

Editor's report

It is my pleasure to present the eleventh issue of Explorations. The present issue consists of nine papers published under the 'Articles' category and one book review.

The first paper titled *Urbanisation and its impact on the Peri-Urban Areas: A Study in Guwahati, Assam* by Indrani Sarma & Sarmistha Das examines the effects of urbanisation in three villages located adjacent to the city of Guwahati. The study highlights how the process of Peri-urbanisation transformed the livelihood patterns of the local communities in the context of the commercialisation of land. The study argues that peri-urbanisation is an opportunity for the development and the challenge of coping with structural changes.

The second paper, titled *Politics and the Peasantry in Assam- Locating the responses in Doyang Reserved Forest* by Indrani Talukdar dwells on the politics of peasantry with special reference to Assam. It contextualizes and complicates the diverse form of peasant protests, from everyday forms of resistance to organised protests. The paper argues that the nature of peasant protests is responsive, not reactive to the state and broader ethnic politics.

The third paper, titled *Hybrid Identity and Cultural Commons in the Foothills of Assam-Nagaland Border* by Antora Borah, analyses the making of hybrid identities and their implications for the gender, cultural and religious implications of the Naga society. The paper gains importance in the context of contested citizenship and religious identity in addition to the patriarchal practices.

The fourth paper, titled *Intertwined Education and Social Inequality: A Sociological Analysis of Schools and People Groups in Nagaland* by P. Temjennungla Imsong & A. Wati Walling, attempts to examine the nature of the relationship between social inequalities and educational accessibility in the backward areas in Nagaland. It highlights the educational achievements of the Nagas in advanced and backward areas.

The fifth paper, titled *Negotiating the Question of Caste, Islam and Indian Muslims: Caste Elements among Meos of Mewat* by Altaf Hussain, examines the role of the caste system among the Muslims of Mewat. The study analyses the consensus and contestations concerning the Mewat and Islamic identity. The paper submits that despite systematic efforts towards Islamisation, even today, the Meo community takes pride in their Hindu-caste identity and follows the associated cultural practices.

The sixth paper, titled *Assemblages and Documents as Tools for Managing Complexity: A Study on the Practices of Adaptation to Floods* by Mridusmita Dutta, explores the state's role in mapping the natural disasters and floods in Assam. What are the means of managing the natural

risks and methodological protocols followed in measuring the degree of loss caused by natural disasters and floods? The paper critically analyses the need to shift the focus from the sociology of governance to governmentality by launching specific schemes to address the problems. The paper highlights the social construction of floods and adaptation mechanisms.

Paper seventh, titled *Understanding Cultural Sensitivity and Competence in Health Care: Reflections on Antenatal Care from Rural Lucknow* by Riddhi Srivastava & D R Sahu, examines the role of culture in health care delivery and management. The paper highlights the significance of local culture and people's beliefs about health, illness and treatment.

In paper eight, titled *Healthcare for the Infertile: A Sociological Perspective*, Madhubanti Sen and Khaikholen Haokip analysed the prevalence of infertility in India and the social and cultural meanings attached to the infertile couple in Indian society. It highlights the growing popularity in the healthcare industry for infertility treatments and the issues related to access to reproductive technologies within the broader neo-liberal market context.

The ninth paper, *An ethnography of the 'labour lines': How has access shaped my study?* Premshila Singh presents the methodological issues and challenges the scholars have faced while conducting the fieldwork among the tea plantation workers in Assam. The study aims to examine the role of the mobile phone in the everyday life of the people staying in the labour lines of a tea plantation in Assam.

Book Review

Book Review: *Ceasefire City: Militarism, Capitalism, and Urbanism in Dimapur* (2020) by Dolly Kikon & Duncan McDuie-Ra by Author(s): Viliebeinu Mom

Explorations invite your contributions to future issues of the journal. We will appreciate your feedback or suggestions on the journal.

I sincerely thank the Indian Sociological Society office bearers, and the selection committee of **Explorations** (ISS E-journal) for choosing me as an editor. I thank Prof Chandan sharma and the team for systematically publishing the periodic issues.

Thanks & Best Wishes

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Article: Urbanisation and its impact on the Peri-Urban Areas: A Study in Guwahati, Assam

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Urbanisation and its impact on the Peri-Urban Areas: A Study in Guwahati, Assam

--- Indrani Sarma & Sarmistha Das

Abstract

The urban peripheries have experienced substantial socio-economic changes in recent years. The study examines the effects of urbanisation in three villages located around the *DeeporBeel*ⁱ adjacent to the city of Guwahati. Peri-urbanisation has led to changes in traditional livelihoods of the communities, commercialisation of land use, declining population engaged in agricultural activities, etc. The study argues that peri-urbanisation presents both challenges and opportunities for development for the local communities. As traditional livelihood diminishes as a result of urban sprawl, new economic opportunities have also evolved. However, the present situation warrants meaningful state interventions for sustainable planning of the peri-urban areas.

Keywords: DeeporBeel, Peri-urban, Urban sprawl, Communities, Livelihood.

Urbanisation and Peri-Urban Dynamics

“Urbanisation is a worldwide phenomenon” (Piorr et. al. 2010) and it “is also transforming the lives of those living in the rural areas around cities” (United Nations 2019). “(T)oday more than half the world’s population (55 percent) resides in urban areas”...and as projected this will increase to 68 percent by 2050 (United Nations 2019). It also envisages that “(M)uch of the new urbanisation will take place in Sub-Saharan African and South Asian countries with low incomes and weak institutional and fiscal capabilities” (Ibid). “Such rapid growth in cities creates new opportunities—but it is also putting new pressures on cities and countries...” (Lall et.al. 2021). For instance, “Ghana in the Sub-Saharan African region is facing a lot of challenges in its peri-urban development and as a result, the demand for rural land has heightened in the recent years. These land transformations are particularly evident in the conversion of agricultural land uses to non-agricultural land uses...” (Ansah and Chigbu 2020, 2-4). “The World Resources Institute (2001) estimated that in 2025, more than 50% of the African and Asian populations would be living in urban areas” (Piorr et.al. 2010). The rapid

urbanisation as observed in developing countries, like India, has also impacted the peripheral areas with more or less rural characteristics. As Marshall and Dolley (2019) argue, “...the most important context of this urban transition is at the peri-urban interface, where there is a juxtaposition of rural and urban activities, and institutions and poverty, inequality and environmental degradation are often most closely associated”. The rapid urbanisation in the developing countries across South and East Asia is seen to be mainly driven by a cycle of neoliberal restructuring of peri-urban space. These impacts further accelerate peri-urban transitions in terms of land-use patterns, resource extraction, pollution, nature of traditional livelihood and other such socio-economic transformations. “There are positive effects, such as proximity to markets and workplaces, quality of life, and innovation” (Piorr et. al. 2010).

The emerging peri-urban spaces are becoming the important “sites of dynamic” (Piorr et. al. 2010) transitions and adaptations. Marshall et. al. (2009) have identified peri-urban as “the urban fringe and the geographic edge of cities as a place, it refers to the movement of goods and services between physical spaces and the transition from rural to urban contexts as a process and finally, as a concept, it refers to an interface between rural and urban activities, institutions and perspectives.” As a result, “the urban and rural areas are no longer separate territories” rather there is a continuum. “(T)he European experiences of urban expansion driven by economic development show that the peri-urban have the same amount of built-up land as urban areas.” Moreover, the future projection points out to the fact that in Europe, the “built development in peri-urban areas could double between 2040– 2060” (Piorr et. al. 2010). Peri-urbanisation is a global phenomenon; however, the trend of peri-urbanisation varies across the globe. “Peri-urbanisation in developed countries is characterised by industrial development, whereas, in most developing countries, the process has resulted insprawl endangering the physical environment” (Ansah and Chigbu 2020, 5).

Increasing urban sprawl, especially in the developing countries has resulted in varied forms of degradation including changes in land use from agricultural to residential and industrial/commercial, changes in the use of natural resources, for instance, deforestation, water depletion and pollution, quarrying, land degradation because of brick kilns and increased solid and liquid wastes have “strained the carrying capacity of surrounding areas” (Shaw 2005, 130). Indian economy underwent massive transformation -post-liberalisation (1990s). The new India (if we can say so) saw rapid growth in its private economic sector. The sudden economic boom resulted in the rapid expansion of the cities which began the

process of peri-urbanisation. “A better understanding of the complex dynamics of rural-urban transitions” (Tacoli and Vorley, 2015) is significant in the present times.

