from His Highness Nizam. The well-appreciated community of Lambadas started facing problems due to entry of market economy in Hyderabad state. The Lambada caravans encountered hostile reception when they entered Hyderabad state. It was due to deployment of Commercial Treaty of 1802 between Nizam and British Indian government. In Bhukya’s argument, it was under this treaty that the state’s market regulation and economy was restructured along modern lines, which destroyed many old market relations and promoted the emergence of new trading communities. Another component of the treaty enabled the state to establish custom’s houses (*nakas*) on all the main roads in 1808 to regulate the influx of goods into both the territories of British as well as Nizam, to collect duties.<sup>477</sup>

### **Dislocation of Livelihood and Criminal Tribes Act, 1871**

The well appreciated Banjaras being the goods- and service-nomads, lost their livelihood due to the processes of mechanisation and

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<sup>476</sup> Syed Siraj-Ul-Hassan, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>477</sup> Bhargya Bhukya, Subjugated Nomads: The Lambadas under the Rule of the Nizams, (Hyderabad: Oriental Black Swan, 2010), 58-59.

industrialisation characterised by improved methods of production and transportation in colonial India. The mass production of industrial goods and their extensive distribution in rural markets had occurred on an unprecedented scale. Introduction of Railways during 1860-65 adversely affected the trading and business prospects of Lambadas, the oxen of Lambadas could not compete with the speed of Railways. In Bhukya's opinion, 'the railway economy, in short, established a regulated large-scale trade in the state that was almost entirely out of the control of Lambadas'.<sup>478</sup> Gradually they started selling out the cattle and lost their livelihood sources. Writing about the impact of modern transportation system that has made on the livelihood of Lambadas of Bellary, Mr. Francis writes that:

They used to live by pack-bullock trade, and they still remember the names of some of the generals who employed their forebears. When peace and the railways came and did away with these callings, they fell back for a time upon crime as a livelihood, but they have now mostly taken to agriculture and grazing. Some Lambadis are, now (1908), working in the Mysore manganese mines. Sensing the danger of a rebellion from them, British government declared them as criminal tribe and restricted their movements severely. This criminalisation process is mainly the contribution of the colonial government.<sup>479</sup>

The British land settlement operations and administrative restructuring accelerated a process of dislocation. This was also the reason why some of these communities took to crime.<sup>480</sup> During the transition from a nomadic to a settled peasant life in the second half of the nineteenth century, a considerable number of Lambadas

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<sup>478</sup>     *ibid*: 64

<sup>479</sup>     Gazetter of the Bellary District, in Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, *op. cit*, 212

<sup>480</sup>     Milind Bokil, 'De-notified and Nomadic Tribes: A Perspective', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (2), 2002 p.149.

began resorting to decoity.<sup>481</sup> Decoity was neither an in-born trait nor a hereditary practice in Lambada society. Rather, some Lambadas took to decoity when colonial interventions destroyed their long-standing livelihood practices and threw them into perpetual impoverishment.<sup>482</sup> Although only a few Lambada gangs committed decoities, mainly during times of famine and drought, the whole community was stigmatized.<sup>483</sup> The creation of 'criminality' in oriental understanding of India was catapult through in Bhukya's opinion:

The creation of a body of anthropological knowledge about the 'criminal' communities, as it helped the state to separate supposedly 'delinquent' subject from 'honest' subject. In turn, it conferred a specific social identity upon such groups, and thereby socially stigmatizing them. The creation of surveillance society served colonial end.<sup>484</sup>

In this regard, there is a need to redress damages done by colonial anthropology to these communities. After the mutiny of 1857, the British administration took a number of preventive steps to maintain law and order. The enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871 was one of them. It was a dark phase for the nomadic communities in India. However, the act was based on a fallacious understanding of Indian society, particularly the caste system. One of the influential members of the Law and Order Commissioner, T V Stephens equated caste with profession and believed that certain communities were professionally criminal and crime was their caste, occupation as well as religion.<sup>485</sup> These ideas were conveniently used to formulate the act, which notified certain communities as criminal tribes. The provisions of the act were

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<sup>481</sup> Bhangya Bhukya, op.cit., 116.

<sup>482</sup> *ibid.*: 128.

<sup>483</sup> *ibid.*: 124.

<sup>484</sup> *ibid.*: 116-117.

<sup>485</sup> Laxman Mane (1997): *Vimuktayan: Maharashtraatil Vimukta Jamati: Ek Parshwa Bhoomi* (Marathi), Yahwantrao Chavan Pratishtan, Mumbai, 120, in Milind Bokil, 'De-notified and Nomadic Tribes: A Perspective' 150.

extremely oppressive. Every member of the notified community was compelled to register himself/herself at the local police station and had to give '*Hajeri*' (attendance) at a specified time of the day. Their movements were curtailed. They could not shift their residence at will and had to take proper permission before any travel or movement. The penalties for breaking these rules were quite severe.<sup>486</sup> It notified Banjara community as criminal tribes. Since Thurston's volume was produced in the light of this oppressive act, he endorses the criminal behaviour of Lambadas. Conclusively Thurston says 'and it must suffice for the present purpose to note that they commit dacoities and have their receivers of stolen property and that the Naik or headman of the gang takes an active share in the commission of crime'.<sup>487</sup> However, "they", Hassan reports that 'do not, however appear to be hereditary criminals and have taken to a course of rapine and pillage owing to the decline of their original trade'.<sup>488</sup> The stigma of being a criminal community haunted Lambadas for a long time. After independence, the Indian government revoked the Criminal Tribes Act in 1952 and the notified criminal communities were de-notified. It was replaced with the Habitual Offenders Act; this act intended to target the individuals not the entire communities. Even though the communities were de-notified, the stigma continued to haunt them. On historical accounts, these De-notified Tribes in India could be said as one of the most subjugated sections of Indian society who have been the victims of historical dislocations, unconventional occupations, colonial legacy and social stigma. There may not be any other case in social history where cultural singularity of a set of communities has proven to be a bane to their existence.<sup>489</sup> Lambadas of Telangana continued as de-notified tribe until 1977, and they were notified as Scheduled Tribes in that year. They are

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<sup>486</sup>     ibid

<sup>487</sup>     Edgar Thurston, op. cit., 232.

<sup>488</sup>     Syed Siraj-Ul-Hassan, op.cit., 21.

<sup>489</sup>     Milind Bokil, op. cit., 148.



now settled down as pastoralists and agriculturalists across Telangana. In addition, many of them are entering in to modern industrial and service sector. The Lambadis present a complete picture of transition from pastoral nomads to settled peasants in recent times.<sup>490</sup>

## **II. Lambada Women and the Changing Cultural Patterns**

Various travellers and official accounts of colonial state have referred the Lambada people. However, in the opinion of Suneetha Rani, their history has not been completely documented in this situation 'orality, which is a part and parcel of their life, also plays its role in recording their history and culture. Their oral literature holds a mirror to their evolution from nomadism to pastoralism and ultimately to agriculturalism'.<sup>491</sup> Historically, without support of Lambada women, the Lambadas men could not have travelled to the remotest areas of the country. The Lambada women historically, drive the cattle along with men in their arduous long journey. Their appearance was robust; they undergo a great deal of labour with apparent ease. The dress of women is colourful and peculiar, and their ornaments are so singularly chosen that they have had eight or ten pounds weight in metal or ivory round their arms and legs along with a child at their backs. Thurston reports that:

The favourite ornaments appear to be rings of ivory from the wrist to the shoulder, regularly increasing in size, so that the ring near the shoulder will be immoderately large, sixteen or eighteen inches, or more perhaps in circumference. These rings are sometimes dyed red. Silver, lead, copper, or brass, in ponderous bars, encircle their shins, sometimes round, others in the form of festoons, and truly we have seen some so circumstanced that a criminal in irons would not have much more to incommode him than these damsels deem

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<sup>490</sup> S. Yaseen Saheb and M. Rajendra Prasad, 'Physical Growth and Nutritional Status of the Lambadi Children of Andhra Pradesh', *Anthropologist*, 11(3) 2009: 195-206.

<sup>491</sup> Suneetha Rani Karamsi, 'Deconstructing the Caste Hegemony: Lambada Oral Literature', *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 2 (1)2010, p. 459.

ornamental and agreeable trappings on a long march, for they are never dispensed with in the hottest weather. A kind of stomacher, with holes for the arms, and tied behind at the bottom, covers their breast, and has some strings of cowries, depending behind, dangling at their backs. The stomacher is curiously studded with cowries, and their hair is also bedecked with them. They wear likewise earrings, necklaces, rings on the fingers and toes, and, we think, the nut or nose jewel.<sup>492</sup>



**Illustration-1:** Lambada Women in Traditional Attires as depicted in Edgar Thurston (1909): *“Castes and Tribes of Southern India”*, Vol.4, p. 210

Different writers have variously described the costume and personal adornments of the Lambadi women. The women are said to remind one of the Zingari of Wallachia and the Gitani of Spain.<sup>493</sup> Married women are distinguished from the unmarried in that they wear their bangles between the elbow and shoulder, while the unmarried have them between the elbow and wrist. Unmarried girls may wear black bead necklets, which are taken off at marriage, at that time they first

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<sup>492</sup> Edgar Thurston, op.cit, 211-12.

<sup>493</sup> H. A. Stuart writes, Manual of the North Arcot District, in ibid: 217.

assume the ravikkai or jacket. Matrons also use an earring called guriki to distinguish them from widows or unmarried girls.<sup>494</sup>



**Illustration-2:** Lambada couple in traditional Attire

(Taken from an old photo from Chirmal Kucha Tanda, Hanwada Mandal, Mahabubnagar District, Telangana, photographed in the year 1979)

**Source:** Collected by the Author

The women wear a peculiar dress, consisting of a lunga or gown of stout coarse print, a tartan petticoat, and a mantle often elaborately embroidered, which also covers the head and upper part of the body. The hair is worn in ringlets or plaits hanging down each side of the face, decorated with shells, and terminating in tassels. The arms are profusely covered with trinkets and rings made of bones, brass and other rude materials. The men's dress consists of a white or red turban, and a pair of white breeches or knicker-bockers, reaching a little below the knee, with a string of red silk tassels hanging by the right side from the waistband.

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<sup>494</sup> ibid

The women are, as a rule, comely, and above the average height of women of the country. Their costume is the *laigna* (*langa*) or gown of Karwar cloth, red or green, with a quantity of embroidery. The *chola* (*choli*) or bodice, with embroidery in the front and on the shoulders, covers the bosom, and is tied by variegated cords at the back, the ends of the cords being ornamented with cowries and beads. A covering cloth of Karwar cloth, with embroidery, is fastened in at the waist, and hangs at the side with a quantity of tassels and strings of cowries. Their jewels are very numerous, and include strings of beads of ten or twenty rows with a cowry as a pendant, called the *cheed*, threaded on horse-hair, and a silver *hasali* (necklace), a sign of marriage equivalent to the *tali*. Brass or horn bracelets, ten to twelve in number, extending to the elbow on either arm, with a *guzera* or piece of embroidered silk, one inch wide, tied to the right wrist. Anklets of ivory (or bone) or horn are only worn by married women. They are removed on the death of the husband. Women also wear *Pachala* or silk embroidery adorned with tassels and cowries as an anklet. Their other jewels are *mukaram* or nose ornament, a silver *kania* or pendant from the upper part of the ear attached to a silver chain, which hangs to the shoulder, and a profusion of silver, brass, and lead rings. Their hair is, in the case of unmarried women, unadorned, brought up and tied in a knot at the top of the head. With married women, it is fastened, in like manner, with a cowry or a brass button, and heavy pendants or *gujuris* are fastened at the temples. This latter is an essential sign of marriage, and its absence is a sign of widowhood. *Lambadi* women, when carrying water, are fastidious in the adornment of the pad, called *gala*, which is placed on their heads. They cover it with cowries, and attach to it an embroidered cloth, called *phulia*, ornamented with tassels and cowries.<sup>495</sup> In the recent past, it has become so difficult to recognise and differentiate *Lambada* women from non-*lambada* women due to adoption of mainstream dress pattern (*sari* wearing) by the *Lambada* women.

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<sup>495</sup> *ibid*: 218-19.



**Illustration-3:** Community in Transition-Elderly Lambada Women in Traditional Attire in a Community gathering. Women wear traditional attire only in such occasion only. The younger generation looks down on it and prefers to wear the attires of mainstream Hindu society.

*Source:* Collected by the Author in 2010 from Chirmal Kucha Tanda, Hanwada Mandal, Mahabubnagar district, Telangana.

