
Land as the Foundation for Upholding Life, Survival and Culture Some Insights from a Study on the Lived Realities of the Bodos

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This article is a result of research conducted to uncover lived reality of the Bodo tribe and their meaning and practices of land. It contextualizes the narrative from within the core of the Bodo worldview- putting as the starting point everyday lived reality and the relations that comprise the terms of interaction in the Bodo society and the practices and meanings associated with land. The findings suggest that the tribal lands, the non-negotiable respect for their relationship with land and their rights over them, are of quintessential for the survival of tribal communities. As it has been evidenced, land was found to be the basis of the socio-political, economic, cultural, and spiritual lived reality of the Bodos, serving as the foundation for upholding life, survival, and culture.

**JTICI Vol.6. Issue 1.
No.3, pp.40 to 53, 2022**

Introduction

The notion of land is a sight of continued struggle, conflict, and contestation in the physical world as well as in the theoretical realms. Land, even though a commonplace term in our everyday language, has a plethora of meanings associated with it when explored conceptually. Platt (2004, p. 4) posited the difficulties of defining land as it meant “many things simultaneously.” As a human habitat, it emerges out of human interaction with nature— houses, roads, waterways, and fields, etc., are converted into distinctive landscapes to accommodate human existence (Singh, 2006).

In studying habitat from the human settlement dimension, it has been observed that there are various factors that affect human interaction with land: social and political thinking (Powell, 1971), economic organization, defense, elimination of disease, and availability of water (Chisholm, 1962), and religio-cultural decisions (Bjorklund, 1964, as cited in, Singh, 2006, p. 13).

Land asserts to its holders the very idea of sovereignty (Rousseau 1762, 1998).An embodiment of land rights with individuals and community together gives shape and form to public territory

that is 'at once real and personal'. Therefore, the administrative structures and policies have a bearing on the very idea of *whose*, *where*, and *when* of land across periods of history, governments, and governance paradigms or ideologies. For instance, on examining the post-independence land policy of the state of Gujarat in India, dramatic shifts in its land policy may be identified (Sud, 2007). Post-independent changes in the society, economy and polity of the state brought about a complete about-turn in the land policy: the rhetoric of "land to the tiller" influenced by socialist ideals of some of the freedom-struggle-leaders at the start was seen as being replaced by "land to the market" via the land liberalization policy of the state (Sud, 2007, p. 627). It resulted in the dilution of the demarcation drawn between land meant for agricultural purposes and land for industry. This thrust towards market-friendly land policy, towards the close of the twentieth century, meant that the state served the interests of the large-landed farmers, local industrialists, small-scale entrepreneurs, and national and foreign investors. It was a rollback on the state's proclamation pertaining to the promises of addressing the *landlessness* of the poor farmers and landless laborers during the freedom struggle. Land, holding a capital value, is an important dimension in the economic avenue. 'The land with its mineral deposits, waters, forests, and other resources' is at the same time a 'universal instrument of labour' and 'universal object of labour' (Ilyin & Motylev, 1986, pp. 18-20). Thus, seeing land from the political-economic lenses establishes its connectedness to the social relations that exist among human beings in a capitalist society: relationships on the basis of ownership of the means of production.

"Land is an important metaphor for power, wealth and status ... all over South Asia" (Sud, 2007, p. 603). The status of *landedness* accords one with the capacity to lead a respected and dignified life in our societies. On the other hand, the status of *landlessness* has been associated with poverty, want, and neglect. Land, in the critical geographical sense, confers one with an identity: it serves as the beginning point to understanding "difference, otherness and politics of exclusion" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 3). Other points of reference, such as class, caste, race, gender, and ethnic origin, also overlap significantly with the point of reference that land accords one. For instance, control over vast tracts of cultivable land by a few as against the large majority of farmers, peasants, and landless laborers has perpetuated inequitable land distribution in India's agricultural practice (Sen, 1955, & Sud, 2007). A subtle mixture of class, caste, and ethnic interests has continued to dominate the ownership over land. Thus, land became an important denominator for (in)equality in the Indian context.