Significantly, “spilling over of population from the city into these areas has been occurring quite rapidly in the 1990s in almost all large cities in India with middle-class housing demand driving the move to the outskirts of the city where land is cheaper. In addition to homeowners building homes in small plots and residential complexes with multiple families, the peri-urban has also seen the incursion of services that need cheaper land, such as hotels, hospitals, and schools. In this sense, the peri-urban is more urban than rural” (Ibid).

Further, it is rightly pointed out that the peri-urban areas provide many services to the urban centres as discussed above. However, these areas often lie outside the purview of the legal jurisdiction of the urban areas. Big companies and public institutions can establish business and privatised services in peri-urban areas. This has led to increased local inequalities in terms of providing services to the local communities residing thereof (Shaw, 2005). Similarly, in the study area, as a prospective peri-urban location adjacent to fast-developing Guwahati city, many developmental activities can be seen, such as a brick kiln, quarrying, establishments of companies, and conversion of land for other uses, public amusement park, and so on. Also, it is observed that the city dwellers continue to buy land at cheaper prices as compared to the city. These have negatively impacted the peri-urban areas, especially in terms of the degradation of the natural environment and the dwindling nature of traditional livelihoods.

In the last couple of decades, rapid urban sprawl has resulted in drastic changes in land use and land cover. Narain et. al (2014) rightly contends, “the metropolitan area of the city has expanded...engulfing a vast stretch of the rural hinterland. Travelling in the outskirts along the transit corridors of NH31 and 37 clearly shows fast-developing peri-urban landscapes consisting of an intense mixture of agriculture, industry, commercial and residential uses. Much agricultural land and several wetlands have been filled to give space to high rise apartments.” These factors have not only disrupted the natural ecosystem but also forced many tribal communities to sell off their land and move from the urban fringe areas. Urban development has eroded the traditional land uses and occupations of the local people. The areas in and around the *Deepor Beel* are in a state of degradation due to massive urban development and the rapidly expanding city’s built-up area (Ibid 2014).

Studies show that the growth of the unplanned city has triggered a lot of urban problems in the city and Guwahati like any other cities in India experiences amassive jolt of bad planning vis-à-vis urbanization (Patowary and Sarma, 2018, Desai, et. al. 2014). Against this background, the study examines the effects of urbanisation in the areas around the *DeeporBeel* located at the fringe of Guwahati city. It is divided into four main sections. Section One deals with the introduction and sets out an understanding of the peri-urban areas. Section two discusses an overview of the study area, data collection and analysis. Section three presents a brief understanding about the communities residing in the villages near *DeeporBeel* and their history of migration. Further, it also examines the impacts of urbanisation on changing patterns of livelihoods and various socio-economic transformations. Section four draws conclusions based on policy implications. The study argues that peri-urbanisation presents both challenges and opportunities for development for the local communities. As traditional livelihood diminishes as a result of urban sprawl, new economic opportunities have also evolved.

Methodology

Overview of the Study Area

The study was conducted in three villages located on the periphery of *DeeporBeel*, namely, Kalitapara, Mikirpara and Deosotal villages. The selection of the study area was based on the proximity to rapidly urbanizing Guwahati city as a result of which the area has undergone massive transformations. These three villages come under the MikirparaChakardo revenue circle and are located on the western side of *DeeporBeel*. The villagers are peasants, though the younger generations have moved out of agriculture as a way of livelihood in the present times, because of their dwindling traditional occupations. The intersections of caste and tribes make these villages rich in terms of their traditional knowledge systems and practices. The MikirparaChakrado revenue village is under the Kamrup Metropolitan district of Assam and the Azara revenue circle. Located around the *Deeporbeel*, the settlements under the revenue village are inhabited by communities across different caste and tribal groups. The Kalitapara village today comprises 26 households and continues their livelihood with agriculture. Mikirpara village is situated on the western side of the *Deeporbeel*. The village has around 45 households which include people from different communities like the Mikirs (Karbis), Kalitas and Bodos. Similarly, Deosotal, has a mixed demographic profile with 55 Karbi and 35 Nepali households.

DeeporBeel is a permanent freshwater lake and the largest Beel in the Brahmaputra

valley of Lower Assam (ASTEC, 2016). Among the two other Ramsar sites in the northeastern region of India, *Deepor Beel* is the only Ramsar site in Assam. It is located about 10 km southwest of Guwahati city in the Kamrup Metropolitan district of Assam. There are traditional fishing and peasant communities inhabiting many villages located around the *Beel*. The *Beel* and its adjacent villages fall under Azara revenue circle of the Kamrup-metropolitan district. National highway 37 (NH-37) is on the northern side of the Beel and touches its periphery at different places like Dharapur, Azara. Different institutions such as Gauhati University, Assam Engineering College, Assam Ayurvedic College, and Forest School are located on the Northern side of the wetland (ASTEC, 2016). *Deepor Beel* is ecologically an integral part of Rani and Garbhanga Reserve forests (Mikirpara-Chakardo Micro Plan, 2017, Saikia, 2019). In the present times, the dynamics of economic growth and urbanisation have an ambiguous impact on the wetland and deteriorated it to a substantial extent. While being located as a peri-urban area, the areas around the wetland have been degraded due to various developmental factors such as large-scale encroachment, population pressure, landfilling and conversion to other land uses, settings up of hotels, industries like brick kilns, and construction of the building. In emerging peri-urban areas, the issues of land, traditional patterns of livelihood, development, and rural-urban interface have presented serious nexus of conflict.

Data Collection and Analysis

The overall methodology of the study is based on qualitative research methods obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data directly gathered from field and data collection methods included focus group discussion, structured/semi-structured interviews using interview schedule, in-depth interviews/ discussions, direct observation, oral narratives of the communities, and an interview guide. It must be mentioned that the methodology of the present study has to be flexible to some extent to deal with the sensitive issues in the field. Thus, mixed methods of data collection have been adopted for gaining deeper insights of the problem under study. The study made use of snowball and purposive sampling methods to select respondents. While secondary data is collected from books, journal articles newspaper articles, web publications etc.

The fieldwork for the study was conducted for a period of 4 months from November 2020 to March 2021. It is to mention that due to the prevailing COVID 19 pandemic in the state, a prolonged fieldwork could not be conducted as there were COVID protocols of the state related to travel and safety measures. The researchers also had

to rely mainly on alternative methods to gather data such as telephonic interviews and discussions with some of the stakeholders.

The significance of the present study lies in the fact that there is dearth of sociological research studies on the growth of peri-urbanisation and its impact on the communities in Assam in general and Guwahati in specific. There are little or no studies on the dynamics of peri-urbanisation of the areas around the Guwahati city. The focus of much of the available scientific research is on the ecological impact of rapid urban sprawl on *DeeporBeel*. During the last decade, the city of Guwahati has expanded enormously as a result of rapid urbanisation. The city's boundaries are also continuously expanding to the adjacent areas to accommodate the development needs of urbanisation. Though most of the adjacent areas around the city are rural in the present context, these areas reveal the characteristics of peri-urban interfaces, that is, the existence of both urban and rural linkages (Narain and Nischal 2007). In the proximity to Guwahati city, the rural areas emerged as peri-urban areas with major environmental and socio-economic transformations. In this context, the sociological study aims to understand such transformations and challenges in three villages located near the *DeeporBeel*.

Communities and their Settlement: A Brief History

The history of human settlement around *DeeporBeel* has not been documented. There are mostly scientific and environmental studies to understand the changes in the wetland. The literature available on the history of human settlement around the *beel* is rather thin. There has been little or no sociological research to understand the history of migration of the communities, their livelihood, culture, and recent changes. Therefore, the researchers had to rely on the oral narratives from the field. The data reveals that people from the villages under study have largely migrated from the nearby areas

Although there are traditional fishing communities that have been dependent on the *beel* for subsistence, there are also communities that are traditionally peasants. For example, Keotpara village located towards the northern side of the *beel* is traditionally a fishing community. While the oral narratives from the villagers in the study area, viz, Kalitapara, Mikirpara and Deosatol reflect that these villages were traditionally peasant. Flood and erosion pushed them to the areas adjacent to the *beel* during the 1950s in search of secured land and livelihood. However, being peasants did not cease them from accessing the water body and being affected by its precarity in recent times.

One of the respondents from Deosatal village (situated on the western side of the *Deeporbeel*) narrates his personal anecdote. He recalls the process of relocation from the native village (located on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra where floods were perennial). According to him thenatural push added to the brevity of time and forced people to migrate. He recalls the help that they received from an influential elderly from *DeeporBeel*(whom he fondly refers to as a *Mukhia*) and his support towards their settlement. On hearing the underpinning natural disasters in the forms of landlessness and flood the *Mukhia* welcomed them to the village and in return demanded their labour and financial contribution towards the construction of the local school and temple in the village. The migrants were allowed to settle in an uphill locally called a *tila*. However, today the *tila* no longer exists inthe village as it has flattened and has become plain, but it continues the name. As far as his memory goes there were 10 such families who have migrated into the village and have settled there during the 1960s.