The Lambada families are patriarchal in nature and enforce traditional patriarchal structures and institutions. Lambadas are divided into jatis and gotras; they are endogamous within the jatis and exogamous between gotras, their matrilineal system permitting cross-cousin marriages. In Rathord's opinion:

Traditionally, the largest debts are incurred due to 'bride price' payable in livestock, land, ornaments, etc. however, this tradition is fast changing under the influence of the wider society that they form part of; now Lambada girls pay dowry in order to get married.<sup>496</sup>

A Lambada person cannot marry out-side the sub-caste nor inside the section to which he/she belongs. Earlier polygamy system was

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<sup>496</sup> B. Shyamala Devi Rattord, 'Class and Caste Differences among the Lambadas in Andhra Pradesh', *Social Scientist*, 12 (7)1984, 50.

prevalent, now since Lambadas are covered under Hindu marriage law, legally it is not allowed. Among the Lambadas child marriages are not preferred/allowed. Girls are not usually married under twelve years of age. The traditional Lambada marriages are considered egalitarian in the sense there was no financial considerations in determining marriages. The practice of bride price has been a well-appreciated cultural practice among the Lambadas. Even the marriage ceremonies pattern also differs from mainstream Hindu marriages. In historical accounts, the marriage ceremonies of the Sugalis of North Arcot, Thurston reports that:

The marriages last for three days. On the first an intoxicating beverage compounded of bhang (Cannabis indica] leaves, jiggery (crude sugar), and other things, is mixed and drunk. He also mentioned that, when all are merry, the bridegroom's parents bring Rs. 35 and four bullocks to those of the bride as bride price, and, after presenting them, the bridegroom is allowed to tie a square silver bottu or tali (marriage badge) to the bride's neck, and the marriage is complete; but the next two days must be spent in drinking and feasting. At the conclusion of the third day, the bride is arrayed in gay new clothes, and goes to the bridegroom's house, driving a bullock before her.<sup>497</sup>

There is also a detailed description of the marriage ceremony in the volume, especially the unique custom of abusing the officiating Brahmin in the marriage ceremony. Quoting from the Mysore Census Report, 1891, Thurston noted that:

One unique custom, distinguishing the Lambani marriage ceremonial, is that the officiating Brahman priest is the only individual of the masculine persuasion who is permitted to be present. Immediately after the betrothal, the females

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<sup>497</sup> Edgar Thurston, op.cit, p. 220.

surround and pinch the priest on all sides, repeating all the time songs in their mixed Kutni dialect.<sup>498</sup>

The Brahmin is surrounded by mischievous lasses of the tanda who pinch and prick on all sides, smear his body with cow-dong, try to strip him naked and tease him every way possible.<sup>499</sup> The pinching episode is notoriously a painful reality. It is said, however, that the Brahman, willingly undergoes the operation in consideration of the fees paid for the rite. One more unique tradition among the Lambadas is that the existence of feminised weeping at Lambadi weddings, known as *dhavalo*. The bride is taught *dhavalo* rhythmically to sing and weep simultaneously. Elderly women usually teach it. Brahmins are sometimes engaged to celebrate weddings, and, failing a Brahman, a youth of Lambada will put on the thread, and perform the ceremony.<sup>500</sup> When the guest arrives after a long gap Lambada women offer them water-filled pots and express their joy and sorrow hugging the guest, moving the neck and weeping, this is called *malero*. Gradually, *dhavalo* and *Malero* tradition also silently has been withering away from this community. Traditionally, among the Lambadas, widow remarriage and polygamy have freely prevailed. In addition, it is customary for divorced women to marry again during the lifetime of the husband.<sup>501</sup>

### **Changing Traditional Lambada Marriages: Entry of Dowry**

The process of continuous contact between the Lambadas and caste ridden Hindu village society has brought several changes in life style of Lambadas.<sup>502</sup> Apart from the material changes within the Lambada society, there have also been changes in cultural terrain. For instance, the Lambadas, apart from ancestral worship, usually

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<sup>498</sup> The vicarious punishment to which the solitary male Brahman is thus subjected is said to be apt retribution for the cruel conduct, according to a mythological legend, of a Brahman parent who heartlessly abandoned his two daughters in the jungle, as they had attained puberty before marriage.

<sup>499</sup> Syed Siraj-Ul Hassan, op.cit., 23.

<sup>500</sup> Edgar Thurston, op.cit., 222.

<sup>501</sup> *ibid*: 224.

<sup>502</sup> K. Ilaiah, 'The Lambadis: Their Identity', *Man in India*, 75(1) 1975: 97-100.

worship female deities on various occasions like Tulja Bhavani, Kankali Bhavani, Maremma Bhavani, Hingla Bhavani etc. however, in the last couple of decades there has been a sudden change in the spiritual realm, and all the traditional goddesses are being replaced with patriarchal Hindu male gods.<sup>503</sup> The impact is felt more in the marriage practices. In Lambada traditional marriage, bride price was/is in practice, the bride's parents do not pay dowry. Rather, it is the bridegroom's parents who pay bride price, it is called *Karar*. The wedding expenses are also shared more or less equally.<sup>504</sup> Thurston's informs us in his volume that the existence of bride price, of Rupees 35 and four bullocks. Even Hassan recorded the same thing in his volume that the bride price system varies according to the means of the bridegroom. However, it is no case, less than Rupees 121/- Half the amount is paid at the betrothal and the remaining half is paid when the bridegroom comes to the bride's house for the marriage.<sup>505</sup> This well appreciated practice has undergone a tremendous change. Over a period it became impossible to protect their ethnic identity amidst the in-egalitarian society that had been surrounding it, because of their living proximity with the caste ridden Hindu mainstream society. Even the changing pro-market ideology of Indian state from 'economic nationalism' to 'economic globalisation' through LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation and globalisation) is affecting them in adverse terms (there is a need for in-depth research impact of LPG on this community). Since 1990s, these socio-economic reforms have had a great impact on their mode of thinking. In the past the adivasis' mode of thinking about the forest, universe, their social and cultural practices and work culture, which transforms their universe into a living space, was backed by egalitarian values and practices. The Lambada community

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<sup>503</sup> Gita Ramaswamy & Bhangya Bhukya, *The Lambadas: A Community Besieged-A Study on the Relinquishment of Lambada girl babies in South Telangana*, UNICEF and Dept of Women Development & Child Welfare, Government of AP, (Hyderabad, 2001), **32**.

<sup>504</sup> Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, 'Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patters', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (16) 2002: 1497-98.

<sup>505</sup> Syed Siraj-Ul-Hassan, *op. cit.*, 22.



has come out of this mode of thinking and had been imitating caste-Hindu practices and ethos in their day-to-day life. As the Lambadas are close to villages, they come under the influence of village society, which is caste-stratified, within a short time. All village practices have begun having corresponding resonances in the 'thanda' society.<sup>506</sup> Consequently, gradually the practice of bride price is replacing with the dowry. Especially since 1990s, they have given up their traditional marriage systems.



**Illustration-4:** A Traditional Lambada Marriage (Bidding Farwell to Bride) as depicted in D.B. Naik (2000): “*The Art and Literature of Banjara Lambanis*”, p. 19

However, the costs of the new practices have thrown them into a crisis. In the words of Ramaswamy and Bhukya, it has come from mainstream Hindu society as a part of the package deal of modernity. In a money economy, dowry is an important source of capital, and the only models the Lambadas had were the upper castes in the villages. Excessive dowry is a symptom of the marginalisation of the Lambadas, and particularly of the Lambada women. As Lambada, tandas are located in plain areas and near

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<sup>506</sup> Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, 'Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patters', op. cit., 1497.

villages; they could not protect their cultural values from the onslaught of Hinduism. Rambal, an activist of *Lambada Hakula Porata Samiti* (Organisation fighting for the rights of the Lambadas) from Mahabubnagar district, says that forms of marriage in the community has changed in 10-15 years now. By referring his own family experience he says ‘my elder brother had to take a pair of bullocks and all kinds of materials and provisions for his half share in the wedding for his bride. The next brother had a Hindu marriage and took dowry’.<sup>507</sup> Chandru from Shivampet mandal of Medak district, who had given way one of his girl children a couple of years ago, has five daughters now, of which the elder three are married now. For their marriages, he had to pay dowry beyond his capacity. He says that ‘girls cost the earth to get married’.<sup>508</sup>



**Illustration-5:** the Hinduisation of Lambada Marriage and the presence of Brahmin Priest- both bride and groom are first generation well educated persons (in the photo groom’s mother could be seen in traditional Lambada attire).

**Source:** *A photograph collected by the Chirmal Kucha Tanda, Hanwada Mandal Mahabubnagar District, Telangana, year 2014*

<sup>507</sup> Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, *The Lambadas: A Community Besieged-A Study on the Relinquishment of Lambada girl babies in South Telangana*, op.cit., 24.

<sup>508</sup> *ibid*: 24

The entry of dowry among the Lambadas has turned the daughter who was earlier considered as an asset now as liability. Lambada girl child trafficking in south Telangana conclusively caused by the imbalance between material and cultural changes has led to a moral crisis in Lambada society.<sup>509</sup> The newly educated first-generation (hence employable) Lambada grooms heralded the dowry system. Instead of education becoming a liberative force to this community from blind faiths and other social problems, has become a means of Hinduisation and Sanskritisation, hence demanding more dowries. The families those who have one or more daughters, the burden are heavy. Under the grip of Sanskritisation, Lambada community is becoming an unconscious victim. M.N. Srinivas defined 'sanskritisation as the process by which a 'low' caste or tribe or other group takes over the custom, ritual, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a 'twice-born' (*Dwijia*) caste'.<sup>510</sup> This is coupled with this the adoption of Hindu customs, a crisis has been crept into the Lambada society, needless to say that, the weakest always is the victim. Bhukya informs us the worst type of burden that has been manufactured through these changes i.e. selling of girl child by Lambada women in Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh. The Lambada society, coupled with poverty and dowry sees Lambada girl child as burdensome; consequently, Lambadas have instances of selling their girl children just for a sari valued at Rs 200.<sup>511</sup> While giving an example of such incident Bhukya narrates the story of a Lambadi woman Mudavath Champli. They say:

Champli of Bodagutta thanda of Balanagar (Mahabubnagar district) is a 30-year old woman who was married when she was 15 years old). She was paid Rs. 116 and offered two

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<sup>509</sup> Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, 'Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patters', op. cit., 1497.

<sup>510</sup> In B. K. Nangla, Indian Sociological Thought (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2008), 142.

<sup>511</sup> Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, 'Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patters', op. cit., 1497.

bullocks as bride price at her marriage. Today bridegrooms are demanding a dowry of Rs 50,000-60,000 for her daughter. Fearing the future, Champli gave up her one-month old sixth girl child for Rs 200.<sup>512</sup>

The issue of dowry has been central to the problem of relinquishment of the girl child in the perception of the Lambadas themselves. In their survey, Bhukya and Ramaswamy found that, out of 9,223 total surveyed women, 2,501 women said dowry was the main reason for relinquishment of girl children.<sup>513</sup> The National Human Rights Commission took *suo motu* cognisance of a news item published in the Hindu of 22 January 2000, which highlighted the suffering of women of the Lambada Tribe in Telangana Region. It was reported that, in a number of instances, they were being compelled by their circumstances either to sell or to kill their infant girls soon after birth. Unfortunately, in most of such cases, poverty and illiteracy were the main cause for the giving-up of the child.<sup>514</sup> Mudavath Chander of Bodagutta Tanda of Balnagar mandal has three acres of land and a family of seven daughters. When his wife gave birth to the eighth daughter, he gave her away to Sanjeeva Rao, Action for Social Development, for a paltry sum of Rs. 100. The main reason for giving up the baby, he points out, are poverty and dowry.<sup>515</sup> The Lambada women are even changing their dressing practises. They have started wearing sari, which is worn by the Mainstream Hindu women. Even the change in dress pattern from traditional Lambada dress to sari wearing by women hints the practice of dowry. In Ramaswamy and Bhukya's opinion, the

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<sup>512</sup>     ibid: 1497-98

<sup>513</sup>     ibid: 1497

<sup>514</sup>     Government of India, National Human Rights Commission Annual Report 2001-2002, 'Sale of Female Children of Lambada Tribals in Telangana Region, Andhra Pradesh' in National Human Rights Commission, (New Delhi, 2002) pp.73-74, Retrieved from <http://nhrc.nic.in/documents/AR01-02ENG.pdf> (Acceded on 10 December 2014).