On the other hand, attempts by the states to bring about land reforms have been fraught with stiff challenges, shortcomings, and failures. Common interest groups have been observed to dominate decision-making processes in favor of small privileged sections (Peters & Kambewa, 2007, & Sud, 2007). Land, when studied vis-à-vis gender differentiation in society, emerged as a complicated bone of contention in the Indian context. Patriarchal gender relationships in society served to exclude women from owning land and property rights (Agarwal, 1994). Yet again, land is imbued with complex meanings, claims, and counter-claims when looked at from the perspective of the state formation processes (Fernandes & Bharali, 2011, & Scott, 2009). Further, the processes of colonization have given rise to different distortions to land relations in the erstwhile colonized places (Smith, 2012). It is therefore important to take into cognizance these

conceptual difficulties that are embedded in the meaning and the notion of land while researching it.

Tribal/indigenous Notion of Land

The tribal/indigenous notion of land, while including the aforementioned formulations, offers divergence as land is understood to be beyond physical, geographic, and political spaces and encapsulates the spiritual connections associated with it. In order to lay stress on this close connectedness between the tribal communities and their lands, Styres and Zinga (2013) sum it as "...a deep sense of identification through a cosmological and ecological connection to both natural and spiritual worlds (p. 302). Leo (2013) captured the integral relationship and interconnectedness of the Poumai Naga (an indigenous/tribal group of India) with land. The strength and spirit of the Poumai Naga are rooted in land, water, and air, as they serve to accord him/her with identity, space, and place— a dignified existence. Land is seen as a 'nurturing mother' and held as sacred and in reverence. In this context, Sylvain (2002) associated the essentialist and primordialist conception of indigeneity the world over and their associated identity struggles and movements to the connectedness of land and tribal people. Land has always been *indivisible* from the conception of indigeneity itself.

Thus, in light of the experiences of the tribal communities in India, the recent report of the High-Level Committee on Socioeconomic, Health, and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India singled out the Scheduled Tribes and Adivasis as the most marginalized and vulnerable communities in the country primarily owing to their dispossession of land. This was found to be occurring in spite of the strong constitutional mandate and provisions for the protection and safeguarding of land of the tribals. The uprooting of tribal communities from their ancestral lands and habitats has happened as a result of development-induced displacement, wrongful interpretation of laws and manipulation of records, recording of community land as government land, settlement of refugees in tribal lands, creation of National Parks, and conflicts as exemplified in Northeast India. This process has had devastating effects on tribal peoples as it augured their alienation from "... livelihood, political system, culture, values and identity..." and also their spiritual lifeworlds (Xaxa, et al., 2014, p. 251).

The Bodos' Notion of Land

Land has been seen as an intrinsic characteristic of the identity of the Bodos- defining their social, political, and economic lives, spirituality and well-being. It has been maintained that the Bodos lived closely with nature and have lived as its custodians too. To the Bodo mind and imagination, earth, water, air, sky, and beings (animals, fish, and birds) that dwelled upon it were peopled with a vast number of invisible spiritual beings (Endel, 1910). These forces have been identified as sacred for the Bodo: not to be tampered with and trampled upon. The world is at one and the same time "animate, relational and sacred". It is beyond human capacity of knowing it in a linear, reasoned, and disembodied way. Land and water are communal and spiritual. Again, when read from the concrete socio-political and economic materialistic experiences, Bodos have had strong claims of ownership rights, privileges, and territorial claims all throughout their history (Daimary, 2012). This particular notion of land was and has been at odds with the views on land as held by a liberal/neoliberal state and its institutions (Narzary & Swargiary, 2015).