Kalitapara village presently comprises 26 households with agriculture as a primary source of livelihood. The respondents from this village stressed the process of migration and the brevity of time like the previous respondent but did not acknowledge any help received from anyone. They narrate that the process was initiated by their forefathers who found land around the water body fertile and suitable for agricultural activities. The process was prolonged as they recall their fathers crossing the beel regularly during monsoons and engage in various agricultural activities for the season. Albeit the movement was crucial for sustenance yet was treacherous as the water body was double its present size. It is then that the villagers decided to relocateand settlement in the fertile pockets of the waterbody.

While people from Kalitapara and Deosotal recall a history of migration, the villagers from Mikirpara cease from remembering any shared narrative on migration. A strong narrative claim that the Karbis who were formally known as Mikirs have been the original settlers in the area, locally they are also called the *bhumiputra* (sons of the soil). One of the respondents brings into focus the accounts of Tarun Ram Phukan in his *SikaroroDinolipi* (Hunting Diaries) where he documents the Karbi settlements. While a few respondents asserted that their ancestors may have migrated, they held themselves back fromsharing any such narrative as shared by the respondents from the two villages.

Such narratives from the villagers challenge the larger polemic of human settlement and encroachment in the larger area of the *beel*. There is a constant struggle

between the villagers and the landowners. Landlessness among the villagers is a critical issue analysed in the field. The binaries of land and landlessness are points of constant anxiety for people in the area. The traditional understanding of land did not include the process of its documentation (*matipatta*) till the last decade. The issue of land documentation has crept up in the area since 2011 when the villagers were asked to produce legal documents for the land that they were working on for years. This was the first major bolt to their existence and identity. The land which they felt belonged to them has now been registered in name of a person who does not belong to the area. The coming of the new landowner was appalling for the villagers. While the new owner has made many promises it is extremely difficult for the villagers to trust. The villagers also highlighted a nexus between the *Marwari* businessman (a metaphor used mostly for a non-Assamese businessman from the city, does not necessarily include only people from the *Marwari* community) and the local landowner. For the villagers, it is their ill fate that has pushed them away from their soil. Due to their inability to produce proper land documents they also do not have any legal claim over the land.

The only way of land legitimacy is through the production of legal documents which the villagers fail to produce. Desai et.al. aptly (2014) state,

“Guwahati’s hills have gradually been settled by different socio-economic groups... The displacement of tribals from Guwahati’s plains led many of them to move to the hills. Tribals displaced by development projects as well as natural calamities from elsewhere in Assam as well as those fleeing from ethnic conflicts in rural parts of Assam who migrated to Guwahati also preferred to live in the hills... because of the lack of vacant lands in the plains and the high cost of land and housing in the informal sector in the plains... it is the poorer groups living on the Reserve Forest lands in the hills that have recently borne the brunt of the state’s denial of land rights.”

Traditional occupations vis-à-vis Changing Livelihoods

The communities are indigenous peasants who have been solely dependent on agriculture for sustenance. Since depredation of crops by elephants is common in these villages, the villagers had to eventually stop the cultivation of *Sali*ⁱⁱ crop. However, with increasing urban sprawl, these villages have witnessed tremendous transformations in the land-use patterns from agriculture to non-farm activities in recent years. Elderlies from Kalitapara village recollect that besides the cultivation of paddy, they were also engaged in Jute cultivation. Jute was a good source of income for many of the villagers for years as there was a market and demand for

jute and its byproducts. Over the years, however, the demand for jute has declined and also the skills that the villagers owned in terms of making the products have waned. While the villagers (from Kalitapara) were not directly involved in any activities with the *DeeporBeel* like fishing, the *beel* did provide them supplementary resources for their everyday activities. The *meteka* (Water Hyacinth) from the *beel* was also used by the villagers to make baskets for storing vegetables and fruits. The waterbody also acted as a bridge bringing the villagers closer to the nearest townships. However, today there are concrete roads that connect the villages and townships. They rue that the development of concrete roads has in a sense pushed the youths (emotionally) away from the *beel*. Although, the village youths do not have the same emotional connection with the *beel* as that the elderly villagers, they wish to use the *beel* as a source of income. The discussions with the youths in three villages reveal that the availability of the internet has exposed them to various new ideas on the constructive uses of the wetland (*beel*) and potential eco-tourism. However, they lack the essential expertise to pursue the same. In this regard, the government has taken several initiatives on eco-tourism in the area which has further reified the arguments of the youths.

At the village level, a Micro-Planⁱⁱⁱ has been implemented in the year 2017 by the Mikirpara-Chakardo Eco-Development Committee (EDC) under the aegis of the Forest Department. The village development plan is based on the objectives of enhancing livelihoods for the local communities as well as biodiversity conservation. The micro-plans are an integral part of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme which aims for the active participation of the community members in their development. The primary aim of such a plan is to link local forest-based resources to local needs. But residents in these villages regret that besides a few promises and meetings held at the village level there are no concrete steps taken towards developing the area as a centre for eco-tourism. The steps have been rather limited.

The youths have started several small businesses like tea shops and *gumtis* (small shops, selling local merchandise, vegetables etc.). However, with the pandemic, the tourist footfall went down, and the sources of alternative livelihood have also gone down. The other important source of livelihood was agriculture and like many parts of the country, the area too has issues with irrigation. It is mostly rainfed and is completely dependent on rain. Apart from irrigational issues, the apathy towards agriculture is due to land alienation because of various developmental projects like roads, railways etc.

Impact of Urbanisation

The rapid expansion of Guwahati city has led to crucial transformations of the urban peripheries. As mentioned, the peri-urbanisation presents both challenges and opportunities for development for the local communities. This has been witnessed in the context of the field area where rapid urbanisation has led to huge transformations in land use patterns and the nature of traditional livelihood. However, with these transformations, new opportunities have also evolved for the communities. Over a period *Deeporbeel* has developed into a tranquil space, which lures many living in the nearby areas. Either to break the monotony of urban life or to spend time in the wilderness they come around the *beel* and spend some time in solitude, they either take a walk or a run. Discussions with some of the respondents from the villages highlight the positive impact of *Deeporbeel* being developed as a tourist spot. The respondents added that the area has opened many new business avenues for the unemployed youths. The small tea/snack stalls opened by these youths is a silver lining to their dwindling income sources. Besides tea and snacks, they are also making a living by selling local vegetables and coconuts to the visitors. However, due to the outbreak of the Covid -19 pandemic in the state, its protocols have pushed these youths toward shutting down their business.

A young boy and his mother owns a tea stall near the *beel*. The mother describes their drudgery. They started the shop in December 2018 as the footfall is highest in the months of December and January. Gradually along with tea and snacks, they also started selling local vegetables (which they explain was a great hit). They could easily make an income of 200-500 rupees on a day, that is, approximately 15,000 rupees a month. But everything came to a halt with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The mother asks: What will happen to people like us?

The fieldwork reveals there is an inclination towards other sources of income generation. For many youths, engaging as daily wage laborer is more fruitful than toiling in the agrarian field. A young respondent from the area narrates more than agriculture or dependence on the *beel* youths have started to work in the warehouses. Over the last one decade the villages have seen mushrooming of warehouses. While the owners do not reside in the villages, they constantly need help and support from the youths in the village to carry on their everyday business. For days work the youth gets an average of 500-600 rupees, while this is not a permanent source of income the young boys are happy with it as they do not have to travel across villages and cities in search of employment. Further, he contends that the area has undergone a massive transformation, as more and more people

started moving away from agriculture. Apart from the normal apathy towards agriculture, the youths have started to withdraw from agriculture because of the elephant raids into the paddy fields. The entire area was an elephant corridor, and the elephants would come down in search of food and water. But the construction of the concrete road (connecting Lokhora- Basistha), and railway track upto Jogighopa led to the shrinking of the large elephant corridor around *DeeporBeel*. The Rani-Garbhangha reserve forest and the stretch passing through *DeeporBeel* is one of the most critical wildlife corridors. The railway track which passes through this corridor has become a deathtrap for the wild elephant, hence posing a threat to their survival^{iv}. Narain et.al. (2014) contend, “(I)nvasion of city spaces into the rural hinterland has disrupted the micro-ecosystem of forest, wetlands and hilly landscapes. Encroachments into the forest areas either for residential or commercial purposes have increased soil erosion. There are emerging problems of hill cutting, soil erosion, siltation and associated urban flooding.”