<sup>515</sup>     Gita Ramaswamy & Bhangya Bhukya, The Lambadas: A Community Besieged-A Study on the Relinquishment of Lambada girl babies in South Telangana, op.cit., 31.

change in dress pattern also hints that dowry is oldest among sari-wearing families. They narrated the story of Salibai of Osmankunta thanda of Nalgonda district, who informed them about the entry of dowry among Lambada society without hesitation, answers ‘*sado bandhin katnam ayoo* (dowry has come with the sari).<sup>516</sup> It seems that the community is victim of double tragedy. In the colonial times, they were stigmatised with the tag of notified tribe and in the post-colonial state, the tragedy emanates from their inability to interact with the in-egalitarian caste/class stratified mainstream society. It is amply clear that dowry is not part of Lambada culture. It has entered in the community through the interaction with the mainstream Hindu society; it is the social interaction of Lambadas with the mainstream society, which has led to the social process of acculturation. In Ramaswamy and Bhukya’s opinion ‘In a money economy, dowry is an important source of capital, and the only model the Lambadas had were the upper-castes in the villages. Excessive dowry is a symptom of the marginalization of the Lambadas, particularly Lambada women’.<sup>517</sup> Further, they opined that, the very sudden entry of dowry into the lives of the Lambadas has been, in historical terms, nothing short of catastrophe.<sup>518</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

The nomadic Lambadas’ life has been conditioned and limited by various factors: of physical environment, technology, economy, their own turbulent history, their subjugation by colonial rule. Present-day Lambada community seems to be under a deep cultural crisis, emanating from leaving away their old egalitarian practices and adopting the in-egalitarian Hindu culture. It is in a sense changing the gender relations and making it more patriarchal. It is

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<sup>516</sup> Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, ‘Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patters’, op. cit., 1498.

<sup>517</sup> Gita Ramaswamy & Bhangya Bhukya, *The Lambadas: A Community Besieged-A Study on the Relinquishment of Lambada girl babies in South Telangana*, **op.cit.**, **26**.

<sup>518</sup> Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, ‘Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patters’, op. cit., 1498.

coupled with poverty, adversely affecting the gender relations within the community. It seems that the community is victim of double tragedy. In the colonial times, they were stigmatised with the tag of notified tribe and in the post-colonial state, the tragedy emanates from their inability to interact with the in-egalitarian caste/class stratified mainstream society. There is a need for reforms among the educated especially among the educated people of the community who are readymade victims of acculturation and Hinduisation, because the poor illiterate Lambadas are just imitating the Hindu practices adopted by the more advanced among them. It is a point of fact that there is a necessity to insulate the community from the onslaught of Hinduisation. This community needs a serious non-hinduised modernisation or modernisation which by-passes sanscritisation. It could retain certain egalitarian old cultural practices with respect to non-Hindu cultural practices. What is more, the community is in need of serious reform from within. They could as well affiliate themselves with larger egalitarian cultures like Buddhism. There is an ample scope for the scholars to conduct extensive study on this under-researched community.

Social change in India and particularly among the Lambadas has been channelized through sanscritization process. It is quite opposite to the western modernity, which has done away with larger social identities and created society based on individualism. Marginalised communities in India are neither able to preserve some of their age-old egalitarian practice like 'bride price' nor able to completely moving towards western modernity. These marginalised communities are stuck in between with Hindu cultural practices and unable to move beyond it. Liberation from such regressive religious practices would mean that the community is liberating itself from the marginalised social position.

# Reflections on Nicobari Resilience Post-Tsunami in Andaman and Nicobar Islands

bodhi s.r

## Location

I wish to state that I am not from the Nicobari community and my propositions below are mostly of one who is gazing at the Nicobarese from a Khasi point-of-view. The Nicobari context is complex and I do not claim to understand it fully. Having gone through historical transformation as island peoples, they remain to this very day a well knit community and shows great resilience braving colonialism and disasters alike. In the midst of the tsunami that struck their community, I was tasked to assist them in their moment of crisis. Below are reflections of my experience in their context. I write with awareness and full respects to the dignity and resilience of the Nicobarese.

## The Context

The Andaman Islands comprises of 204 small islands and the Nicobar Islands comprises of 22 islands, 12 of which are inhabited. Post 1947, when the Constitution of India came into force, the Andaman and Nicobar Island (A & NI) was awarded the status of 'Part D' state of the 1st Schedule. As on 1956, all the Islands have been declared Tribal Reserve Area under the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribals) Regulation, 1956**, with the exception of eastern coast of the Great Nicobar, comprising 7 villages, which is a non-reserve area. Here, 330 ex-servicemen and their families were settled under the **Accelerated Development Programme** of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation in 1969-72. Other than these areas, according to the 1956 Regulation, non-tribals are not permitted to carry on any

business or acquire land in tribal reserve without the permission of the Lt. Governor.

The Chief Commissioner in exercise of the powers conferred by section 10 of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation 1956 (Regulation No.3 of 1956) notified **The Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Rules** (No. AN/PATR/10/1.) on 21 April 1957. The violation of The Andaman and Nicobar (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation is a cognizable offence *vides* Section 9, and subsequent notification No. AN/PATR/9(1)/6 dated 6<sup>th</sup> May 1957. As per the (Regulation No.3 of 1956), and subsequently (No. AN/PATR/10/1.), entry to some of these Islands became highly restricted. A Tribal Pass, which permits people's entry for specific purposes only, was made mandatory. Licenses for trade or business needs to be obtained and if sanctioned, is permitted to operate only for one year and prior permission for purchase of goods from the tribes.

In the year 1959, dated 31 March, the Government of India notified C.O.58, **The Constitution (Andaman and Nicobar Islands) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1959**. As per power conferred by clause (i) of article 342 of the Constitution of India, the following communities are deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to the Union territory of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These are (1) In the Andaman Islands –(i) Andamanese including Chariar or Chari, Kora, Tao or Bo, Yere, Kede, Bea, Balawa, Bojigiyab, Juwai and Kol; (ii) Jarawas; (iii) Onges and (iv) Sentinelese; (2) In the Nicobar Island – (i) Nicobarese and (ii) Shom Pens. Leaving aside the Nicobarese, the other five tribes have been classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups.

The Jarawas, Sentinelese, Andamanese and Onge have affinity to the Black race and the Shompens and Nicobarese are close to the Mongoloid race. The current population of the Scheduled Tribes in A&NI is represented in the table below:



### Tribal Population of Andaman and Nicobar Islands (1901-2011)<sup>519</sup>

Year	Total Population	Name of the Tribes					
		A	O	J	S	Sh	N
1901	24, 499	625	678	468	117	348	5, 968
1911	26,459	455	631	114	117	375	7, 991
1921	27, 080	209	346	70	117	375	8, 248
1931	29, 476	90	250	70	50	200	9, 589
1941	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	12, 252
1951	30, 971	23	150	50	NA	71	11, 902
1961	63, 548	19	129	500	50	71	13, 903
1971	115, 933	24	112	275	82	92	17, 874
1981	188, 745	25	103	NA	NA	NA	NA
1991	280, 661	28	101	NA	NA	NA	NA
2001	29, 470	43	97	240	39	398	28, 653
2011	380,581	44	101	380	15	229	27,168

*A-Andamanese; O-Onge; J-Jarawa; S-Sentinelese; Sh-Shompen; N-Nicobari*

The A&NI has remained a Union Territory since the year 1956, when the reorganization of the states took place in India. It was governed by a Chief Commissioner till 1982, after which the post was upgraded to that of a Lt. Governor.<sup>520</sup> Since A & NI is a Union Territory, it appears that all major decisions are taken in Delhi. The A&NI administration has about 20 major Departments (Agriculture, Education, Health, Civil Supplies, Power, Forest, Public Works, Marine, Fisheries, etc.) – each under a Secretary from the Indian Administrative Service. Most development activities are coordinated by a Chief Secretary. The A&NI are divided into two Revenue Districts: the Andaman and the Nicobar. Each revenue

<sup>519</sup> Source: Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi and the Census of India

<sup>520</sup> In the year 2006, dated 31 January, **The Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Amendment Regulation** was promulgated and the word 'Administrator' was notified to replaced the word 'Chief Commissioner'.

district has a Deputy Commissioner with Headquarters in Port Blair and Car Nicobar respectively. These two districts are further broken up into two sub-divisions, under the charge of an Assistant Commissioner and 7 tehsils, of which 5 are in Andamans and the remaining 2 in the Nicobars. About 78 percent of the area falls within the Andamans district and the rest in the Nicobar Islands.

The A&NI have one representative to the Indian Parliament. Since 1995, a 3 tier structure of governance is in place. Until 1992, two Nicobarese, one each from Car Nicobar and the Nancowry Group of Islands were sent to the West Bengal Council. Thereafter, the concept of Tribal Council, which functions as a mini-government for an Island was introduced.

There are many other communities who have settled in the A&NI constituting of the “Mainlanders” from India and those who were resettled from Sri Lanka. Among those who are labeled as “Mainlanders”, there are contract labourers who are primarily tribals from Jharkhand. There are also some Tamilians, a few people from Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. These people were brought by the government or private contractors to work on the rubber plantation and also for construction work. Some were also brought to work on plantations of the agricultural department and in the coconut and betelnut plantation. These are not homogenous groups and their issues are diverse. They are referred to as “mainlanders” by the Nicobarese.

Further there were about 9 lakh Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka who had gone there as labourers, especially to work on tea estates. When the issue of conferring citizenship came up, the then Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Ms. Sirimavo Badarnaike, insisted that India should take back some of them. About 5, 25,000 were repatriated under the Shastri-Sirimavo Pact in 1964. Citizenship was granted to them and their children. The enabling legislation however was formulated only in 1967 and the Sri Lankan Tamils started coming to India from 1968 onwards. There was another Pact (the Sirimavo-Indira Gandhi Pact) in 1974 under which about 75,000 were repatriated

from Sri Lanka and some were settled in A&NI. This group is addressed and called locally by the Nicobarese as “Ceylon settlers”.

### **The Tsunami**

An earthquake, measuring 8.9 on the Richter scale with its epicenter situated about 750 km south of Port Blair, 360 kms south of Campbell Bay was recorded at Port Blair at 6.30 am on December 26, 2004. At 9.30 am another large shock was reported with the epicenter located 650 km south of Port Blair. It created a tidal wave of about 3 meters high in the harbor area in Port Blair.<sup>521</sup> The tsunami wave along the Nicobar group of Island destroyed huge areas along the coasts and changed the nature and the character of the coastline in some of the Islands.<sup>522</sup>

The worst affected islands were Car Nicobar, Katchal, Nancowry, Trinket and Little and Great Nicobar Islands in the Nicobar group of Islands. A large number of the evacuees were transported to specially established camps on elevated grounds in Port Blair and other islands. Most of the social and economic support systems in the affected islands were decimated and become dysfunctional.

Katchal Island falls in the Nicobar Group of Islands, the worst affected area in the A&NI by the tsunami. This group of Islands can be classified in 3 district clusters – the northern, central (also known as the Nancowry group) and southern islands. These 3 sets together comprise 24 islands, of which 13 islands are inhabited, each having several villages. The 13 inhabited islands are Car Nicobar, Chowra, Teresa, Bampoka, Katchal, Nancowry, Camorta, Trinket, Pilo Milo, Little Nicobar, Kondul, Great Nicobar and Tillang Chong.

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<sup>521</sup> “Details of Shocks of Magnitude 5.0 and above on Richter Scale,” Department of Science and Technology, Andaman and Nicobar Administration, IMD, Port Blair.

<sup>522</sup> Also see “Satellite Images: Tsunami 2004,” Resonance 1 February 2005.

## Post Tsunami Status of A&NI

When I reached the islands as part of a team from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences engaging in relief work, I observed that the Island had faced extensive damage due to the tsunami with the coastline and topography physically altered. I spoke to people in West Bay who stated that the sea had come in upto 2 kms because it was hit by the waves from both the east and the west. The island, they noted now was shaped like an '8'. It also seems that the Island had tilted southwards and hence the water level appears to have risen along the coast. Moreover, due to erosion, the coastline had reduced in the range of 0.5-5 km, all along the coast. The central part of the Island has not been affected much, with forest land therefore remaining more or less intact. Our team was put up in the in this part of the island. The fresh water supply of the Island was affected with two of the streams being washed away. Many of the wells became saline. One stream had fresh water, which was used for bathing as well as for drinking purposes.

### Tsunami Damage as on 26 January 2005<sup>523</sup>

Districts	Population	Dead	Missing	Camp	Persons in Camps	Evacuated
Nicobar	42,068	1861	5541	118	28,059	PB 9147 ML
Andaman	3,14,084	66	14	839	17,907	PB 4320 ML 3995
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,56,152</b>	<b>1,927</b>	<b>5,555</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>45,966</b>	<b>PB 13467 ML 5563</b>

ML = Mainland, PB = Port Blair

Immediately after the Tsunami, all the Scheduled Tribes (Andaman group of Islands) were reported to be safe except for the Nicobarese of the Nicobar Group of islands. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs deputed teams to collect hamlet wise data of the status of

<sup>523</sup> Source: Prayas Childline Responses to Tsunami, Andaman and Nicobar Islands. (Second Report Update). However by 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2005 it was noted that total affected in A&NI (in lakhs) was 3.56; Deaths was 3513; Widows was 148; Orphan Children was 143. (India: Tsunami- A Report to the Nation. Govt.India available in <https://reliefweb.int/report/india/india-tsunami-report-nation>)

the impact. The details concerning lives lost, those noted as missing and those who were in the relief camps was reported. In the Nicobar group of islands which constitutes of 13 islands, the live lost or missing that was reported a few days after the Tsunami was noted that as a total of 1839 dead, 5565 missing and 1451 injured in Nicobar group of Islands.<sup>524</sup> These initial days after the Tsunami were chaotic days, there was all kinds of data being produced. One did not know if the data was factual, at the same time there was no immediate possibility to check for veracity of data. For one who is in the field in the midst of the crisis one felt a heavy load of the catastrophe that has befallen.