Methodological Frame

Community-first land-centered theoretical frame (Styres & Zinga, 2013) was used to map across time and space, the Bodo peoples' practice of land and their associated meanings to unveil how it informed their social, political, economic, and spiritual lived reality. The process was one where the *researched became the researchers* as expressed by Akhup (2013). It allowed for the carrying out *locationing* exercises by the researchers in order to revisit themselves and thereby engage with the communities in respectful and relational harmony with their goals, pursuits, and narratives. Again, participatory multi-sited ethnographic tools are employed in the present study to allow adjustments, decisions, and flexibility. Drawing mainly from the works of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, participatory research allowed reflexive reciprocity and a problem-centered approach while stressing the need to avoid unilateral control by the researcher (Elden & Taylor, 1983, p. 4). Participatory community mapping tools were used to map the historical, geographical, and temporal dimensions of *Kumarsali Fwthar* located in the Chirang district (Bodoland Territorial Region), and emergent concepts corroborated with findings in *Hatirtary village* of Baksa District. Tools such as social mapping, resource mapping, mobility mapping, etc., were useful for generating information pertaining to the spatial dimension of the communities. Timeline, trends analysis, and daily activity schedules of men, women, and children maps generated information regarding the temporal dimension of the villages. Finally, relation-related maps enabled the researcher, as well as the communities under study, to understand the dynamics of social interactions pertaining to land in the village.

On the other hand, multi-sited ethnographic tools, namely, observation, in-depth interviews, and group interviews, were key to sharing and for drawing out the narratives and oral histories of the community in the study. Multi-sited ethnographic research has already been successfully used by Kim Fortun while exploring the 'cross-cutting forms of agency, discourse and meaning' of advocacy that transpired after the Bhopal gas tragedy (Satterfield, 2003, p. 284). In the globalized context, truths for the 'local realities' are very often 'produced elsewhere, through dispersed relations and agencies, generating a multi-sited imaginary' (Marcus, 2009, p. 183). In this connection, Waghmore (2013) successfully studied the dynamism of Dalit activism employing multi-sitedness at three levels, namely, activists/leaders, participants/supporters/volunteers, and networks of the movement.

In this light, the present study employed the frame of participatory multi-sitedness across spatial and temporal dimensions at three levels, one with the socio-cultural, political, and economic leaders of the community in order to understand the Bodos' perception on land while interacting with the state, second with individuals and families who 'cultivate' the land, and finally with the web of relations that intertwine between and among the people and land and how it has been subjected to change across time.

Key Findings

The findings have enabled the researchers to appreciate how embedded processes around land practice have contributed to the socio-cultural, economic, political, and spiritual mobilizations of the Bodos and their identity formation. They are presented in the following paragraphs:

Place-making as an Ethical Negotiation with Nature

In order to escape from external threats, the Bodos strategised in a number of ways. One of the most significant strategies was to reorganize the habitat and the social relationship. It saw the beginning of the “*jabphathanaï*” system, whereby smaller and vulnerable households would strategically be co-opted into one of the bigger farming families in the village. In this way, the co-opted family henceforth became an extended family in the same household. They would also establish, through a social ceremony, the start of family relations. Henceforth, they would not be counted as an independent family. The land and assets of the co-opted household were merged into the larger household, and they also became part of the family in terms of property share and inheritance. The merger of the families, though not related by blood or marriage, was a strategy to also cater to the needs of safeguarding the property and lives of the poorer members of the community. It was found that even though this practice is no more prevalent among the Bodos, it showed that the communities generally devise their own strategy to offset threats to its existence when it is from an external agency.

The “*Phamujanaï*” system was necessitated to augment food production for the meaningful subsistence of agricultural families. In this system, the family would engage in the cultivation of seasonal crops in the common lands that were available by and large for anybody who desired for it, in the community. The system of “*Hadansiphainaï*” meant the formation of a new homestead land away from the existing one. This system was necessitated as a result of the impoverishment of the tribal families owing to threats, land loss due to the demarcation of large tracts of lands as forest areas, and the sale of land to the non-tribals. Many Bodo families became landless and started new settlements in fringe areas of forests, reclaimed land by the river banks, and lands that were demarcated as community lands.