In general, the respondents felt that the Government of Assam is indifferent towards area. They remember how time and again several governments have failed to address the issues of *DeeporBeel*. In an online interview with the Fridays for Future (Guwahati Chapter, July 2021) a respondent from the Kalitapara village referred to the chief secretary's report of 1989 where the Government showed disinterest in converting *DeeporBeel* area into a Bird Sanctuary. The proximity of the area with Guwahati Airport was the main reason behind the decision. As navigation of flights was a major problem due to possible collision of birds. However, the state authorities did not refrain from construction the railway track which connected Kamakhya-Jogighopa. The railway track not only had an adverse effect on the elephants but also impacted the agrarian economy of the area. The villagers (who were in their 40s and 50s) fondly recollect their memories of seeing elephants cross the area, of them coming down to the water body for food and walking back to the nearby Rani Reserve Forest. At present, the railway track passing through the elephant corridor has stifled the free passage of wild elephants into the area. Stories of man and animal conflicts were almost nil in the area, however, today there are instances of such conflicts. With a shrunk habitat, dearth of food, the elephants started entering the villages in search of food and the process started destroying many paddy fields.

Besides, unabated construction activities and fragmentation of habitats have also forced the wild animals to intrude the human habitation. The villages located around the urban peripheries of Guwahati city towards Chandrapur, *DeeporBeel* and Rani-Garbhangha areas have been continuously facing human-animal conflicts.

Some of these areas are crucial elephant corridors and the fast-expanding developmental activities have resulted in dwindling forest covers. Moreover, the rapidly expanding city's built-up areas have not only resulted in depletion of natural forests but also degradation of natural water bodies, especially the wetlands. *Deepporbeel* is one of such natural water bodies located in the urban periphery of Guwahati city. In the last couple of years, the areas around the *beel* have been degraded mainly due to anthropogenic threats such as heavy landfills for construction, big residential complexes, development of road network, industries, waste dumping, etc (Narain et. al. 2014).

The area has many stone quarries as well as warehouses owned by the rich Marwari businessmen from Guwahati city. The local youths are of the view that these businessmen have started fortifying the village along with giving employment to the villagers. Many youths have started taking up employment at the local warehouses as daily wage workers.

A local youth laments, apart from the already mentioned reasons for the decline in agriculture activities, the lack of proper irrigation facilities is also a significant cause. Unlike the traditional system in which the youths would clean the water bodies in small groups, the villagers today have stopped clearing the waterbodies and the wetlands which in turn have impeded the natural drainage system. They are of the view that there is no fund to initiate the practice of cleaning and the state is also not responsive in managing the water bodies. At the local level, few villagers used to get engaged in cleaning tasks occasionally. However, due to bleak benefits, they also gave up to the process of cleaning. Hence, these factors are held responsible for the withdrawal of traditional fishing practices as an alternate source of livelihood generation.

It has been observed that landlessness among the villagers has also accentuated the process of out-migration, especially among the youths. Many youths from the nearby villages have started moving out to the nearby townships. With the boom in the real estate, schemes and factories under the Advantage Assam Scheme of the Government of Assam, the young boys find non-farm activities more alluring. They also find moving to bigger cities like Delhi, and Bangalore more lucrative.

Thus, it is worth noting that the peri-urban transformation is an interrelated process. Transformations in the urban areas trigger changes in its peripheries. (Ansah and Chigbo, 2020). During the last couple of years, the rapid urban sprawl of Guwahati city has induced various socio-economic and ecological changes in the study area. The emergence of the *DeepporBeel* area into peri-urban exhibits changes in the

traditional patterns of livelihood, traditional occupations, and ecological and various environmental challenges. The discussions with the local villagers revealed that the rapid urbanisation of the Guwahati city in the last couple of years and its continuous interactions with the peripheries have transformed the areas around the *DeeporBeel*. Similarly, around Guwahati city, there are areas which till a few years back were typically rural. However, during the last couple of years, these rural areas have significantly transformed into peri-urban areas with considerable infrastructural development. For instance, Amingaon, Azara, Chandrapur, Panikhaiti, Sonapur, Changasari, etc are some of the emerging peri-urban areas around the Guwahati city. There are several reserve forests located in the peripheries of Guwahati. As a result of rapid urban growth, these reserve forests are also facing potential from economic development, population growth, commercialisation, and so on. The peri-urban areas can be transformed into potentials spaces with multi-functional (Wandl and Magoni, 2017) dynamics with planned, innovative, and sustainable urban planning. Urban planning and development must consider the dynamics of the peri-urban areas, the communities, and their traditional living. The fieldwork reveals that the peri-urban areas are being inevitably affected by the expansion of Guwahati city leading to a host of negative impacts on the traditional communities, their livelihood, as well as the ecology of the areas. It has been observed that the development such as construction works, industries, commercial complexes, etc. are sometimes unwanted by the communities in the urban peripheries because these tend to invade their traditional spaces. This has also created tensions between the urban areas and their peripheries. Hence, it calls for strategic planning and management of the peri-urban areas. Wandl and Magoni (2017) lament, “(A)n integrated approach is required to which can address environmental protection, the provision of ecosystem services and the creation of green infrastructure alongside local economic development, and the maintenance of the quality of life”.

In the last decade, state decided to undertake the project of saving the city of Guwahati from flash floods. Under this campaign, the water from the rivers of Bharalu, Bahini and Basistha were to be released at *DeeporBeel*. The water from these rivers also brings along silt and pollutants which causes massive water pollution and eventually affects the aquatic ecosystem of the beel. A similar story was also crafted around the dumping ground. To beautify the city of Guwahati the peri-urban area of *DeeporBeel* has been selected as a dumping site, the Boragaon dumping site right next to a Ramsar site is an example of unplanned development.

Conclusion

The proximity of the field locations to Guwahati city has led to various socio-economic transformations in recent years. While the extension of the city spaces has created new avenues for the people in the peri-urban areas, it also has constraints. Rapid urban sprawl poses severe threats to the peri-urban communities, such as the high cost of living as a result of the development of the urban economy (Afriyie et. al. 2014), declining agriculture-based livelihoods, the emergence of various non-farm activities, commercialisation of land, other developmental activities, etc. As discussed, establishments of various non-farm developmental activities in these areas, such as a brick kiln, quarrying, construction works, companies, etc. have opened up multiple income-based opportunities for the communities. The meaningful state interventions are important for sustainable development of the peri-urban areas so as to ensure a balanced development of both urban and its peripheries. As the Guwahati city is fast expanding, land in peri-urban areas are also rising high in demand. The present situation warrants the implementation of an appropriate state land-use policy to address the sustainable use of land in peri-urban areas. Unplanned expansion of the city may trigger a lot of problems for the peri-urban communities.

The fieldwork reveals that the villagers do consider that the area has a lot of potential for alternative livelihood generation. Training programmes for skill development for the local villagers must be created and the state must support the “diversification of the peri-urban economy and the development of the non-farm income-generating activities” (Afriyie et. al 2014). Also, “(P)eriurban agriculture should also be encouraged...to ensure sustained urban and peri-urban food supply” (Afriyie et. al 2014). There is scope for the overall development of the area vis-à-vis the generation of alternative sources of livelihood for the peri-urban poor. For instance, the local youths from the area are well versed with the local/ migratory species of birds that flock around the *beel* during the winter season. Proper training from the government can help these youths to generate an income through birding. Also, as decided by the government if the *Deepor Beel* beautification project takes shape, this can be of immense help to the communities and will open up employment opportunities. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of livelihoods, it becomes crucial to address these issues with a rigour. The state can also work in tandem with the local level bodies like village development bodies, Eco Tasks Forces, and Self Help Groups and incorporate people across caste, tribe and gender towards developing a sustainable model.

Notes:

ⁱBeel means wetland or large aquatic body in Assamese. It is one of the two Ramsar sites in the state.

ⁱⁱ*Sali Dhan* is a traditional later maturing variety of paddy in Assam.

ⁱⁱⁱ Assam Forest Department's Micro Plan prepared by the Mikirpara-Chakardo ECO-Development Committee (EDC). According to the JFM Guidelines of 2000, the Forest Officers and EDC should prepare a micro plan after having detailed PRA exercise in the village. The micro-plans of the EDC are to be incorporated into the working plans of the Forest Department.

^{iv} <https://www.tribuneindia.com/2010/20100822/spectrum/main1.htm> (accessed on 19th July, 2021).