In relation to all of A&NI, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs data estimated that the impact of the tsunami on the tribal population in all of A&NI was as under:

#### **Post-Tsunami Tribal Population of Andaman and Nicobar Islands<sup>525</sup>**

Tribe Name	Population as per 2001 Census	Location/Island Name	Status after Tsunami
<b>Great Andamanese</b>	43	Strait Island	Safe in Adi Basera, Port Blair (41 and 5 children at VKV hostel) 2 female children and Shri Jirake, Chief in G.B. Pant Hospital on 05-01-05 & 06-02-05.
<b>Onges</b>	96/97	Little Andaman/ Little Island	Safe in Little Andamans. 5 Onges at G.B. Pant Hospital, Port Blair since 23-12-04.
<b>Jarawas</b>	240	South and Middle Andaman Islands	Safe in the habitat. 3 in G.B. Pant Hospital, Port Blair, since 22-12-04
<b>Sentinelese</b>	39	North Sentinel Island	32 were seen on 30 December 2004
<b>Shompens</b>	398	Great Nicobar	Reported to be safe
<b>Nicobarese</b>	28653	Nicobar group of Islands	1151 (approx.) lives lost, 5580 missing (estimated)

<sup>524</sup> Source: <http://www.trrcindia.org/static/reliefnicobar04205.htm>

<sup>525</sup> Source: Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India on 09-01-2005.

## **Some Reflections of my Experience in the Katchal Island**

I visited the Katchal islands for the post disaster relief work with a team of colleagues from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai which constituted of Disaster experts, faculty working on Tribal communities and also senior scholars. We left Mumbai for Port Blair with a stopover in Chennai. After a few days in Port Blair we were transported by Helicopter to Katchal Island. Once we touched Katchal we went straight to the office of the officer in-charge who was stationed in the island. In the meeting we were given some demographic data by the officer in-charge regarding the residence of Katchal. As per Census 2001, we were told, there were 32 villages with a total of 1116 households, 5312 inhabitants out of which 2662 were Scheduled Tribes.<sup>526</sup> After discussions with him we were sent to a shelter a distant away from his office to reside. There was very less space to put up so we split our team into two. One stayed in a small room and another put up in a cow shed.

### **Facilities at Katchal Island<sup>527</sup>**

As we began gathering data we found that there was one primary health center and 3 sub centers, 6 primary schools, one middle school, 2 secondary and one senior secondary school. The island had one police station and one police radio station. There were 4 functioning cooperative societies. The pucca road length throughout the island was 23.66 kms, electricity was available, and there were no immediate reports of problems about water supply. The main mode of communication was through shipping and there is a berthable jetty available for travelling to other islands.

### **The Impact on Katchal Island**

In conversation with Nicobari elders we were told that Katchal had a distinctive settlement pattern before the tsunami – the government infrastructure was mainly on the east coast of *Kapanga*

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<sup>526</sup> Census of India 2001: Number of Households, Total Population and Population of Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes.

<sup>527</sup> From discussions with the Officer-In-Charge Katchal Island

(a village completely wiped out by the tsunami). The Nicobarese were based in settlements along the shores around the island, and there was a settler population based in Mildera in the center of the island (on high ground). The settlers include Sri Lankan Tamil refugees brought here under the international agreement I had noted above. Also the other labourers were brought to Katchal under the tribal pass system, while it was also reported that some “illegal immigrants” were also brought in by labour contractors (of whom the numbers were unclear). Deaths because of the Tsunami have occurred mainly among the Nicobarese, the government servants and the illegal immigrants. (There is considerable dispute over the numbers because of the last category). The other settlers have not lost lives or property in the tsunami.

Initially the whole of Katchal constituted 35 villages. Out of these, majority of the villages were located in Main Katchal which excludes Upper Katchal (five villages). After the Tsunami, majority of the population were relocated into three centers where relief was organized and provided. These relief camps were situated in Mildera 1, Mildera 2 and Beachdera, (with the exception of Upper Katchal). Those who survived the tsunami and were relocated to the camps had two or three villages clubbed into one.

In the initial data provided by the officer in-charge to our team, it was reported that a total of 1487 people were reported dead or missing. In Mildera which constituted of 4 villages, 987 were reported dead. In Mildera 2 which constituted of 2 villages, 102 deaths were reported and in Beachdera (2 villages) 142 were reported dead.<sup>528</sup>

From discussion with the community I was told that the household size in some cases had reduced from 100 individuals to just 2-3 members. Most of the leaders in the village have lost their lives and many heads of *tubet* have died or were listed as missing. Most of the survivors still showed signs of fear and appeared very demoralized

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<sup>528</sup>    *ibid*

during the first week of February 2005. People who had lots of land were now landless.

In these camps we were told by the people that after they were set up “the situation demanded a strong, energetic and assertive group to run the camps and care for its people.” It is from this felt need that a few youths between the ages of 30-40 years emerged, who were finally designated as relief camp in-charge by the Special Relief Officer (SRO) Katchal. It was reported and also based on my own observation that these camp leaders were easily accepted by the people in the camps more so because of their ability to negotiate with various stakeholders.

### **Complex Realities Emerging and Community Concerns**

About one month and a half after the Tsunami, there was discussion under the leadership of the SRO in consultation with people to choose new sites for village settlements. The camp leaders were tasked with this responsibility which falls outside the ambit of camp responsibilities. In this context I observed a subtle clash between ‘camp leaders’ and the surviving captains mostly third, fourth and fifth (will engage with the concept of Captain in detail in the following section) who by this time had felt isolated and were slowly beginning to reassert themselves. In one incident I observed that a single village, before the tsunami, was now choosing two new settlements- one led by the designated camp leader who also happened to be the surviving son of the first Captain who passed away, taking with him 35 households and another group led by the remaining captains consisting of 60 households.

Further in the context of the ‘rehabilitation package’ as planned by the government, some of the elders I had spoken to stated that they had ‘heard’ that the government would bring an amount of approximately Rs.40 crores (in cash and kind) into the island.<sup>529</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> Later as Govt. of India “India: Tsunami- A Report to the Nation”, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2005, total amount (in crores) disbursed to A&NI was 821.88 out of which 107.35 for Relief & Response; 23.04 for Sustenance Allowance; 99.10 for Temporary Shelters;



While there was a general excitement about the rehabilitation package, some of the community members I had spoken to were concerned about the situation that would unfold if the same begins to get implemented.

### **Reflections on Nicobari Social System and their Resilient Culture Post Tsunami**

As legend has it, there are two narratives of how the Nicobarese came to inhabit Katchal. I had collected both these narratives from one of the Nicobari Captain who I worked with throughout my stay in Katchal. However before I discuss the same it is important to note that the tsunami was never part of the social consciousness of the Nicobarese. Most of the residents of the Katchal Island have never experienced or heard of such a disaster, more less, imagined that the tsunami would be so lethal. About how Nicobarese came to inhabit Katchal, one of the dominant narratives relates to a couple from China who supposedly landed in the island. They had a daughter and later when she reached a certain age, she was impregnated by her father and from this lineage the island was populated. In another narrative, I was told that as legend has it, one of the princesses of Myanmar had conceived before marriage, embarrassed by this, the king put his daughter on a boat with food supplies that will last her for months. A dog was also put in the boat. The boat after days on the sea reached Katchal Island. The princess then gave birth to a male child in the island. Later the son grew up, his mother feared that they will not be able to procreate and hence trick her son by telling him that a woman would be waiting for him in an area of the same island. She waited for her son and she was impregnated by him which is how the Nicobari Katchal population grew.

The average family size of a Katchal family would be around 5-6 members, but the Nicobarese have the 'tuhet' system where the

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9.75 for Relief Employment; 305.97 for Infrastructure; 261.66 for Agriculture & Animal Husbandry; 15.01 for Assistance to Fishermen. (Source: <https://reliefweb.int/report/india/india-tsunami-report-nation>)

entire joint family owns all the property and means of production. The system appears fairly egalitarian in terms of gender and class. For example after marriage, it is the stronger party (the one better able to negotiate), which keeps the bride or the groom. The Nicobarese are quiet, non-aggressive and unassuming peoples. In the Katchal Island, they are all followers of the 'protestant' Christian faith.

**Traditional Structure:** “The villages in these islands have a *tuhet* system (where a unit of joint family or few families stay together with a common kitchen). The *tu-het* household consists of maximal lineage members identified specifically under a particular name. The significance of the *tuhet* is the socio-economic integrity of its members and an identity. Every *tuhet* is headed by *Ma Tuhet* which could be either male or female and correspondingly the village is headed by Chief or Captain. Each village, which is called a *panam*, has its captain also called *mapanam*. Every village in the tribal area has a village council headed by the 1st captain and who is assisted by 2nd and 3rd captain. The Captains are elected democratically by secret ballot normally for tenure of 4 years. He or she takes decision concerning the socio-politico matter of the village. Interestingly there are very less crime rate in the island and it is reported locally that the police department in every headquarters of the islands have no work to do. The concept of Tuhet System is enthralling. Every resource they have, they share together and the food they derived from forests or sea, are being served for the whole Tuhet under one kitchen. So when one family is unable to fetch food they can fall back to other family. The Nicobari extended family system is based on shared resources and human power. The extended household communally owns all productive assets. Most of the houses are held as joint property by the clan. A settlement consists of 8-10 households with 50-100 members. The Nicobarese still practice indigenous form of medicines using herbs, roots etc and if anyone in their community falls sick, people come forward to lend help. During fishing, in case if they fetch fish in surplus: either they throw it back to the sea so that people, who

could be in need of it, could catch them or to let the fish breed more. The art of sustainability is best exemplified by them.”<sup>530</sup>

Tribal Councils are the traditionally elected body looking after the welfare of the local people. Every island/group<sup>531</sup> of islands has a Tribal Council, which is constituted by the First Captains of Village Council falling in their jurisdiction. These First Captains select a Chief Captain and Vice-Chief Captain of the Tribal Council. Each island has a Tribal Council comprising of five representatives from each village. During the time of the before the tsunami, in the Nicobar district, there are seven Tribal councils namely Car Nicobar, Katchal, Nancowry, Kamorta, Teressa, Chowra and Pilobhabi. These Village Councils play an important role in day-to-day life of the community. They are the link between the Local Administration and the tribal people of the island. Most of the developmental schemes are being implemented through the councils.

Outside of the traditional socio-political structure there was also the Nicobari Youth Association (NYA) which during the early 2000 remained within two three islands only. The NYA takes up a number of activities concerning the community.

Specifically with regards to the Island of Katchal, the Nicobarese organize themselves village-wise, and within a village they have five elected representatives occupying the seat of authority under the label of ‘captain’. A nebulous structure that locates the first captain on top followed by the second, third, fourth and fifth accordingly forms the core committee of traditional governance in the identified village. They are generally elected through voice vote by

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<sup>530</sup> Richard Kamei who worked in the Katchal islands around the year 2010 noted the following about the system of the Nicobarese as on 28 August 2012. For more details also read Reddy, G.P. and V. Sudarsen 1986: *The Institution of Captainship: A traditional political system of the Nicobar Islands*. *Mankind Quarterly*, 17:1.

<sup>531</sup> Among the Nicobarese, there is an accepted notion that any generalizations across the Nicobar of islands where they inhabit do not hold good and that their behavior and responses vary from island to island (even though they trace their descent to a single lineage).

members of the village and represent the village/island on the Tribal Council.

The leadership profile of the Nicobari community post Tsunami altered considerably. Almost all the First Captains who were perceived as the 'knowledgeable leaders' of the village had lost their lives. What remained after the tsunami, a trend which was recognized in most villages, was a loosely structured leadership which consisted of third captains and below. During the crisis the community saw an increase in the responsibilities of the remaining captains.

**Tribe-Non Tribe Tension:** The most unfortunate changes are the fast colonization of their lands and economy by mainland south Indian immigrants. Originally coming to the islands as contractors, temporary construction laborers and government employees for various development projects and for local administration, most of them have stayed back behind by starting their own small enterprises, marrying into the community or gaining employment with those who had already become established. In the central group, the population of non-tribals has risen from 1401 in 1971 to 4268 (1991 census) almost the same as that of the tribals now. It has been calculated that the influx of non-tribals is growing at the rate of 15 per cent per year. This is despite the fact that the Nicobars is a strictly prohibited area under the Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation (PATR) of 1956.

Even more unfortunate is the fact that these settlers have powerful political clout because of their number and have used this influence in establishing trading enterprises to export copra, arecanuts and other marine resources from these islands and in turn import food and other necessary commodities. Needless to say that such economic monopolization has rendered helpless the tribal who neither access nor network and have little knowledge of the tactics of mainland business. Under these circumstances, copra and arecanut prices are arbitrarily fixed by the traders and so the islanders have forever entered a cycle of debt.