Homestead Land as the *Location* for the Bodos

The homestead land served a variety of foundational purposes in the life-worlds of the Bodos. It served as the anchor or the location for the Bodo family. It is mostly an ancestral property that nurtured and nourished life. It was considered the ‘core’ of one’s existence as it was the place for living and forming a family, bringing up children, and establishing social and spiritual relationships with the community and nature. The dwelling huts and houses were constructed in it. Homestead lands teemed with a variety of fruit trees, medicinal plants, vegetables, timber-producing trees, and a few cash crops that served to sustain and augment the income for the family. The homestead lands were also home to the poultry, piggery, and cattle that the family reared for subsistence. The religious and spiritual needs of the family were also taken care of in the homestead lands. The homestead land nurtured morality and values for sharing, cooperation, respect, and dignity among the members of a family. It also provided the members of a family with the basis for identity formation at the village and the larger Bodo community levels. It provided the identity basis for the members of the family to engage in socialization and participation in community affairs.

Agricultural Lands as Axis of Community Life

The agricultural lands are mainly used for the cultivation of paddy, jute, mustard, pulses, and sesame. The works in the agricultural fields were intense and required the establishment and

maintenance of strong social bonds and inter-relationships at the community level. The concept of *saori* (free community service) was called upon to enhance agricultural cooperation and productivity in the village. The *saori* provided a space for the sustenance of community relationships, solidarity, and cooperation. It also became the meeting point for members to assemble, engage in close conversations and merry-making, and successful completion of community projects. It was found that the agricultural fields were the axis points to which the Bodos held on to in spite of the heavy odds pitted against them. It served as the basis for providing one's economic needs through the cultivation of crops for subsistence as well as sale. On the other hand, the need for engaging with the cultivation fields nurtured the community mores and fabric. It is the most important parameter for the sustenance of a village. Further, it has also been the key to maintaining intact the contiguity of Bodo village as well as the Bodo identity.

Irrigation Activities and Organizing for Community Wellbeing

As there was no government support in the construction of irrigation canals in the agricultural fields of the village, in the earlier days, the community took it upon itself to provide for their irrigational needs by forming Dong Bandw Committees [Check Dam Committees]. The irrigation system was important to ensure that there were no conflicts in the community due to water. It was a committee to take care of addressing the water requirement of all families in a democratic manner. For instance, the Kumarsali-Dwiswmjhora-Thaisojhor Dong Bandw Committee was in itself a well-organised community institution that sought to take care of the irrigation requirements in the Kumarsali and Dwiswmjhora villages. It was successful to a great extent. In contrast to this, the irrigation project at Hatirtari village was a Government-tendered project. The hasty construction without adequate community participation saw that the boulder-pitching project sought to protect the roadway at the cost of the erosion of cultivation lands. The important lesson one could learn from these two projects was that community leaders and institutions are of paramount importance when it comes to executing irrigation projects in the villages.

Community Land as the Basis for Community Welfare

The community lands were considered to be the center points of intense community interaction and engagement. These lands provided scope for the community members to engage in the cultivation of crops while also serving as recreational spaces. Adjacent to the cultivable lands and the community forests, there were also spaces demarcated for serving the need of organizing games, sports, festivals, and community meetings. The playground (open field), thus, was an important place. The community youth spent their leisure hours in the playground as these were also surrounded by trees that provided adequate shade even in the heat of summer. Social, political, and economic issues of the community were discussed in the place, apart from the planning of community projects and work. The place also served as a training ground for physical strength and endurance, even in the absence of expert trainers. The community land and its management by the traditional Village Council is a unique phenomenon all throughout the Bodo villages.