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Article: Politics and the Peasantry in Assam- Locating the responses in Doyang Reserved Forest

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Politics and the Peasantry in Assam- Locating the responses in Doyang Reserved Forest

--- Indrani Talukdar

Abstract

The peasantry in Assam and Northeast India has been the subject of a plethora of academic literature, more so on its links to the ethnic-religious movements, yet less on its internal politics. It would be erroneous to assume that the peasantry is divorced from the wider social-political milieu or that it is dependent on the same. At the same time, it is also influenced by the process of globalisation brought along by the Indian state. However, the peasantry has its forms of politics that not only negotiate with, but also challenge the dominant structures in place. This politics takes myriad forms, ranging from everyday forms of resistance to organised protests. This analysis of its politics contributes to rural-agrarian protest movements, stemmed in multiple histories of migration, peasantisation, border conflict as well as ethnic conflict, yet it is missing in contemporary academic discourse. This paper shall attempt to draw on such insights to portray the peasantry as responsive rather than reactive to state and wider ethnic politics.

Keywords: Peasant, Reserved Forests, Northeast India, Peasant Politics.

Introduction

The discourse of peasant politics in the context of Assam and Northeast India rarely highlights the everyday instances of resistance and their transformative power in terms of state policies for the people. Analysing and placing the everyday peasant politics with respect to historical development of the nature and character of the state, helps us to understand how power operates and devolves through the institutional mechanisms in place, and what form of resistance is shaped around it. The idea is to converse beyond the understanding of the peasantry as ‘dependent’ on the outside world for their own politics and instead look at it as an autonomous unit capable of building its own narratives of resistance located in everyday experiences. What thus constitutes everyday peasant politics in an extremely heterogeneous location such as the Northeast, and why do the peasants take recourse to it instead of organisational politics? What is the relationship between

everyday politics and organisational politics? How do these forms of politics affect state policies and interventions? What is the need to understand the different forms of politics that the peasantry undertake? Such questions need close examination to understand how the peasantry addresses its grievances against the hegemonic structures in place and how and when there are negotiations.

As far as the actual potential of the peasantry for successful revolution is concerned, Marx believed that it would be the proletariat that would usher in a revolution. Even though he ascribed a secondary social class status to the peasantry that exists outside the economic class system of the capitalist class system, he saw in it a potential ally of the proletariat working-class movement. The peasantry, he thought, would be drawn into the revolution through growing capitalist penetration into the French countryside, and thus would become the 'rural proletariat'. He notes, "... the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organisation among them, they do not form a class" (Marx 1951 [viz., Marx & Engels, 1950 Selected Writings, Moscow], Vol I, p. 303; quoted in Shanin, 1971, p. 23.) reflecting on the weakness of the peasant structure and values to constitute a revolutionary consciousness. James Scott argues the contrary, he maintains that the proletariat is fatally compromised because it is 'organically linked' to the capitalist class, whereas the peasantry is not similarly linked to a superior class because of its relative economic autonomy as a food producer (Scott, 1977, pp. 196-197) and cultural autonomy stemming from its social base, the village community, which is both functionally and historically prior to the city (ibid, p. 276). Mao however categorises the vast number of peasants in the countryside with the term 'semi-proletariat' who possess the strongest of tendencies to involve in revolution.

Scott (1977) mentions what he calls 'everyday forms of peasant resistance' by which he refers to the challenges that the peasant put up against those who seek to extract labour, food, rent and taxes and interest from them. These challenges are in the form of foot-dragging, arson, sabotaging, dissimulation, feigned ignorance and so on. These forms of peasant resistance however do not qualify to constitute a peasant 'movement', for it lacks the organisation required for a movement in conventional understanding. However, Guha (1983) would argue that small acts of violence even though do not constitute a movement, they at times amount to turning things upside down for the dominant society, an act of 'inversion' or 'ambiguity' (p 77). At the same time, he contends that some peasant insurgencies lacked neither the leadership nor the aim or some rudiments of a programme; however, they may have lacked the attributes of the matured and sophisticated historically more

advanced movements in the 20th century (1983, p. 10; cited in Shah, 1990, p. 80). In so far as the political economy of the peasantry is concerned, the concept of ‘embeddedness’ is a viable lens to assess the process by which the ‘peasant’ is to be analysed as part of a larger community.

This paper, an outcome of fieldwork conducted in the Doyang reserved forest in 2019, shall look at the politics associated with the peasantry situated in a conflict-prone zone in Assamⁱ. The data was collected through in-depth interviews with peasants who have been a part of the land rights movement over the period. The paper locates the Doyang reserved forest in historiography of land relations in forest areas and border conflict. Adopting a qualitative perspective, the paper seeks to address the gap in the available literature on peasant politics in Assam, particularly with respect to micro-politics which otherwise appear banal but possess increasing significance for the study of protests and movements. The paper shall delve exclusively into the ‘unofficial’ politics of the peasantry in the Doyang reserved forest rather than provide a linear historical description of the land rights movement itself due to limited space.

The Doyang reserved forest situated in the contested Assam-Nagaland border is the context for the study. A geopolitically strategic area, it is exposed to multiple streams of political movements. First, it was declared a reserved forest during the colonial period but today the area is dotted with widespread human settlements. However, till date, none of the communities, irrespective of the size of landholding or time of settlement, possess permanent land rights. Second, it is situated in a geopolitically sensitive location, sharing an inter-state border between Assam and Nagaland, which is disputed and also home to the longest-running autonomy demand in India since independence. Third, the human settlement itself is as heterogeneous in terms of social composition as the demography of Assam itself. And fourth, Doyang also hosts a unique history of the land rights movement in Assam, one that began in the 20th century and continues till the contemporary period. In the 21st century, it has contributed to the emergence of the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samity in Assam, one of the most prominent and significant mass organisations or a people’s organisations, that has also forayed into regional politics by floating a political party of the people for the 2021 state legislative assembly elections.

In order to arrive at a more detailed analysis of the rural-agrarian movements, it is essential that we explore the theoretical underpinnings to locate how resistance to the state manifests through the routine, seemingly banal instances. The idea is to

look beyond the control and allocation of resources by political parties, lobbyists, state authorities and agencies, and individuals trying to influence government officials and policies. Politics in this case refers and connotes to the control, allocation, production and use of resources, and the values and ideas underlying those activitiesⁱⁱ. Resources include land, water, money, power, and education among other tangible and intangible things. Behaviour regarding producing, distributing, and using resources can range from cooperation and collaboration to discussions and debates, to bargains and compromises to conflicts and violence. With this definition, the paper seeks to justify a more nuanced conceptualisation of politics, in contrast to a more traditional view of politics as an institutional domain i.e. of governments and states. The idea is to look beyond the control and allocation of resources by political parties, lobbyists, state authorities and agencies, and individuals trying to influence government officials and policies. In doing so, the paper intends to facilitate bridge the hiatus with respect to theoretical traditions and rural-agrarian studies of the 21st centuryⁱⁱⁱ. This paper would carry forward the idea/understanding of/ peasants within the structural arrangements in place such as the relations of production and the policies that define these relations vis a vis the state, but in their conscious deliberate exercise and experience of agency.

The case of the Doyang reserved forest

The Doyang reserved forest was named so under the Bengal Forest Act of 1886. The term ‘Doyang’ itself is a Bodo word, ‘doi’ meaning ‘water’ and ‘yang’ meaning ‘swirl’, referring to the Doyang river which runs through Nagaland and enters Golaghat. The land, even though was fertile for wet-rice cultivation, historically witnessed a scarce population towards the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as there were frequent skirmishes between both the Ahom and Kachari kingdoms. The British government classed this area under the reserved forest category, and for the extraction of labour services to maintain the forest resources, the first forest villages were established in 1905. The seventy- seventy-five families thus settled were given the responsibility of conservation of timber trees. In 1951-52, the Forest Department established four *taungya*^{iv} villages with makeshift residences in Torani so that labour could be extracted by the Department as and when necessary for the plantation and conservation of the forest lands; in this manner the people had to render services to the department for twelve days annually. In return, the families were given five-ten bighas of land for cultivation to derive their subsistence.

In 1950-52 under the aegis of the Socialist Party, landless and marginal peasants

from Golaghat, Sivsagar and Jorhat districts mobilised to occupy plantation lands for the landless cultivators. In this manner, a process of ‘encroachment’ on forest land began to shape the socio-political dynamics of the Doyang forest (Saikia, 2008). This process of ‘encroachment’ gained momentum in the early 1960s, as a result of which the Forest Department began to take up eviction drives seriously. In 1968, the first-ever political struggle for land rights in Doyang was organised by the Left-leaning activists. In 1973, a small girl suffering from chickenpox died during one eviction drive in the monsoon season, and this incident intensified the protests against the Forest Department. The peasants’ demand was not for permanent land rights during that period, but the right to cultivation on the lands occupied by the marginal families. Meanwhile, incessant mobilisation and support from the Left-wing and All Assam Students Union led to the election of Sonewar Bora, a socialist leader as the Agriculture Minister under the Janata government in 1978. It was under his initiative that the habitants of the Doyang Reserve Forest began to press for permanent land rights from the state. The then Chief Minister Golap Borbora also agreed to open the Doyang Reserved Forest to the peasants who had settled there in the post-independence period. Hence the political mobilisation brought along a certain sense of security for the hapless peasants as there was a discontinuation of the eviction drives. During the same time, one Land Settlement Committee was constituted, and it began to measure and map (like a census) the demography and land possession of habitats in Doyang. However, the short-lived Janata government failed to deliver any permanent solution to their problems.