One of the principal concerns for the Nicobarese is the ‘influx’ of non-tribals and outsiders, leading to a gradual impoverishment and erosion of traditional cultural practices. The impoverishment takes place in various ways. The forest department’s threat to tribals to prevent them from using timber for rebuilding traditional houses, shopkeepers selling goods at exorbitant rates, selling alcohol (IMFL) and fuel (LPG gas cylinders, diesel and petrol) at prices that are two or three times that of the official market rates, promoting sale of consumer durables such as DVDs, washing machines, motorcycles and in some cases even a car. These concerns are voiced not only by local communities and elders, but also by sensitive government officials at various levels.

The influx of people other than the indigenous people on these islands, whether legally permitted or illegal entrants had been a cause of concern for the locals for a long time. This created tensions between the communities as the tribes were continuously losing traditional access to and control over their resources. The tensions between tribes and non-tribes posed livelihood challenges. The premises in which livelihood is understood creates fissures between the two well demarcated groups. The concept of competition, wealth accumulation and profit making, contest the Nicobari notion of ecologically sensitive, non-exploitative and non competitive values.

The ‘Ranchis’ (sometimes used as a derogatory term) named after their general place of origin (from Chota-nagpur are) face a unique problem-accepted neither by the Nicobarese nor given special privileges by the administration. They remain as a result one of the poorest communities in the A&NI. Over the past three decades, the people of this community have outgrown the areas originally allocated to them, ‘encroaching’ upon revenue lands and/or forests. With this status as ‘encroachers’, they do not have access to government facilities and the rates of unemployment are very high in the community. Alcoholism is rampant, with high incidence of broken families and school dropout rates especially girl children.

## **The Economic Domain**

The introduction of currency in the 1950s, growing contact with the global economy together with the development efforts by the administration have had an adverse effect on the delicate, self-regulatory relationship of the Nicobarese with their environment. There is now little need to keep in tune with nature since life resources are easily available from the outside world through trade and aid. Hence, the gradual eclipsing of indigenous values and knowledge systems by those based on the rationality of science, have triggered off unsustainable trends on the islands.

With a virtual construction boom on the islands, sand mining is reported by residents of Katchal. Policing is virtually non-existent and the lone station house officer (SHO) in Katchal is somehow unable to take action against such operations. Mining often take place at night, but the island are small places and information goes around.

An outsiders' perception of economy and livelihood are invariably at loggerheads with the reality for the Nicobarese. An excellent example is that of fishing. An insensitive outsider assumes that the Nicobarese being islanders should naturally be fisher folk. Nothing could be farther from truth. The only fishing that happens is at the subsistence level and not as a livelihood. Making available fishing nets to the Nicobari would be telling them to change their way of life so that they continue to survive.

Opportunities of working as contract labor has come up as a profitable enterprise after the tsunami, especially with the rebuilding works. For the Nicobari people, who get paid Rs.300 per day for 3 hours of work and who often work more than one shift a day (hence earning twice the daily wage amount), it was argued that for the Nicobari people, this was an occasion to generate money in the short-term. However, this cannot be considered an answer to livelihood needs as the concept of daily wages is difficult to internalize for a community traditionally not used to a money economy.

With the growing population of the Nicobarese, there is also less economic options within their own islands. No longer a fully subsistence economy, they are dependent to a large extent on whims and fancies of the world market. Fluctuation of prices and demand for copra and arecanuts far from their islands affect their everyday lives. Due to lack of entrepreneurial skills and knowledge of trade, they stand nowhere as compared to the non-tribe settlers. Additionally they face an ever growing threat to be overwhelmed in their own lands by the immigrant population.

### **The Religious Domain**

One of the Captains I spoke to relates to me that the first organized attempt to convert the Nicobarese to Christianity was by Faure and Taillandiers, two French Jesuits belonging to the French Society of Jesus, who landed in Great Nicobar. I was told that only two among them converted who were servants of the two jesuits. However in the 1920s, few Nicobari youths who had studied and received training in missionary work in Myanmar returned to Car Nicobar. A local by the name of John Richardson was one of the most dynamic forces to convert them to Christianity. He was the person who translated the Bible into Nicobari script, who he himself was supposed to have created.<sup>532</sup> Most of the Nicobarese in Katchal are Christian and seems to have taken to this faith very seriously.

### **The Social and Psychological Domain**

In my interaction with the people, I observed that most continue to live in makeshift tin settlements where the situation deteriorates during monsoons with stagnant pools of water and uncleared garbage clogging the natural drainage channels and settlements. Tribal lands are in certain areas, threatened to be commandeered by

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<sup>532</sup> For a detailed documentation of the history of Christianity among the Nicobarese please see Satyarao 1976: "Bishop Richardson," *Yojana*, Vol.20 Nos. 13&14 (15 August):69.

the State. Other changes set in motion by tsunami seriously threaten their psychosocial buffer.

People who have been living in intermediary shelters feel the pressing need to go back to their original places of living. The feeling that the place of stay is 'temporary' has resulted in many problems, like alcoholism, conspicuous consumption and suspected cases of abuse. People especially women and girls, feel the lack of privacy very keenly and are often afraid of voicing their opposition for fear of causing violent fights among the men. As such, many of the old support structures are weakening with no new ones to take their place.

Planning thus need to reflect the traditional environment of the Nicobarese. This will mean reduced psychosocial stress in the rehabilitation process. The proposed development strives to keep the social and familial structure of the Nicobarese intact. This has obvious implications on the health of the community.

The physical restructuring that was the natural fallout of the impact of tsunami on the community manifested itself in various ways. Now that *tubets* have adopted new relations in their households because of a huge number of deaths in the community and a common kitchen being the new reality, problems of adjustment were reported by community members. Notwithstanding the fact that the Nicobari tribe seemed a well integrated and organically structured with well laid out community systems that could buffer any disaster. There was increased report by community members of a sudden increase in alcohol intake. Alcoholism has never been an issue of great concern for the Nicobarese inhabiting Katchal but concern was shown by many after the tsunami.

The reason given was an increased sense of loss and a radical change in daily routines. This was stated to be a way of coping with the pain. Use of community and community meetings were perceived as natural methods to help community cope with the loss. I observed a number of meetings being held in the church where many of the problems were discussed. At another level



community solidarity and structure makes for strong support to individuals and families affected by the loss.

The notion of ‘demanding’ does not come naturally to the traditional Nicobarese who value characteristics such as a preference for independence, self-sufficiency and freedom to live on their own terms. However one observes the changing notions of ‘need’ among the Nicobarese. When I was in the field, I was informed by one of the Captains that a total of Rs.64.992 crores is said to have been disbursed as tsunami relief funds to 88,490 people in A&NI. While the aggregate data was not available for the Nicobars and especially Katchal, the relief aid money has found its way into pockets of shopkeepers and traders. For instance the cooperative store in Hut-Bay, who had stacked up the store with electrical and electronic goods and even foreign-made chocolates, reports a ‘fast movement’ of the goods. In an area beset with basic problems like erratic, inadequate power and water supply, and unsatisfactory education, transport and health facilities, it is ironic that compensation money is spent on conspicuous consumption at the cost of basic needs.

It is interesting to note that traditionally the concept of employment for earning money did not exist among the Nicobarese and hence the concept of ‘unemployment’ is relatively new. However the idea of employment in government run institutions is now seen as necessary and many are moving to get employment in Government institutions.

The system of the Public Distribution System provided some important insights into community resilience. It was reported by one of the Captains that food rations were provided to the remotest of villages and that there were no stark cases such as starvation deaths among Nicobarese. On the other hand, the community being closely linked to the forest, plus being a coastal community have developed their own ways in surviving on food collected from the immediate environment and the role of food ration was at best a critical yet supportive one. On their own the Nicobarese had already

begun mixed farming and horticulture on many of the islands. It is observed that many solutions are available from within the Nicobar Islands itself and the Nicobarese were already gearing to move on with their lives and deepen their collective spirit.

### **Concluding Remarks**

With the erstwhile eco-friendly, culture-appropriate modes being considered as entities belonging to the 'backward' past and the government-designed standard rehabilitation processes being dubbed as 'progressive', the predominant attitudes only serve to perpetuate the growing divide between the state and the people. For example, the state continues to provide inappropriate and costly housing solutions to an indifferent community even as the gaping chasm grows wider between them.

One observes a natural organic process of community/village participation, so deeply embedded and intrinsic to the Nicobarese being already reformulated with every engagement and contact with outside agencies. It is important for non-Nicobarese to be aware and sensitive to know when to intervene in their lives and when not to intervene. Issues such as rituals, religion, traditional beliefs and taboos, community/family meetings demand that non-Nicobarese and mainlanders allow much needed privacy and not intervene in sensitive issues that require the community to find solutions to the problems they are confronted with.

The Nicobari worldview is vastly different from the 'conventional' or mainland worldview. This includes everything from family structure to economy, to perception of property, to ideas of development. Without a comprehensive understanding of this parameter, it is easy to derail and disempower the community, facilitating a stratification process that dehumanizes many and profits a few. Worldwide, people are trying hard to turn urban lifestyles into environment friendly ones; in India one must restrain from replacing the island's existing environment friendly system to an unnatural one.

## **Dialogues with Adivasi Women: Of Resource Rights and Feminism**

**Bhanumathi Kalluri**

This chapter explores the present context of Adivasi women's perspectives and challenges on their resource rights question in India vis-a-vis their customary and external spaces. It is an attempt to put together the views expressed by Adivasi women through a series of dialogues, field studies and campaigns as part of a national exchange programme of Adivasi women human rights defenders and their contemporary struggles linked to gender and environment justice. Adivasi women came together from Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Dadra, Nagar Haveli, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. They represent diverse tribal communities like Gond, Oraon, Choudhary, Bhil, Bharela, Meena, Konda dora, Khond, Warli, Korku, Lambada and Pateliya. This platform has been a collective space for dialogue and capacity building on issues around Adivasi women's identity, legal rights, governance and engagement with the customary and constitutional institutions to negotiate and participate in decision-making spaces and to amplify their self-representative voices. They come from different struggles of legal and cultural assertion, from different contexts of natural resources conflicts that affect their communities, ranging from forest evictions, conservation projects, industries like mining, tourism, museums, consumer goods manufacturing, infrastructure, energy, highways, dams and other mega and local projects. These conversations are not only with frontline defenders but also with Adivasi women in the communities whose daily struggles for survival and their engagement with customary and governance structures carry several narratives of the hidden and the forbidden.

## **The Context**

Spaces, identities, entitlements, choices –what insights do we draw from Adivasi women on the community geographies of their gender dynamics and constructs of social hierarchies that articulate the multiple perspectives of women’s rights and agency in an Adivasi context and that may, at times, appear incoherent? How are challenges confronting Adivasi societies today in India perceived and addressed from a women’s rights perspective by the Adivasi women themselves. Are prioritisation of strategies determined by factors and urgencies that are perceptually more critical than achieving gender equality? How do Adivasi women today strategize for ensuring that women have agency, entitlements and choices for protecting informal and formal spaces of agency? Whether Adivasi women debate on the politics of the state and the complex marginalisation impacts on their resources, social structures, customary politics and constitutional obligations. Whether Adivasi women experience gender imbalances within their customary mechanisms of laws and judgments and if they do, how are these challenged and influenced in formal and informal processes of law, leadership and legitimacy within the customary and the constitutional. These are some of the questions being deliberated on with the Adivasi women.

What, from a feminist perspective would have been assumed as a generally accepted perspective on gender equality with respect to women’s rights to property, land and assets, when posed to Adivasi women leaders, emerged as layered in several complex prejudices, dilemmas and challenges from the women themselves. The macro experience of women’s vulnerability to patriarchy within the family and society and experiences of gender discrimination, domestic violence, intersectional exploitation through caste and gender that demonstrate a strong link between resource rights and gender based violence do not come out as a universally felt problem among Adivasi women. Many of them expressed the near absence of violence, not having experienced discrimination within their families

and community. With women as primary actors in tribal economy and production, many of them enjoy a level playing decision-making role, exercise control over their household incomes, social privileges and choices unlike in other dominant feudal societies in India. Hence, the feminist movement for land and resource rights as a reference of gender equality goals does not seem to always necessitate or prioritise such demands among Adivasi women. Not having formal individual entitlements to property does not create anxiety to the extent of bringing this demand into the self-assertion campaigns that Adivasi women are part of, as customary leadership is considered benign and sympathetic to women's security and inclusivity. As this is not a serious problem, any actions on this subject are perceived as a threat to the cohesion of Adivasi struggles, with feminism often perceived as an intimidating term.