The Market Area for Economic Networking

The marketplace served as the central location of the village, where the *talk-of-the-community* passed around. It was there that people came to sell seasonal vegetables, fish, and meat in the evenings. The community members generally went shopping and sale of their vegetables and other items in the village market during the evenings. Some of the vegetable items that were sold are lai (spinach), laffa (a kind of leafy vegetable), coriander leaves, mushrooms, potato, beans, chillies, peas, arum, arum leaves, arum roots, banana, pineapple, oranges, jackfruit, tomato, pumpkin, gourd and ashgourd, milk, kheda-daphini (leafy vegetable collected from the forests), etc. Baring a few items, most of these came from the kitchen gardens that they maintained in their homesteads. It was observed that most women were engaged in the sale of vegetable items in the evenings.

Forest Lands Serving as the Community Resource Base

The forest lands were now controlled and managed by the Forest Department of the state (since 1952). This drastically reduced the community's participation in managing its plantation and administration. However, the community still maintained a close association with the forest by tracing its development to the contributions from the community members: plantation of trees, saving it from wildfires, preventing it from excessive logging by smugglers, and saving the wild animals that strayed into the villages. In the past, prior to the government takeover, the forests served to provide food items, medicinal items, grazing areas, and construction materials for housing. The government restrictions in the forest areas have drastically reduced access to these items. The forests also served as a hiding place when the police atrocities were inflicted with impunity on the villages during the Bodoland Movement days. Men had to leave their homes and sleep in the forests during the period.

Thus, in the community's narrative, the forest was a rich resource base intricately linked to their food habits, medicinal needs, and livelihood. It catered to their health needs, provided a variety of food in different seasons, the raw materials to construct simple huts with, and also helped them in times of crises. It also provided an operational base for resistance to safeguarding the rights and dignity of the Bodos.

Transfer of Land by Inheritance

Land is the primary asset or property that is inherited by the family. The Bodos followed a patrilineal and patrilocal family system. As such, it was observed that the ancestral lands may generally be handed down to the male heirs in the family. However, this was not always the case. The customary laws of inheritance were not rigid. It was found to be flexible, accommodating the demands of a particular context. The involvement of community leaders and elders in the event of property distribution within the family ensured that there was case-by-case scrutiny of the needs of all the children in the family. The son or daughter in the family that took care of the parents in their old age was considered to be the most deserving. Unmarried daughters in the family were also generally given a plot of land from ancestral property.

Land Transfer by Sale: Land Alienation among the Bodos

Land is generally not considered a commodity. It is considered as being the most important asset for the family. It provided nourishment and nurturance to the family for its overall growth and transitions through its different developmental stages. As such, it is generally not bought and sold. The findings of the study revealed that the sale of land was, by and large, resultant of the impoverishment of the families and their inability to sustain economically on the small plot of land. Families also had to sell the land in order to treat illnesses and to meet the educational costs. Thus, it may be surmised that if at all there were sales of land, it was as a result of distress.

On the other hand, the Bodos were also pushed to abandon their lands on account of their interface with immigrant communities and other non-tribals. The Bodos' agricultural fields were targeted as they served to be the soft spot that hurt them the most. The cattle were intentionally strayed into these fields, which rendered them helpless and desperate- leading to sale or abandonment. Apart from the sale of land to the non-tribals, tribal land alienation also happened in commercial/market areas. The tribal people could not keep up with the exploitative principles of the liberal market. The noise and din in such places were also incompatible with the quiet and peaceful ways of living close to nature. People abandoned their lands and moved off to settle in more quiet and undisturbed areas.

Alienation of land has had deleterious effects on the Bodos. It led to the impoverishment of families. Loss of land also required the person to shift his dwelling place and agricultural fields and start life afresh. These were expensive affairs and resulted in the financial indebtedness of the person. Shifting of one's dwelling place resulted in the loss of social capital that the family had accumulated over generations.

Development Projects: High Tension Power Lines, an Ashram, and a Bridge

Three development projects, namely, the construction of High Tension Electric Lines, the construction of Patanjali Trust at Chirang, and the construction of the HagramaDalang(bridge) over the *Bima* river were studied to understand the community's interface with development projects of the state and private companies.