Meanwhile, Merapani in Doyang witnessed the severest of border clashes in 1985. Over the next decades, a series of developments took place with respect to the land entitlement movement. Local skirmishes with the state and its institutions continued. Towards the beginning of 2000, local leaders Soneshwar Narah, Hem Phukan and others tried to revive the protests at Doyang and another place called Tengani which was also prone to eviction drives by the state. It was at this juncture that Akhil Gogoi, the face of KMSS, mobilised the people in large numbers, and three issues gained centre stage- border conflict, granting of land titles and flood relief. Gogoi unified the peasant movements in Doyang and neighbouring Tengani, and in 2004 the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samity was formed. Since then the organisation have taken up a number of issues, such as addressing flawed governance and developmental projects, land rights for the indigenous, etc. It has also floated a political party for the 2021 state elections in Assam named ‘*Raijor Dal*’ or the People’s Party in 2020.

The narrative of people’s resistance in Doyang is, thus, one of a struggle for life

and livelihood of a community often defined as ‘forest dwellers, as well as ‘forest encroachers’ who have been put into a troubling trajectory of the struggle for livelihood under the state-defined discourse of development and conservation (Dutta, 2009). It is also a unique example of ‘universality in diversity where a community diverse in terms of caste, tribe, religion and ethnicity has been forced to live in unity for the cause of life and livelihood. It also reveals how a community struggling for a ‘constitutional right’ i.e. the right to life as guaranteed by Article 21 of the constitution of India indulges in ‘unconstitutional’ means i.e. forced occupation of the reserved forest and its resources and also establishes a parallel form of government amidst the faulty trajectory of ‘ecological conservation’. It also shows the bankruptcy of the post-colonial government and its inability to resolve the contradiction between ‘forests’ and ‘human’ as imposed by the colonial government (Dutta, 2009).

To contextualise the said contestations, the paper is divided into two sections. The first section examines the overarching structural changes in polity and in general the response of the peasants as part of the land rights movement in Doyang. The second section would shed some light on the ways peasant politics operate on an everyday basis, and how these small acts challenge not only the understanding of organisational politics but also the distribution and devolution of power in peasant society.

The state and resistance

The nature and character of the state have undergone a transformation over the decades, and needless to say, this impinges on its citizens and populations residing within its territory. As a direct outcome of the neo-liberal economic order, there is a push to both localise (in response to decentralisation of state) and internationalise (in response to globalisation) the actions of rural social movements. We witness therefore the rise of networks of horizontal solidarity, polycentric movements to confront the ever-changing structural threats posed by the state. The protests and movements are no more directly against the commercialisation of forest resources but related to a broad set of agricultural demands such as better access to markets, employment, subsidies for agricultural production and so on (Baumann, 1998, p. 104), most of which called into question the governing role of state-market-society nexus.

Often, there are two sets of contenders proposing their agendas with respect to natural resources. The environmental or conservationist approach is used to challenge the economic struggle for livelihood in forest lands either in public

debates or state rhetoric. For instance, an organisation called the '*Xeuji Xomobay*' (Green Cooperative) was established in Doyang by local Congress supporters and members who argued that increasing encroachment on forest lands are harming nature and that it leads to widespread deforestation. It was thereby a ploy to delegitimise the land rights movement in the name of conservation. Interestingly this issue has been appropriated in the charter of demands and agendas during the later stages by the KMSS who demand not only subsistence economy but also environmental conservation. Meaning, that more balanced conservation as well as sustenance of economic needs can only be possible at the hands of the local communities, rather than the private enterprises or centralised state control. For KMSS, this is *the* national interest.

The responses of the grass-root voices are thus shaped by the relative access to power structures, and the ability as well as the willingness of those structures to negotiate with the people. In terms of the experiences of the peasants residing inside forests, the presence of the state in its permeable form pervades the 'every day' of the habitants in the forest of Doyang. In 1985, due to an escalated conflict between the Assam and Naga police forces, central forces had been deployed to maintain law and order. Prior to this, the negotiating power of the residents with the Assam Police was relatively more. For instance, some the households began constructing permanent pucca houses even without official permission. Another interesting event that coincided with the Merapani conflict was the destruction of documents and records of 'criminals' accumulated at the Merapani police outpost in the process of conflict. Due to the bombing, the outpost caught fire and all resources were lost. In this process, some of the complaints registered against protesters during the land rights movement in the late 1970s disappeared in smoke, much to the relief of the poor villagers who were called to court at regular intervals even after 1980. Now they could go scot-free. With the positioning of the central forces, however, the interaction between the state and the citizens increasingly assumed a 'distant' nature, yet the former's presence exerted a more rigorous and stringent influence among the people. Residents are, for instance, barred from constructing two-storeyed houses and strict tabs are enforced on the movement of the hills and valley people through check gates. Meanwhile, to construct a new pucca two-storeyed house at the 'disputed site,' especially closer to the Naga hills, residents now have to seek permission from the DC office, not only in Assam but also in Nagaland.

The state thus attempts to not only exhibit 'concern' for its citizens at the grass-root level by seeking to involve them at the implementation level of policies, whilst

seemingly maintaining a dialogic relationship with them as stakeholders, but it retains its high handedness in almost all aspects of decision making. What is missing is a genuine engagement with grass-root level communities directly, instead of involving third parties, or manoeuvring through its local 'agents'. The market-led model of economic globalisation gives rise to the new notion of economic and political 'order' derived from the principles of the corporate organisation rather than representation accountability (Sheth, 2004). While at the same time the local authorities are in a position to negotiate with the local people and thus extend governance measures for their benefit, in lieu of political office of course, over the period it has been observed that their interventions mostly provide short term relief rather than long term security.

As such, the politics of claim making by different actors- state, environmentalists, habitants over the contested forest space in Doyang point out to three parallel processes in the contemporary period. First, the "multiple genealogies of belonging"^v imbibed over the last hundred years by colonisation, i.e. growth of plantation economy and subsequent forest policies, demographic changes in terms of in-migration due to displacement, the subsequent history of land-use and land cover changes as well as the post-colonial forest policies, that the state ignores. This also takes into account the narratives that negotiate and counter the dominant narratives of conflict between the hills and plains people. Second, the blurred boundary between forest and non-forest in Doyang. That is to say the contestation between the making of forest subject and the creation of disputed-area subject within the same geographical space by the state. Thirdly, the attempt to centralise control over forest space by ignoring the "multiple genealogies of belonging" through a state politics of decentralisation which adduces to ethnic history claiming over deemed non-forest space. And overall, the denial of property rights (economic justice) and provision of citizen rights in lieu of the former to the habitants in Doyang through education, health care, development of roads and other means of communication and so on.

The trajectory of Doyang's land rights movement, the demands of the people, on the other hand, have always been about the need for security of life and livelihood, one that can only be achieved through permanent land rights. As citizens, they are entitled to a bundle of rights, irrespective of caste-tribe-class affiliations, which the state provides in bits and pieces, community-wise. Residing along the border they are prone to a double pressure- from the state as 'illegal encroachers' in forest reserves while being legal citizens, and 'encroachers' in the much-coveted homeland politics of the Assam-Nagaland border. Nevertheless, there are a series

of negotiations, conflicts and resistance that the people put up with power structures. While these acts appear small and marginal, they constitute and enrich the discourse of peasant politics in many unconventional ways.

The outside of conventional peasant politics- locating the everyday

Locating the peasant with the agency of his/her aims to comprehend that politics is not something 'out there, far away from common people going on with their daily lives. Rather reinforce the understanding that politics is in the everyday. Everyday social institutions, be it family or religion, schools and universities also involve the control and allocation of resources. The question thereby is how do the common people negotiate with politics in their daily lives, without consciously attempting to challenge the state? From cracking jokes to passing snide comments in private on superior forms of authority, be it state officials or big peasants, or employers, one does indulge in politics. It necessarily involves the responses to positions of power and authority, be it traditional or rational-legal. Thus, all forms of power, be it state or non-state, are to be brought about within the fold of exercising politics. Power and politics are therefore the central organising themes in this section of the paper. Highlighting specific examples as well as narratives, an attempt would be made to delineate peasant politics in Doyang which is not only a conscious manifestation but also to a large extent autonomous compared to traditional party politics in any state. It is articulate and creative, and involves active participation of the common people in terms of identifying what is just and unjust!