Firstly, we found that there is no one Adivasi category as a homogeneous community or entity that is all encompassing of what we define or build as a common narrative of women's problems and perspectives within these social groups. There is also no one cohort of Adivasi women as a uniform social category, presenting a single voice or theory. Variations in social dynamics and political contexts today are influencing women's status and construct of gender relations within customary law and culture and the engagement between the customary and the external –whether the external state or the external society. Variations range across Adivasi patriarchy, egalitarianism within patriarchy, matrilineality and matriarchies, posing different challenges across tribes, states, geographical locations and, their proximity to non-ativasi and urban societies. They also differ, based on contexts of marginalisation, displacement, resource ownership conflicts, economic agendas of the corporate, the state and the counter insurgency politics – these are some of the multiple orbits of influence guiding the dynamics in Adivasi gender relations and perspectives today. The multiple locations of Adivasi women, as in the above mentioned, as well as contexts of education –whether of external formal education or from experiential nature-based knowledge, economic and livelihood

locations, spirituality and theologies under attack by colonising religions -these influence the frameworks from which analysis differs or is articulated.

Articulation is often incoherent in the outsider terminologies of theoretical analysis that often borders on the metaphorical, riddled in poetic or non-verbal communication that demands for an understanding from a cultural paradigm of interaction. Silence or non-communication could also imply a reluctance to engage with an external society that has been historically exploitative and largely incompetent in respecting women's agency in the Adivasi context. Women complain that the dominant societies have only interfered and tampered with more than respected existing internal spaces of power while the customary has not completely stood firm on gender equality on many fronts. Rather, lapses are glaring in some critical areas of resource rights. Interpretation of the many forms of silence of Adivasi women speaks of internal and external dilemmas. As a result, often, Adivasi women's voices echo dominant patriarchal perspectives of defending gender hierarchies that have subscribed to the customary (male judiciary and male domains of decision-making) gender roles, normalizing the Hindu, colonial and post-colonial cultures of gender hierarchies and behaviours within Adivasi communities. Discriminatory practices and problems especially with alcoholism and domestic violence visibly on the increase were common experiences that came out of the narratives.

Hence, egalitarianism and gender equality experiences ranged from a highly evolved consultative relationship of equality experienced between the genders to some communities experiencing gendered violence, sometimes a traditional culture but increasingly imitating modern forms of patriarchy of dominant cultures and religions. These having penetrated so deep into the social biases within Adivasi society that the politics of gender and the politics of resource rights not only prohibit women's entitlements, but have also convinced Adivasi women that any resource entitlement claims are hazardous to their and their communities' security and cohesion.

While many believe that women should have formal rights to land, we also heard vehement arguments from Adivasi women themselves, against women owning land or properties. We tried to understand and look beyond land alienation arguments. Closer interactions revealed other perspectives beyond the acceptance of normative cultural rules even from older women, especially widows. Whereas many young women, are attempting to balance between cultural identity and challenging the customary, traversing between the community agency and women's agency, between nurture as women's sentiment to thinking beyond nurture and care-giving where collective and individual resource identities of women's assertion become inevitable logics in the face of violence.

Violence as the corporal and ideological foundation of patriarchy when it becomes a phenomenon that cannot be ignored, even where one considers its society as egalitarian and gender inclusive, awakens new waves of assertion and resistance. This has been emerging, bringing a visibility of discomfort over cultural and neo-cultural intolerance ideologies within the shifting power dynamics in many Adivasi communities. The politics of superstition is being challenged where resource rights of patriarchal agendas prevent women from staking claims to resources. Unmasking the creation of witch theories of the customary has been one of the first waves of Adivasi feminism that has exposed the fault-lines of culture and cultural jurisprudence. We tried to understand the status and perspectives of widows and single women in the present juncture of violence in entitlement claims and women's empowerment models of the state and the customary practices, including witch-hunting practices and resource rights dynamics of Adivasi communities. We also tried to understand the subtle intrusion of violence unleashed by the state and the corporate and these impacts on women's lives, their resistance and coping strategies that narrate the many interpretations of violence.

Ironically, demanding for the traditional collective rights and foregoing individual rights prevents them from utilising many

constitutional opportunities provided in the more recent legal safeguards like the Forest Rights Act (FRA) or the fundamental rights to own property upheld by the Indian Constitution and in many of the Supreme Court judgments in relation to scheduled tribe women. Yet many Adivasi women activists rationalised that Adivasi societies were cohesive due to their collective spirit of existence and hence, in many places, choose to prioritise community forest rights whether under the FRA or through their community driven models of forest management, over and above the demand for inheritance of private properties. Even where Adivasi women are in government services and have the resources to purchase their own property, they hesitate on several fronts.

As much as the community forest rights is extremely critical to upholding the Adivasi assertion over forests and natural resources and in many ways more primary to achieving this assertion, foregoing the individual poses a question regarding gender equality. Women may perhaps, be diverted by sentiment at the cost of pragmatism in bringing gender justice into present-day environment justice and land rights movements of adivasi assertion especially when men are unwilling to commit to community rights alone. At this juncture, when only one Adivasi village in this country is known to have made this incredible shift of placing its entire individual property into the collective pool of resource ownership, we found these dilemmas of engagement with land and forests being debated by Adivasi women within their campaigns. A clear message in preference for joint titles at family and community levels was reflected in these dialogues while also aspiring for individual property rights.

Inheritance rights and control have been clearly patriarchal both with customary and state laws. Whereas customary laws overtly prohibit women from inheriting land with windows of opportunities at individual levels based on emotional bonds, the special courts in scheduled areas have largely been nebulous, unresponsive or are unable to provide clear legal directives on behalf of Adivasi women



who have petitioned for justice. The informal spaces of liberalism within Adivasi societies have been the more positive aberrations from the normative where women have received land from maternal or marital families as gifts of inheritance.

The priority given by women to maintaining good relations with the maternal home is common, as frictions with husband and his family, always being a strong possibility. As Sadhana Meena from Rajasthan shared, *'more often, women reported of foregoing their 'gifts' due to a sense of indecency in claiming maternal property'*. However, exploring the various other possibilities of exercising rights to land ownership did not come out as an urgency in our many conversations suggesting that women's acceptance of cultural norms and bottlenecks, may need more persistent and assertive conversations on exploring their rights, legally and socially, individually and collectively.

We found that even sensitive judicial authorities in the local courts who believe in respecting the fundamental right to gender equality as laid down in the Indian Constitution and the universal human rights principles under CEDAW as adopted by India, find it difficult to render justice to women. The cases studied on this front threw some light on the challenges that these authorities confront when Adivasi women approach local courts for justice. While the hidden costs prevent most women from even resorting to legal help, access to grievance mechanisms, lack of clarity and ambiguities in interpretation of formal law and inconsistencies between constitutional and customary laws, prejudices of and resistance from customary leadership, ostracisation and other forms of social humiliation are major detrimental factors.

State as a patron of women's empowerment has been limiting in its gender equality goals within the overarching ideology of patriarchy—neither moving beyond welfare nor realigning the customary or constitutional spaces of legality to spell out a clear legal entitlement of inheritance for Adivasi women. Formal laws, far from being created for ensuring equal rights to property and land, are quickly being amended on a larger scale to prohibit legitimate claims in

scheduled areas by Adivasi societies. State endorsement of corporate land grabs through willful tampering of protective legislations is destroying all hopes of tribal autonomy and women's agency within this autonomy. We found that when the community itself is vulnerable, women place the collective demands of the community above their own individual rights. However, today, they are also often steering the discourse of the community's demands and resistance to corporate induced evictions. Our dialogues led to interactions with many of these undocumented women warriors among the Adivasis who are active in present day movements of Adivasi resistance. They are championing their own cause for justice that is inextricably interwoven with the cause for ecological justice. They uphold their communities' rights to resources, even if women's individual rights remain undermined.

The role of the state in preventing women's access to and ownership over lands and resources is increasingly visible in its pursuit of development agendas. Defining linearity to divert lands in Fifth Schedule areas has expanded to a large list of industries which come under the public purpose category. Commerce as co-existence with conservation, where as tribal as an obstacle to forest protection is the new ideology of development economics. This is reflected in the policy and legal amendments proposed to the forest and governance laws of the scheduled areas like the Indian Forest Act, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, the Forest Rights Act, the National Tourism policy, to give a few examples. With this, the state has brought a new divide within the community between the genders where men, especially the youth, are compromising their resource rights for monetary compensation, either due to intimidation or convinced by rehabilitation promises. Not only the physical trauma of eviction but the impacts of environmental destruction are resulting in gender based violence. Adivasi women affected by mining, tourism, conservation and other infrastructure projects have narrated experiences that call for a review of what the state and the customary mean by gender justice. These narratives reflected more about women having choices,

access, rights and redressal vis-à-vis the state, the corporate and the customary, where the superficial nature of addressing environmental and resource losses borne by women have ignored women's anger. The dialogues from the field expose the dichotomies between women's demands and remedial mechanisms of the constitutional and the customary state that widen the hiatus between the genders and have deeply stained the manner in which campaigns are strategized and solutions are defined on behalf of Adivasi women.

### **Specific Dilemmas documented from field dialogues**

#### **Marriage – controlled spaces and land alienation claims**

The general assumption from within Adivasi societies links land alienation to women's choices of marriage. It is believed (and experienced in numerous places) that women are trapped into marriage by non-tribal men when women have land and hence, land registration in the names of women would potentially lead to land grabbing through the route of marriage. Most Adivasi women therefore argue against women having entitlement to land. This is an argument that has been put forth by male leaders, a refrain that has been internalised by many Adivasi women who believe their rights should be restricted to the informal and collective spaces. Examples of this form of land grabbing on a large scale were articulated both from the scheduled area states like Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Maharashtra and from the non-scheduled states like Tamil Nadu and Dadra, Nagar and Haveli.

Large parts of Schedule V areas have been alienated and increasingly so, for corporate interests where more land is taken for mining, tourism, conservation, power, irrigation, and monument projects (as in the recent Statue of Unity museum) that would, far surpass the extent of land diverted through mixed marriages. Further, most negotiations, either with the state or with the private, over acquisition or sale of land, are conducted by men, either out of fear of state or corporate repression, or with the lure of monetary compensation offered in return for land. Adivasi women remain in the shadows of these negotiations that transpire without their

knowledge or consent. In non-scheduled areas as in Dadra, Nagar, Haveli, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, for example, more land has been alienated to industries, non-tribal businesses and affluent non-tribal individuals who own farm-houses, estates, plantations and recreation getaways as a result of deliberate state negligence and oversight. In Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh, there is currently a huge agitation spearheaded by the Girijana Sangham, a joint action forum of scheduled tribes in the district, for implementation of the land transfer regulations, as a result of experiencing persistent large scale land grabbing by non-tribal traders for various businesses. In the north-eastern states of India, women complained how their village chiefs have been complicit with outsiders in trading away their lands for real estate businesses, mining, plantations and other industries.

Yet, women complained that women's choices of marital relationships are perceived to be a greater hazard. These arguments prevent women from staking claims to their rights even while the vulnerability of land alienation or succumbing to external pressures prevails, if through other means, where Adivasi men have titles to land. These have not prevented Adivasi men from owning land and property, nor refrain them from marrying outside of their clan or tribe. On the other hand, legal alternatives to preventing non-tribals from grabbing lands through marriage while allowing Adivasi women to own formal land rights and titles (and also holding the right to marry within or outside of their communities), have remained unexplored or mostly been rejected. Hence societal prejudices continue to uphold patrilineal and patriarchal forms of land ownership rights within customary rules and practices even if the Indian Constitution, on paper, allows for rights to own property for all its citizens irrespective of gender, as a fundamental right. In this context, there are two challenges confronting Adivasi women – the right of land ownership as well as the freedom of personal choices in marriage and sexual relationships. Adivasi men have rights to both, including the right to marry non-tribals, albeit with certain conditions and cultural riders. These directly point to the

gender imbalances in tribal identity, clan membership, property and sexuality.

While many Adivasi women had traditionally accepted this, critically challenging these biases is a new wave of Adivasi feminisms that is visible today. One of the major questions posed to their customary leadership by them, as stated by Mamta Kujur of Jashpur, is the need for introspection on why women choose to marry outside their clan and community. Barring all other personal choices and preferences in selection of marriage partners, a common problem articulated by women is the issue of domestic violence, whether overt or covert. Alcoholism and polygamy rampantly prevail in Adivasi communities to which the customary judiciary is often charitable, or is losing its authority on its community members to protect women's safety and dignity. Adivasi women argue that they are forced to go beyond the norms of endogamy and to look outside of their communities in the hope of finding better partners, which may or may not always work to their advantage. However, stigmatising women and imposing a cultural illegality on women's rights over marriage, land and property, are now being challenged from within. Yet, alternate strategies for ensuring women's land and inheritance rights including legal mechanisms of protecting themselves and their communities from the exploitation of non-tribals who use the recourse of marriage, are not clearly emerging from the dialogues so far. This domain of legality, legal pluralism versus universal human rights principles of gender equality and cultural practices are in need of more intensive dialogue internally.