It was found that development projects, when implemented without prior consultation with the community, caused apprehensions and suspicion among the people. There was also a lack of proper education on the consequences it could have on the people and their livelihood. There was much apprehension in the areas where the High Tension Electric Lines were installed. As the High Tension Electric wires cut through the villages, it fragmented the families, villages, and communities that stood in its line. While these High Tension Wires snaked through their lands, they were not the beneficiaries of the electricity it transported. In this way, it was found that the 'development project' failed to benefit the primary stakeholders who have had to sacrifice their lands.

The second project in the form of land allocation to a Trust, was actually a reclaimed riverine area. It was found that though the land in question has been referred to by the administration as vacant land, the land was recovered from the *Bima* river (*Aie* river). The move expropriated land from the families and villages that had lost it to the river-bank erosion of the *Bima* River. Though

these lands were silted (with sand and stones), it had borne the hopes and expectations of the families to resettle in the area and also start engaging in agricultural cultivation. However, its allocation to the multi-crore corporate giant dashed their hopes of recovering the land completely.

On the other hand, the third development project, namely, the construction of Hagrama Dalang (a bridge), spanning a distance of 1.7 km served the long-pending needs of the communities and they benefitted much from it. The bridge signified a shift in the understanding and meaning of development projects in the Bodoland areas. It readily fulfilled their fundamental need for mobility to attain better health, education, and markets for the sale of their agricultural produces. Further, the anti-erosion embankments that the project brought along with it ensured the protection and safety of many villages along the upstream river banks. Along with the completion of the bridge construction, the condition of the Amteka-Koilamoila-Chapaguri road also improved drastically. As the bridge addressed the felt-need of the people, the project was much appreciated.

Land as the Site for Practice of Religio-spiritual Being

The religious practices of the Bodos reverberated with closeness to nature and appreciation of all that it could offer. The three main religions practiced by the Bodos are Bathou, Christianity, and Brahma. The study covered two communities that professed the Bathou religion and Christianity. Each of these religions, as practiced by the Bodos, had accorded to land, its practice and engagement, a significant space. Among the followers of Bathou, it was found that the earth was one of the five elements that were held in veneration. Land is revered as the fountain of life, the supplier of needs, and the bringer of prosperity. While it is based on veneration of nature, it also prohibits wanton exploitation of nature. It prohibits the destruction of trees and plants that are associated with the faith. Bodos embraced Christianity in the light of saving themselves from the political, social, and economic atrocities they were facing at the time. As Christianity organized the Bodos into congregations, it enabled them to withstand and overcome the exploitative moves of dominant groups. The people rallied around the strengthening of their faith by clinging on to their lands, culture, and communitarian ways.

Land as the Point of Negotiation with the State

It was found that the multiplicity of land laws and legislation of the state were not able to address the unique land-related problems of the Bodos. The government had not conducted with sincerity any activity aimed at settling the land of the Bodos or the Dooar areas. Though it was supposed to have been done every thirty years, no settlement has been made after the first settlement. At the time the study was carried out, all the community-owned lands were categorized as “unclassified.” Such a record in the government documents made it vulnerable to encroachment and its shrinkage. With the shrinking of the community spaces, there was a shrinking of the social, economic, and religious-spiritual space in the community. It also led to the increasing vulnerability of the poorest and the landless. Thus, it was found that the Bodos were in continued negotiation with the state over their right to land and territoriality- peaceful mass movements, militant resistance, and political dialogues.

The Bodoland Movement started in the late Nineteenth Century in order to safeguard the political rights of the Bodos and other tribal communities of Assam. As a result, the Bodo areas were included within the state of Assam, with special provisions for the protection of the tribal lands via the creation of the Tribal Belts and Blocks, as per the Chapter X of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations Act of 1947. The formation of the Tribal Belt and Blocks in the contiguous tribal areas of the state was in keeping with the apprehensions expressed by the Bodo leadership, on the one hand, and the need for safeguarding the land of the Bodos and other tribal communities, on the other hand.