An interviewee, an ex-AASU leader in Golaghat, chuckled and remarked during his interview-

*Doyang is probably the most politically vibrant place in Golaghat!
You will be taken aback by the kind of discussions they hold daily-
whether this one place should come under the development scheme,
or how to access and confront corrupt units of the public
distribution system.*

Discussions and debates retain the vibrancy of politics in Doyang as per the interviewee. The topics may range from access to land, wages, grains, availability of education, health care, based on the common values that people share pertaining to dignity of civil life, to the values underlying institutional arrangements in place denying them the basic economic right, i.e. right to own land/property. All of these may hardly feature in organised ways, but rather they appear in conversations at tea stalls, among guardians waiting outside schools forwards, in the fields, in the

offices. Politics therefore no longer solely remain within the confines of the government or its offices or limited precincts of elections and parties. The notable feature of this politics is also the banalness of everyday village life.

Politics of everyday experience or everyday forms of resistance among the peasantry have been outlined and analysed by a wide range of scholars, foremost among them Scott (1977), Guha (1983) and Chatterjee (1988). These authors have contributed immensely to understanding the moral economy and political consciousness of the peasants rooted in the community as the site of solidarity. They delve into the subject matter with a structural framework that talks about the networks of solidarity for resistance, while a more holistic approach to everyday politics including resistance and compliance is proposed by Kierkvliet (2009). Kierkvliet believes that these everyday practices have the potential to challenge and change the direction of national policies. The conscious conversations are rooted in the socially developed collectivised (not organised) understanding of what and how resources should be allocated. Questioning or revering the structural institutions of power and authority is the key take away from the understanding of politics. The awareness of political issues and social-economic problems of the villagers and the right to address the state on them illustrates the villagers' level of political awareness beyond the confines of elections. This is in stark contrast to what the likes of Hobsbawm (1973) and others defined peasants as rooted in a local community, isolated from the purview of political processes. Let us now briefly discuss and contextualise the conceptual forms of politics.

Kierkvliet discusses three types of politics- official, every day and advocacy. Official and advocacy politics have a plethora of conceptual as well contextual literature. Official politics involve the authorities in the organisation, be it a university or a family. Advocacy politics on the other hand take recourse to direct and concerted efforts to support, criticise and oppose authorities or the institutional arrangements in place. Everyday politics involve direct experiences and practices (rarely organised) of embracing, complying, evading, and adjusting to authoritative norms and rules pertaining to the production and allocation of resources. Often, informal and illegal activities practised by authoritative personnel may canvass as everyday politics, hence it is difficult to maintain a rigid distinction between the lot. Everyday politics may also serve as the precursor to advocacy politics; collective discussions may bring the people together and organise efforts to directly confront the authoritative measures in place. The example cited above by the said interviewee, of discussing the problems of local agents of free ration for the target population, have aided in the consolidation efforts to demand fairness and

transparency in the public distribution system by the KMSS. The similarity of experiences of the poor across the state of Assam also led the organisation to expose the prevailing rampant corruption of the government.

Often the people's ideas about the right way to allocate the resources are at odds with the state's. Thus, there emerges two sets of contenders- one which envisages the right to occupy, reside and own lands (irrespective of forest or non-forest lands) by virtue of leading a dignified life as a peasant, and the other *writ* of the state that banks on the accumulation of forest resources and dispossession of forest dwellers. For the former the forest happens to be in their vision of a cultivable landscape. To counter the state, there are numerous and banal attempts at seeking respite, as people are dependent on land and forest produce for their sustenance. These everyday peasant politics may take different forms. Everyday resistance involves little or no organisation; for instance, the nasty, derogatory remarks in private, jokes against the superiors be it their landlords, employers etc. Outward signs of acceptance of impoverishment, and exploitation are facades beneath which the peasants harbour alternative visions of how resources should be produced, distributed and used (Kerkvliet, 2009, p. 234). In spite of continuous repression by the state during the late 1960s and early 1970s, batches of displaced people continued to occupy the forest lands, driven by the belief and understanding that as humans and citizens they were entitled to basic rights, i.e. food, clothing and shelter. Irrespective of how many times the Forest Department broke down their huts, the people collectively built them again. This is an example of resistance. The resistance was not directly directed towards the authorities, but for their sustenance.

Often, these everyday resistances become important precursors of open, confrontational, advocacy forms of politics under favourable political circumstances. Or this may also happen with the emergence of leaders and groups who are able to 'frame' discontent and resistance in ways to confront the peasants' fear and collectively confront the authorities concerned. This method involves situating the local ideas and experiences of oppression with the broader ones. The consolidated organisational efforts of Soneswar Bora, Socialist Party and Janata Party, AASU, and the KMSS represents this form of advocacy politics building around everyday narratives of politics. Resistance thus essentially involves practices of subordinate peoples *against* superordinate. Let us consider the following narrative of an 85-year-old woman-

Sometime in 1996, the then MLA from Golaghat went to inspect the border situation. Learning about his arrival, Naga militants set fire

to the bridge over Selseli noi (rivulet). On that evening, we had guests at our place for dinner at Kulajan. When I heard the news of the attack, I blurted out saying that why should the state interfere in how we are living? If we pay the Nagas yearly or when they demand, they spare our houses and cattle. And this kind of fire does not happen. It was only after the guests left their identity was revealed to me. It turns out that I had blurted these statements in front of the MLA himself!

Without knowing the identity of the guest, this old lady was engaged in a discussion where she expressed her frustration against the state for interfering in the affairs of the village. This criticism was not directed at the authority per se, but a general comment on how poor people need to negotiate with a host of factors to live their lives without the intervention of the state, which comes more as an inconvenience in disguise rather than a knight/saviour. This appears as a conversation between the host and the guest who arrives at the former's residence without prior announcement, otherwise a common practice in rural Assam. Further, this also indicates how the issue of borders is viewed through the lens of security and strategic control by the state and government authorities as uncompromising or non-negotiable, but from the lens of the villagers, it is a daily narrative of adjustment and negotiation. Inter-state borders in the context of Northeast India thus illustrate the dual nature of human interactions- at the local level one of conflict and negotiation, at the macro level one of recorded discussions and debates with no permanent solution in place.

The second type of everyday politics conducive to the present study is that of *compliance*. everyday politics is not confined to the subordinate people only, but also super-ordinate aka big peasants, forest villagers whose form may not be resistance, but compliance, like for instance compliance with the idea of constitutional border making by the post-colonial state. For the forest villagers, big peasants and other dwellers/peasants (both superior and subordinate) the legitimate border is the one demarcated in 1963, abiding by the outlined plan in the post-independence period. The example of an ex-forest guard canvasses across official, every day as well as advocacy politics; in an official position, they were involved in the activities of the state, and in the process was also aware of the atrocities involved in the everyday life of the 'encroachers.' Sometimes they may also have passed a word in advance to the latter about the impending eviction drives. In an official position, they were party to a combination of both official politics (against

the state through activism) and everyday politics (by participating in discussions and debates with the villagers). It is thereby interesting to note that they joined the Janata Party as an organised political collective demanding land rights during their post-retirement life. This is one example of the all-encompassing and surpassing nature of forms of politics in Doyang.

Further examples of compliance with the regional government representative's decision to settle ethnic communities within the half-mile belt near the foothills of Naga hills. This compliance, in the beginning, was in the form of discussions rather than organised collective efforts indirect and overt form. At the same time, the decision to settle the ethnic families was also a result of everyday politics! In a way, the state tried to control the foothills from further occupation by the Naga villagers. To flag off, the same attitude is however missing for the relatively newer settlements of the Bengali Muslims; the solidarity of peasant-hood is missing in this community vitiated by the dominant discourse of ethnicised politics in the state^{vi}. What took place and has continued ever since is a cycle- wherein official politics may inform different forms of everyday politics, which in turn informs advocacy politics. On the other hand, the narratives and acts of cooperation between the communities across the inter-state border are also everyday resistances to the military-authoritative diktats of boundary making.