### **Absenteeism**

Adivasi communities argue that women leave their maternal homes after marriage and hence, inheritance rights to land would serve no purpose. Women believe so too and find that there is a practical challenge in taking benefit from land inherited from the maternal home when they move to their husband's village. Many expressed a sense of gratitude when they receive gifts in kind - grain, livestock or jewellery from their parents or brothers. In some communities as

among the Bhil Meenas in Rajasthan, some mentioned that land is offered as a gift although women do not, in reality enjoy it. Notionally at least, this gives them a sense of assurance. They usually refrain from converting this right into a formal title for themselves for fear of incurring the wrath or hostility of their brothers.

However, in the current context, while women may leave their village for marriage, men are increasingly migrating seasonally and seeking employment elsewhere with prolonged absenteeism from their traditional farming, which has led to women taking the primary responsibilities in agriculture. In many places, especially where the state has introduced cash crops and plantations like cashew, coffee, tea, resulting in marginalisation of food cultivation, men stay in the villages only during sowing and harvesting seasons. On the other hand, women remain to take care of their agriculture throughout the year, and also invest in their farming through loans taken from self-help groups, but without any ownership rights. Gendered denial of rights of entitlements on grounds of absenteeism is, thus, being questioned as these cultural restrictions seem to indicate gender biases rather than logistical conveniences to address problems related to absenteeism. In the case where both men and women are forced to seasonally migrate as in Dahod in Gujarat and Barwani in Madhya Pradesh, patrilineal control continues. Migrant Adivasi women have to send back home their wages, for the upkeep of their husband's farms and their children who they leave behind. Living in makeshift tents and mostly surrounded by men from the outside, women reported of a deep sense of fear and insecurity as they lack the women's agency of the community that provided a buffer to male abuse. Women reported of sexual abuse from contractors and other labourers and physical violence from their own men who are free from traditional social monitoring of their behaviour. This situation is increasingly on the rise, especially for the tribal groups in central and north India where displacement from their villages and state neglect in nurturing traditional farming are resulting in large scale distress migration. Absenteeism from their villages is not only

an alienation from their resource rights, but also a serious threat of persistently heightened male violence.

Our dialogues brought out several instances of women and adolescent girls facing abuse, trafficking and abandonment which some of the groups in Chattisgarh and Jharkhand have been addressing. Mumtaz Kerketta, a young Oraon activist from Chattisgarh narrated several stories of adolescent girls being lured into trafficking for labour or for sex work as their families push them to urban centers for meeting their cash needs. Women also expressed practical dilemmas over division of land or staking entitlements to land that they had worked hard to develop or purchase along with their husband. Women reported that those facing domestic violence, alcoholism, or conflicts with husbands and are forced to nullify their marriage, have no security or alternate properties of either house or land as a fall-back support when inheritance is denied in their maternal and marital homes. They cannot physically carry the land with them in the event of separation. Neither do they anticipate the customary panchayat to settle a dispute in their favour by handing over their share of the land. Kondamma from Salugu village in Visakhapatnam, for example, had to leave her husband's village after his death as her share of land was denied to her by her brothers in law for fear that she may leave the village.

In a survey conducted by us on the status of 120 widows and single unmarried Adivasi women in two panchayats in Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh, this threw light on the consequences of denial on grounds of absenteeism. Women who were driven out of their marital homes or faced tensions with their husband's families after his death, returned to their maternal homes in the hope of a livelihood. They either live on the charity of their male siblings who may allow them to cultivate some part of their maternal land, or face as much vulnerability in the maternal village as in their marital village, being landless labour with no secure livelihood. Many end up losing even the one source of monetary relief-widow pensions-

when they move back to their maternal village. In Lolangipadu village of the same district, a single unmarried woman complained of being ill-treated by her brother who does not want to give her the right of inheritance. In Kakki village, Kanthamma complains that her father in law allows her to cultivate her husband's share of the family land but is against mutation of the share in her name.

The survey revealed that majority of the women were widowed between the ages of 30 and 50, one of the common reasons for death of their husbands being excessive consumption of alcohol, chronic illnesses like tuberculosis and injuries. Women at this middle stage of life may also choose to remarry. The customary allows certain privileges but also denies, because of these privileges. Adivasi society, which is considered liberal as there is no stigma against remarriage whether for men or for women, is not so egalitarian with respect to land ownership. Polygamy does not prevent men from the right to own land but condemns women with prohibition and suspicion on grounds of sexual fluidity leading to anarchy in land ownership, ignoring the ground realities of the women's status. The fear of land slipping out of the patrilineal family prohibits married women inheriting their husband's property or being joint title-holders either with brothers or with their husband.

Majority of the widows reported that the share of their husband's land is given by his family to her for cultivation alone, but not for registration in her name. In some instances, she is driven out with not even cultivation rights. Where it is in the name of the father-in law, she has cultivation rights but not possession, until her minor son grows up and stakes claim. Where it is in the name of her husband, it is immediately, transferred into the names of his brothers or the sons as suspicions over her sexuality pose a constant 'threat'. Subjugation to the domination of sons or brothers-in law from this early middle age becomes a source of friction and stress for most widows. Majority of them in this age group expressed a strong desire to have mutation of land records to their names.



Many women depend on welfare schemes which are posed as gender inclusive state solutions on gender equality budgeting, whether pensions, rations or housing. The meagre pensions they are entitled to, has several loopholes. As some state governments do not allocate full budgets for pensions for all eligible persons there is always a waiting period for the younger widows based on 'vacancies' meaning, death of older pensioners. Other administrative bottlenecks like errors in registration of age or names in supporting documents, the waiting period for registration for ration cards, the challenges of getting death certificates create hurdles for eligible women to claim any relief or even apply for mutation. Most widows expressed anger, frustration and failure as many spend money by taking the help of middle-men in the hope of getting transfer of land records, but most often they are cheated. Further, the enthusiasm of the state in extending housing loans and schemes to women as a populist façade is not effectively converted into an entitlement record in the names of women. Women narrate how such schemes create a burden of loan on the women than a settlement of right. It is only recently that the government of Andhra Pradesh has initiated a positive move towards joint titles in its housing programme, where some of our groups are facilitating unmarried single women and widows to be included for registration.

While denial of land entitlements to younger women is linked to the problem of their sexual mobility, the denial to older women often happens, on the grounds that they have retired from active farming life. As sons take over the cultivation and are also expected to provide shelter to the mother, they argue that it is irrelevant to have land records in the names of older widows. Hence, older women live with a sense of obligation in their own homes than as their right. During our dialogues with widows, many expressed their desire to have land registration shifted from their husband's names to their own instead of to their sons or brothers-in law, although these were expressed in hushed tones for fear of causing frictions. Many feel that there is potential for change from the outside by state laws as the customary portends to demonstrate a slower

possibility of a shift in their favour. These hushed tones come from experiential challenges and risks faced by widows and their daughters. While they are unable to articulate strategies to overcome this hurdle, they are interrogating the nuances of domestic violence and its inverse relation to women's land rights in order that women can negotiate within their customary politics for resource rights.

A rampantly practised social evil which all the women in most of the states reported, but to a lesser extent in the southern states, is the superstition of Dayan Pratha. State attempts to ban this practise have been weak, legally and administratively. Bihar and Jharkhand have passed laws whereas Chattisgarh, Rajasthan and a few others have introduced Anti-Witch hunting Bills with no teeth. Women feel they do not have strong support either from the customary leadership or from the state machinery to enact these laws or implement them stringently even after extensive research and where many rights based groups have exposed the cases of violations. Administrators posted as revenue officers in scheduled areas are unclear about the line of action in support of women between the customary laws and implementation of constitutional justice. As the sub collector in Paderu whom we approached for mutation of land records in the names of widows complained, the fear of opposition from customary male leadership to any positive actions in rendering property rights to women, and the lack of clarity over legal procedures prevents them from giving women land titles. As the FRA has clearly mentioned the settlement of rights on behalf of women, bureaucrats are more willing to give individual titles under this Act for forest-lands but are not so enthusiastic about revenue land titles. Thus, Adivasi widows' status currently appears to be on the fringes of inclusivity and survival both in terms of legitimacy from the state and through customary norms. Their silence reflects their tolerance, and more so, their self- resilience even in extreme calamities, rather than symbolising voluntary consent to non-eligibility to own land.

Apart from sentiment, in our survey with Adivasi women who are formally employed, we found that women in government employment, who have regular monetary incomes, tend to create assets for themselves more in the form of jewellery, savings accounts, insurance bonds or livestock than they would on purchase of land. Reasons given were fear of appropriation by male members of the families. Most of them also expressed the irrelevance of owning land when they have shifted away from farming to a more secure income from employment, and hence, the emphasis on jewellery or insurance schemes rather than on land or property that has likelihood of slipping into male control. Even where property has been purchased, some reported that these are registered in the husband's name. None of the educated Adivasi women interviewed had much understanding of the Fifth Schedule laws or laws related to protection of women either because they have no access to information or due to lack of confidence in customary reform.

Ambiguities between customary notions and rules for social behaviour vastly differ from that of the constitutional prescriptions and rules. Polygamy is one such area of ambiguity. Some of the civil cases we studied in Paderu mandal of Visakhapatnam district, to understand the nature of judicial processes of the customary and the constitutional, revealed that providing justice in favour of women is a challenge. Whether the complainants were daughters or wives (first or second wife), justice from the special courts has been difficult. In some cases where the women had first sought justice from the customary, these orders differed from the constitutional mechanisms. The special courts have found it difficult to implement justice on behalf of women petitioners due to problems of legality. It was found that in most cases, either the final judgments were not passed or women did not get their due share despite the court's orders, and as a result, women said they give up fighting for justice.

Here women leaders have pointed to the fundamental problems with the changing dynamics of Adivasi societies where young men are taking advantage of the fast diminishing spaces of traditional

checks and balances. In a recent case in a PVTG village in Visakhapatnam, the suspected brutal murder/ suicide of a young tribal girl by youth of the village could not be brought to justice as the customary leadership is suspected to have been bribed into silence. Increase in alcoholism and violence among the younger men was reported in these villages reflecting a new sense of failure and discontent among youth being manifested through violence against women. Young girls now question why their male peers resort to alcohol and violence when problems and challenges of urbanisation are borne by women too. Adivasi girls have started questioning the dual threats to their own security from the outside as well as from their own men where urbanisation influences coupled with absence of resource rights are making them more vulnerable to gender based violence.

### **Knowledge as a Resource Threat**

Where culturally sustainable customary spaces existed for widows, even in the absence of physical ownership of land, with knowledge as a resource right and a privilege, the influence of external cultures have wiped them out. A clear example that came from our conversations in Maharashtra, is the status of women knowledge keepers and ritual performers among the Warlis, a tribe that is renowned for its art. It is believed that traditionally the widows called Dhavleris enjoyed the status of priests. The privilege of performing marriage ceremonies was a reflection of their knowledge and a traditional source of livelihood and social status, which ensured their sustenance even when they did not enjoy land rights. These rituals were performed alongside the Savasins - women who performed rituals through mural art. Together, these widows played the role of knowledge practitioners, oral historians, priests and bearers of art and spirituality that placed them in a key position within the tribe, while also ensuring their economic sustenance. Here knowledge as a resource remained an exclusive domain of the widows. In the contemporary social dynamics of urbanisation, widows have come to be looked down as inauspicious, imitating the

Hindu prejudices. Hindu male priests have replaced them at marriage and other ceremonies. Even the art has been appropriated and commercialised by males within the community and outside, thus at one stroke wiping out these women's knowledge resource and livelihood spaces –their primary intellectual resource that had earlier neutralised the inaccessibility to land ownership rights.

### **Dual Rights and Fragmentation**

Many Adivasi women argued that if women are given inheritance rights, it would be unfair to men as women would get dual benefits of land – both in maternal as well as marital homes. Debates over this duality unwound the doubts over unfair distribution as it was realised that duality exists for men also, as they would enjoy property inherited by their wives too. Women further expressed that, opposition to this inheritance right is posed to them on the grounds of fragmentation of land, adivasis being marginal farmers with very small per capita land-holding. However, as one trainer Ushaben from Aga Khan Foundation, which runs legal clinics for Adivasi women, pointed out in one of the workshops, fragmentation perspectives are a very gendered argument. Male inheritance rights do not prevent sons and male siblings from claiming land, however marginal and highly fragmented their ancestral land. Inversely, even if there were only a single female child, culture prohibits women from inheriting their parental property where the fragmentation pretext is irrelevant. Economic risks of fragmentation, the women argued, are overcome between male siblings through joint farming practices or other land management innovations, which could also hold good where female siblings stake claims. Yet, these alternatives to the risks of fragmentation become blinkered in order to deny land rights to women. Women found that their simplicity of accepting norms and customary arguments become an easy predation for male control over property. Women disclosed that their acceptance also stems from the manner in which social and judicial structures are organised where their representation remains weak.