Three multilateral accords have been inked between the Bodos and the state of Assam, and Government of India in the recent times (Mochahari & Narzary, 2020). In 1993 the Bodoland Autonomous Council Accord was signed between the aforementioned three parties to address the demand for a separate state of Bodoland. However, as it did not provide for a territorial base, the 2003 Memorandum of Settlement for the creation of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts under the Bodoland Territorial Council with 40 transferred subjects was signed. The Third Bodo Accord (2020), also known as the Bodo Peace Accord, created the Bodoland Territorial Region and sought to streamline greater powers and functions to the Council of the Bodoland Territorial Region. All of these agreements signed in 1993, 2003, and 2020 dealt with the protection of the territoriality of the Bodos.

Ownership of Land and Relationality as the Key to Strengthening Community

Ownership of land brought with it the capacity for a family to survive and thrive in the villages studied. While it provided them with the productive capacity for meeting their basic needs, it also enabled them to practice meaningful livelihoods and live with dignity and respect in a relational world. It provided a basis for one's identity and close association with the natural as well as social worlds around. The ownership of land has been the primary struggle of the Bodos. The findings suggest that the Bodoland Movement, with all its different phases, has but focused on one thing: ownership of land and its contiguity as a territory. Thus, when there were threats to this foundational relationship with their lands, the community responded through resistance movements of all shades: mass movement to guerrilla tactics by underground insurgencies.

Land as Primary Care-giver and Epistemological Premise

Land as the primary caregiver ensured that relationships with it honored the elders in the family and those who have moved on from the world through deaths and also through separations. It served as the primary point for co-existence: learning about the self and his or her relationships with others in the community and the larger world. Learning was rooted first to the environment that immediately surrounded the self in the context of the place. It was from this groundedness that one learned how to view the self in relation to the world. In this connection, it enabled the individual to look at the world from the locational perspective of the Bodos. It, therefore, provided the theoretical and the epistemological premise for knowing and engaging with the immediate world and also other perspectives and worldviews of the world. The moves to disown the Bodos of their lands were seen as moves to disconnect the Bodos from their groundedness.

Land as the primary caregiver enabled reconciliation and healing. In the aftermath of the Bodoland Movement, the brutalities that the community witnessed and endured brought about

tremendous sociological as well as psychological trauma among children, men, and women. There have been minimum external efforts to deal with this unique situation of the Bodos. The contiguity of the community space allowed for community expressions of grief and sorrow and then to move on in life. The community processes that offered help, cooperation, and solidarity in times of individual, family, or community crises ensured that the wheel of life moved along. The process did not allow forgetting of sorrowful events but made it possible to move on in life after assuaging the pain, acknowledging the loss of dear or near ones, and understanding that the living must continue to journey in life.

In this regard, the epistemological premise of the Bodos stood in alignment with the epistemologies that sought justice from the brutalities of colonizing agents and processes. The land-centered movement of the Bodos resisted the might and strategies of *epistemicide* (see for example, Santos, 2014). In this sense, the epistemological positioning of the Bodo community served to dislocate and fracture the harbingers of epistemicide in a limited yet powerful manner in their immediate lands.

Communitarian Resistance to Domination

The indigenous ways of the Bodos did not evaporate with the penetration of the dominant forces and capital. Rather, it was found that communities negotiated and adapted to the changes in subtle ways that are not readily visible at a casual glance. For instance, the practice of marriage in the community followed a hybrid of traditional and modern. In essence, were evidence of overarching community aspirations, hopes, and participation all throughout: preparations, meeting of the expenses, wedding feast, and the clean-up. It was seen that the community took it upon itself to initiate the newly married couple into conjugal life with all the due processes. Irrespective of their wealth and standing, all members of the community contributed as per their own capacity and liking. All contributions were appreciated. It was found that the community also followed similar patterns in the event of funerals, festivals, and other events.