## **Customary Judiciary as an Exclusive Male Domain**

Universally, the women report that the present mood of the Adivasi patriarchy which dominates the customary decision-making, seems to be largely against any gender equal distribution or ownership of resources. As Damayanti Kumra of Odisha reported, Gond customary judiciary strictly excludes women from decision-making and often gives prejudicial judgments against women complainants. As a Naga woman complained, women are fined even if they tried to attend a village council meeting. Despite efforts by Adivasi women's movements and NGOs working on governance issues, the role of women in customary judiciaries has been negligent due to practical challenges on the ground, particularly with women being preoccupied by economic and domestic responsibilities. Therefore, Adivasi women leaders expressed that a major challenge to influencing changes in customary decisions over property disputes and enabling the chances for fair play on behalf of women, is the low participation of women in customary decision-making meetings even where men have agreed to 'include' women. This low participation has given opportunity to Adivasi male leadership in deciding against settlement of land in favour of women and, where the male was found guilty, to merely pass mild judgments such as reprimanding them. Where disputes with state and corporate occur, the customary has often given in to pressure by giving consent to land acquisition on women's behalf. With respect to the north-eastern states, a strong example being Meghalaya and Nagaland, this further threatens the autonomy of women where village councils led by male leadership have given consent to mining licences under pressure or lure from local mafias with the women from the community not having the power to prevent such plunder. Here, gender, environment and customary rights have come to be at loggerheads with patriarchal power lobbies and economics. In some states like Chattisgarh women stated that they have begun to occupy the formal spaces of customary adjudication taking advantage of their active role in campaigns against displacement and corporate land grabs. In Nagaland, women shared that they are

trying to push for opening up the spaces of village councils by nominating women representatives.

### **State as the Patriarch – a Need for a Deconstruct of Gender Policies**

State disinclination to uphold constitutional safeguards, revoking protective resource rights privileges of scheduled tribes in its ambition to align development economics with corporate demands in scheduled areas, contradicts the sustainability frameworks of Adivasi-nature and Adivasi rights symbiosis in resource engagement. Adivasi women have begun to challenge this logic of development. A direct impact is the lack of land registration in the names of women which poses a problem especially during land acquisition where they are made ineligible for compensation and rehabilitation. In contexts such as mining where employment may be offered in lieu of land acquired, women are largely excluded. In the present context of the Forest Rights Act, widows are invisible in their eligibility both in the eyes of the customary verification process as well as that of the state machinery.

The extensive field interactions during our dialogues have not only exposed the gendered impacts of state-corporate violations but also brought contemporary voices of the Adivasi women affected by the combined might of state, corporate and customary male oppression. In Chattisgarh the local Adivasi women had to fight for their right to employment in the coal mines and in one site eight women succeeded after a long period of litigation. An Adivasi woman whose husband was killed in a mine accident in the coal mines fought for eight years to get compensation and right to employment. Denial was both on the grounds of lack of proof of her marital status as well as prohibition of women from employment in the mines (although most of the informal labour in the mines are women). In Udaipur district of Rajasthan, for example, where women had remained silent to the brutal destruction of their farms and forests by underground mining of zinc, household surveys with women revealed their anger at Hindustan

Zinc/Vedanta's mining operations. The ecological destruction of their water bodies next to their homes by mine tailings contamination which led to serious problems of fetching water, cooking, crop failure, illnesses caused by water and air pollution are directly linked to the state policies of development economics that trifle with women's livelihood and security. It also revealed their anger against the failure of male leadership in addressing their concerns, whether of leadership within the customary or from unresponsive state bodies. Their protest that swelled the walls of the company brought anxiety to the management that used the weapon of retrenchment of Adivasi men in order to obstruct the women's protest. Women found themselves cornered by the cronyism of patriarchy from within and without, where ecological protection n became a compromise by male leadership.

Similar such anger was demonstrated by Adivasi women who fear for their safety where the state government in Andhra Pradesh has declared tourism sites without their consent. The prioritisation of commercial returns for the state and for private businesses over Adivasi rights and ecological security suffers from insensitivity especially towards women, despite women representing their complaints to the local authorities in Visakhapatnam. Adivasi women in the Panna national park affected villages spoke of oppression from the state as well as the mining mafia which has brutalised their quality of life irrevocably. The constant threat of eviction through preventing their access to agriculture or forest produce, physical and sexual assault from wildlife guards, and denial of basic amenities has forced many villages to 'voluntarily' relocate. This relocation is physical, seasonal, or occupational where livelihood collapse from forests has forced adivasis to resort to illegal wage labour in the mines or in the informal construction work.

One finds in Panna, a high incidence of alcoholism, occupational illnesses like silicosis, domestic violence, malnutrition and psychological stress all of which have serious negative impacts on



the safety and well-being of women. This region demonstrates a linearity of gender based violence associated with state victimisation and abuse over the adivasis that cascades into the community, redirecting state violence to the domestic sphere. Alcoholism and silicosis have forced women into widowhood or into being the sole wage earners and care-givers while also having to deal with domestic violence. Here women's dialogues seem to convey an intense fatigue where dealing with the questions of patriarchy, feminism or gender equality, even from a micro perspective seems irrelevant in their immediate crisis of survival. The state, the corporate and the customary patriarchy are blurred into an intangible web of abuse and marginalisation where relief from hunger is the sole purpose of dialogue for the women. Whether the customary (of the once Raja Gonds) was gender inclusive, sensitive or consultative cannot be retrieved today as the customary itself is fragile and notional, struggling to exist between the tigers, the wildlife authorities, non-tribals, the mining contractors and the state.

Women's fatigue and criticism of the state also stems from the manner in which grievances represented by them are humiliated with trivialised actions and offensive economics. In Panna, women's silence was taken as consent to force relocation in lieu of monetary compensation. The state and the financial institutions today pretentiously specify including gender policy within the social policies by treating women as equal claimants to compensation, no matter whether the social milieu of the women ensures their exercise of rights to this compensation or whether compensation was based on women opting for this choice. In reality many women reported that, from the day compensation was deposited, they ceased to be citizens in the eyes of the state – neither those who relocated have had any legitimate identity or state amenities at their new sites, nor those who have chosen to resist relocation. Today women lose valuable time and wages representing their grievances to authorities as most of the men are too ill with silicosis, to travel.

Neither the state nor the financial institutions seem to review the impacts of these repeated acts of ‘voluntary’ relocation in several other national parks and protected areas where women have echoed very tragic stories in the course of our dialogues. Yet the social safeguards policies and gender policies especially of banks like the World Bank which have been financing loans for national park rehabilitation programmes in India, boast of due diligence guidelines towards indigenous people and women. Adivasi women’s realities, however, demonstrate a complete disconnect from these policies as no meaningful respect or adherence to women’s sustainability or safety is experienced by them. Adivasi women in Panna, Melghat, Kanha and in other sites of these dialogues have clearly articulated their opposition to these gender policies, which do not begin from the framework of women’s right to reject, object or define their own perspective of resource engagement. These policies start from the state and the agencies’ notion of justice which is restricted to compensation and right to evict. They start from their offensive solutions to address women’s losses and women’s grievances. Examples of this triviality were given by Adivasi women from Panna in Madhya Pradesh, Mudumalai in Tamil Nadu and from Dallapalli in Visakhapatnam who have been opposing land grabbing in the name of conservation, ‘eco’ or mass tourism. In Mudumalai women narrated how, despite the Supreme Court orders banning tourism with the view of protecting wildlife, the forest department has tried to circumvent the ban through its eco-tourism models. Women were angry at the department’s notion of promoting Adivasi ‘culture’ by trying to lure women into conducting food and dance programmes for tourists even at the cost of disturbing the eco-system. In Dallapalli, women said that they had to stop farming as the hoardings of the tourism department inviting tourists to enjoy the hills without any consent of the local villages led to mass influx of raucous tourists trampling over their lands. Their complaints against the misconduct of drunken revelers led to local authorities assuring them of providing police constables and CCTV cameras. This neither led to any criminal offences being penalised nor

reduced the menace of irresponsible tourists. Rather, it became an affront on the Adivasi women's own privacy and mobility inside their forest.

Women's dialogues in their local language reflected anger, mistrust and a totally different set of needs and perspectives which had no resemblance to the state ideology on adivasi development and gender. The definition of eco-tourism especially in Fifth Schedule areas under the National Tourism policy does not provide for any concrete legal accountability mechanisms towards ecological protection or social security, despite the extensive evidence of increased trafficking, sex work, HIV/AIDS and crimes against women in areas wherever the tourism industry is located. Women in Dallapalli questioned how the government intends to protect their safety when it has failed to do so in existing sites of tourism in their own district. Where the adivasis are closer to urban centres, as the Warlis in Palghar under pressure from the industrial corridor, women have lost their land but have tried to adapt to urban needs by vending their vegetables. Yet, they are now facing a crisis of losing their spaces of hawking as the need for road expansion and highway projects have further displaced them. The Warli women vegetable vendors' trade union poses many questions to the state for its brutal attack on their self-reliance. These are but a few examples of the deep anxieties emerging from the dormant anger of Adivasi women in several other sites where natural resource conflicts are interlinked with Adivasi women's self-resilience and their traditional skills and spaces of negotiating with patriarchy.

### **Concluding Remarks**

While no culture is static, gender equations are being rearranged within Adivasi societies at the risk of not having appropriate legal safeguards or customary revisions to adjust to contemporary frictions between integration, alienation, forced or aspirational convergences with the outside. Some of these tensions in the discriminatory customary and the exploitative external that make for a complex deconstruct of Adivasi liberalism are being questioned by

Adivasi women. Demanding reform of the customary and yet for a strengthening of the indigenous cultures of identity is demonstrative of seeking an equilibrium in the present day environmental politics and feminist discourse over resource rights in an Adivasi context. What comes out clearly is the resonance of plural narratives from the women. These dialogues also indicate the multiple discourses on the subject within Adivasi women's identity struggles and suggests the need for patience in the exploration of self-definitions, ideologies and strategies that are emerging from within. In many ways, as Adivasi women have never tried to isolate their struggles from that of the community and have largely envisioned their identities as collective identities of their tribe or clan, their voices and demands reflected more of upholding the collective spirit of existence. Internally, Adivasi women are beginning to make visible the collective agency of women within the collective spirit of being Adivasi and this is an intriguing journey within the current struggles of alliance building and assertion of Adivasi rights. Interestingly, what is emerging within this alliance building is also a challenge to the traditional male leadership in land rights campaigns where some of the Adivasi women complained of how they are being perceived as a threat if they try to share the leadership space. This throws up an internal challenge to the assertion struggles of the adivasis as leadership spaces and the decisions of male chiefs to barter away their natural resources to corporate patriarchies need to be reflected upon, if external exploitation has to be overcome. Women clearly state that their voices have to be respected from the patriarchy within.

A greater clarity over effecting coparcener rights, the rights of women –single, married, widowed, abandoned, in the complex issues surrounding multiple forms of marriages and social constructs need internal solutions for effecting justice and preventing abuse. Internal renegotiations and revisions that reflect gender justice can alone strengthen sustainable indigenous identity and resource rights assertion, particularly at the current juncture of

misappropriation by the corporate and cronyism politics throttling the scheduled areas and Adivasi regions.

Thus, differences in prioritisation and aspirations between the genders in the current politics of environment and development economics is increasingly putting both the habitat and women's security in vulnerable situations, which gap, the women are recognising. Therefore, environment justice, climate change impacts and global economics – these have to be redefined from the lens of Adivasi women. As forest protectors, as seed keepers, as spiritual healers, farmers and foragers, as artists, historians and economists in their own right and world views, they are beginning to navigate the discourse around human knowledge and co-existence although these voices are discernible only at a very grassroots level. It is anticipated that the Adivasi women are going to play a critical role in first steering the gendered dialogues over resource rights within their own alliances and communities. It is first inevitable for environment justice debates within the customary decision-making, to address women's demand for their legitimate spaces.

# TRIBAL AND ADIVASI DISCOURSE SERIES

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This volume engages with the philosophy of methodology from a tribal perspective. The word 'tribe' in this volume is positioned to refer to methodological communities. Each tribe has their own embodied methodological structure - living, traversing and negotiating different politico-contextual terrains. Post 1492, when the word 'tribe' was fundamentally altered to refer to 'primitives' that needed to be 'civilised', they underwent and endured an epistemicide. Around the mid 1700s, the concept entered the hierarchy bound social imagination of the dominant caste populace of Indian society(s) through the British. Both the British and caste society(s) began reproducing the post 1492 meta-narrative that reverberate across the socio-political spectrum to this very day. However, outside of these ontological impositions and theoretical gaze of the hegemon, numerous tribes persisted creatively with their organic struggles to stabilize their own epistemologies; rebuilding, reconstructing and repositioning their episteme to adapt to the new social and political interplay. This book is an attempt to capture the philosophical subtleties of these methodological communities. It revisits the context, problematises the discourse and reworks theoretical formulations around three co-dependent categories - land, words and resilient cultures.

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