In the event of crises too, the community is calibrated to meet the exigencies of the emergent issues, problems, or threats. It was seen that the Bodos were able to live through the violence and torture during the Bodoland Movement as there was a community to buffer the miseries of individuals. Men went into hiding in groups. Women braved up the unending night vigils in the company of one another. Songs, poetry, art, dance, and intense prayers served to assuage the grief and sorrow of individuals and families who lost their loved ones. Homes and lands provided the base or the here and now, as articulated by Virilio (2010), for the expression of joy and grief for the families. The community thrives on the principles of sharing, cooperation, and relationality, while also prohibiting individualist agents that engaged in accumulation, aggrandizement, and *delocating*. The connectedness to their lands provided for the sustenance of life and relatedness in the face of desperate attempts to break and fracture the community.

Discussion

The discussion points revolved chiefly around three imminent theorizations pertaining to the practice of land and its meaning as held by the Bodos. While the research was conducted within the theoretical frame of a community-first land-centered approach (Styres & Zinga, 2013), the findings merged with the positioning of Bodhi and Jojo (2019) with regard to tribal peoples'

interface with state and neoliberal forces. It was found that the Bodo people's practice of land was primarily an adaptation to the moves of actors to destabilize and dispossess the Bodos from their lands. The Bodo narrative also found expression in the form of a series of negotiations for strengthening the community's vitality and resilience vide movements and peace accords. Thus, the practice and meaning of the land of the Bodos underscore their struggle for freedom from exploitation, marginalization, and exclusion that they have had to undergo for over a hundred years now.

The findings illuminated that the practice of land by the Bodos revolved around ethical negotiations with nature, the social world also involving other communities, the state, and economic institutions. It was a call for the creation of an ethical space for meaningful co-existence, relationality, respect, and reciprocity. It was found that the socio-cultural, economic, and political institutions of the community are rooted to land as being the primary denominator for one's being, identity, and participation in community life. It was held that land was the foundational foothold for the survival and resilience of the community. In this regard, development projects were seen as markers of change and stability in the community. It was imperative to address the community's aspirations for change and stability while implementing development projects. While some development projects were key to solving long-pending issues of neglect, apathy, and isolation, some of the development projects that were implemented for improvements that did not benefit the community was held with suspicion and resisted.

While land provided the Bodos with the locus for survival, identity, and relationality, it also provided the epistemological basis for the Bodo lived reality. It was through practice on land and the meanings associated with those practices that community being was possible. Place-making was found to be an ethical negotiation of the community with nature and the larger society. This value framework respected and upheld the principles of recognizing the lands as the locus of family and the axis of community. Without land, the symbiotic relationship of the communities with nature and family and other communities was not possible. The research findings corroborated with the seminal work on culture, place, and place-making by Escobar (2001, 2008), wherein it has been posited that culture and place are integrally linked. There is a vital connection between the land and the people inhabiting it. Culture is, therefore a composite of all that the people practice on the land they live in. This primary connectedness of culture to place and place-making also found resonance with regard to educational theories and practice, which have to be also primarily connected to the lands where people lived (Styres & Zinga, 2013).

Conclusion

The study elucidates that the tribals, the Bodos in the present case, are rooted in their land. This rootedness also informed the social and cultural make of the community. It was seen that the community could survive violent repressions and brutalities that aimed at the dispossession of their lands during the Bodo Movement years. While there is a need to reverse this destructive process, the community efforts towards land development for productivity and revitalization of the community call for immediate attention. In this regard, there may be measures taken up by the community leaders, state agencies, and other non-government organizations for engaging in a concerted effort to render once more the vitality of the lands in the Bodoland and also other

tribal areas. Such a concept calls for embarking on a community development practice in India that holds the lands of the tribal communities as central to their survival and well-being. Conceptualizations and expressions on tribal welfare and development cannot be construed any further without putting their land rights as the starting point for any meaningful and emancipatory intervention.

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