Structural constraints in the form of forest policies, and constitutional border making resonate in the discourse of policy and lawmakers, the political consciousness of the common man as evident in Doyang goes beyond the exercise of votes and organised contestation of power. It is rooted in everyday consciousness, the same consciousness which fosters social and economic relations among fellow people. Irrespective of the top-down instructions of maintaining distance from people across the border, solidarity in economic activities is observed. These transactions are not conscious and organised acts of defiance or resistance against the authority figures who seek to further their exclusive ethnic-homeland goals. Rather, these acts are conscious means of sustainability and survival in the wild, and yet they enrich the discourse of resistance in everyday life. During one brief visit to the hillside, it was observed that an ex-tea garden community family was residing among the Naga families. The head of the household was taking weed with a Naga man, his neighbour. Upon discussion, it was found that he had been living there for quite some years now and reported that he could draw electricity from both the states- Assam and Nagaland. Since the particular area had Naga households, that area was recognised as a revenue village by their council, so he could use free electricity from their government and not have

to pay the electricity bill to the Assam government. There are also quite a few cases of cross-ethnic marriages; Naga-Bodo, Naga-Mising, etc.

In terms of everyday resistance to the state, some examples listed down show small acts of survival aided in the formulation of advocacy politics. They also managed to modify quite a few policies at the regional level, if not at the national level. The continuous occupation and rebuilding of homes stopped eviction drives altogether, the act of bribing officials, and land sales between the villagers are everyday forms of peasant resistance. These acts articulate the peasants' normative values and opinions regarding who and how should be resources controlled and access distributed. There is a significant gap in the availability of literature and primary records pertaining specifically to the Doyang valley post-1935 to India's independence period. But some word-of-mouth tales point toward a very gradual process of encroachment at the reserve forest through the act of bribing state officials. Over the decades, villagers began to secure more land for occupation under the forest department by bribing the state officials who were 'accessible' to them. These lands were allotted deep inside the forests beyond the purview of regular patrolling of the state. They were then occupied by the kin of the existing forest villagers but in a discreet manner. If caught red-handed, there were evictions and punishments in place for the 'encroachers.' If bribing was possible, then the 'official' protests needed no amount of coercion or force to put forth demands considering that the colonial state was already taking care of their basic livelihood. Lands inside the forests were sufficient for the families, the rights even though we're limited to 'occupation' and not 'ownership' these families were self-sufficient to a large extent. Over the decades, the size of these families increased at a gradual pace, including extended kin migrating in. Should these developments then be called specific forms of resistance? The answer is yes. Forms of resistance need not necessarily be official in the form of protest meetings and building up of networks. A parallel unofficial resistance exists side by side; in such, the site of resistance shifts from the macro to the micro with the individual as the unit. The very act of bribing to secure one's kin members in a space as guarded as a reserve forest connotes that the governance of the very state can be compromised! And at a macro level, such individual acts of resistance to the state have the potential to build an organised network of collectivism such as the KMSS.

The very term 'encroachers' is used by the state officials to point out these peasants, yet this term has been used by the villagers in their day to day activities often to discuss how they are better off without state support or endorsement in some exceptional cases. Firstly, they need not pay any tax to the state since they do not

have a land ownership document. Secondly, mentioned in the previous paragraph, the buying and selling of land among the people require no permission from higher authorities, leading to a parallel co-existence of the formal and informal market exchanges. It is these activities that led to a negotiated vote-bank politics by the MLA representative of Golaghat. She announced Gomariguri in Doyang as a *mahkuma* (district subdivision) even though there is no permission from the Central government to convert the area into a revenue belt. Secondly, the setting up of functional Community Health Centres in Doyang is a result of the increased demographic change in the reserved forest. Thus, everyday politics is what Harry Boyte describes as philosophical, based on values such as participation, justice, and plurality, not ideological; it revolves around significant public problems, from housing shortages to environmental hazards^{vii}.

Furthermore, compliance also factors into the social construction and perpetuation of differences between classes. Everyday politics hence not only challenges the state but also complies with existing inequalities, going in tandem with how the people view society should be, what and how should the resources be allocated and so on. The networks of solidarities in interpersonal relationships involve households and families, neighbours, big peasants and sharecroppers, through which access to land, labour, money and emergency assistance is a big part of people's everyday politics (Kerkvliet, 2009, pp. 235-236). Small peasants- especially from the lower castes, ex-tea garden communities as well as Bengali Muslims on occasions do odd jobs as services to the upper caste-middle and big peasants' families without any compensation.

Conclusion

The Doyang reserved forest provides a unique case study to contextualise the peasantry-politics conundrum, a topic which has perplexed many a scholar of the Northeast region. Questions of ethnicity and development continue to grapple with most of the research questions of academic literature on the political economy of the region. Whilst such questions have their significance, one must also simultaneously interrogate how the political economy shapes the politics of the peasantry, their everyday experiences, and in turn how the peasants themselves frame the ethnic-national questions. The relationship, hence, is mutual. Everyday peasant politics equip the peasants to address their grievances in a regular manner without the struggle of the organisation or collective mobilisation. As citizens, they are entitled to discuss issues they find interesting and this helps not only in the dissemination of views but also consolidation of resistance. Everyday politics, in

fact, aid in the collective mobilisation and formation of advocacy politics, or politics of the organisational kind. Through the examples cited across the paper, one finds that these forms of politics affect state interventions and governance measures. Everyday peasant politics helps to locate the contestations overpower outside the realm of political parties and government offices. It recognises the politics of the different form may assume in different contexts. The Doyang movement happens to be one of the longest-running land rights movements in Assam, yet it has been hardly analysed. Particularly the myriad of instances and experiences which help in consolidating peasant protests in an organised manner is important to be looked at.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to outline a narrative of peasant struggle against state policies and structured inequalities in place. This narrative reflects the peasantry's ability and capability to abide by, confirm to, negotiate with, as well as challenge the power equations put in place by colonial modernity, uneven development, class hierarchy and ethnic assertions. The ability to resist places the peasantry in a conscious web of political ties, one that is not only rooted in solidarity but also in alliances with interested agents. The peasants take recourse to everyday politics in personal capacities, and over the period these acts may converge as organisational politics that have the potency to bring long term changes in the inequalities. Perceptions of how policies should be and what kind of positive impact it must make in the lives of the common people are shared by the community, and this contributes to the meanings they associate with the idea of the nation, the state and the people.

ⁱ The paper is an integral part of the author's ongoing doctoral thesis.

ⁱⁱ Would draw from Kerkvliet's definition and typology of 'politics' (Benedict J. Tria Kiekvliet (2009) Everyday Politics in Peasant Societies (and ours). *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36(1), 227-243.

ⁱⁱⁱ Which seek to address the peasantry in terms of its relationship to the market and development, but does not throw much light in the structural changes as well as political action that shape the political-social agency of the peasantry itself.

^{iv} *Taunya* system of labour is temporary in nature, i.e. the Forest Department permitted the labourers to settle in make-shift residences inside the forest during the tenure of labour only. While the forest villages are permanent in nature, i.e. the villagers had to render compulsory service for a fixed period of time, and in return they were allowed to cultivate inside the forest and pay an annual tax.

^v The phrase is used here to denote the multiple histories of the communities settled in the Doyang reserved forest, using Foucault's concept of genealogy, to argue who should possess the rights over resources inside the forest-scape and who should not, i.e. who belongs and who does not. The perspective is hence of the communities themselves

rather than that of the state or external agents. For more on Foucault's conception, see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/>

^{vi} When prompted, field respondents pointed out that the timeline is important; the Bodo-ethnic families were settled way back in 1977, but the Bengali Muslims came much later towards the 1990.

^{vii} Harry C. Boyte. Everyday Politics and Civic Engagement. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/college/collegespecial2/coll_aascuboyte.html

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Article: Hybrid Identity and Cultural Commons in the Foothills of Assam-Nagaland Border

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Hybrid Identity and Cultural Commons in the Foothills of Assam-Nagaland Border

--- Antora Borah

Abstract

This paper deals with the formation of hybrid culture in the multi-ethnic society of the border villages located at the Assam-Nagaland foothills. It shows that the process of assimilation of the ‘illegal’ Bangladeshi immigrants population with local indigenous communities is not free from socio-political tensions. In addition to the formation of hybrid identity, there is a sharp binary of hill-valley and indigene-immigrant culture. Thus, foothill villages also present a unique site of local cultural conflict management through a process of evolving socio-economic relations in the form of ‘cultural commons’. In the present situation, we also locate some latent tensions that have crept into these villages. In a way, it presents a unique site of socio-cultural experiences that is the focus of this paper.

Keywords: Hybrid identity, Foothill border, Cultural commons, Bangladeshi immigrants.

Introduction

The present study is an ethnographic account of how different ethnic groups live together in a conflict like situation due to the creation of arbitrary state borders in post-colonial India. It shows that hybrid identities in the villages located at the foothills of the Assam-Nagaland border offer a site of co-existence of new and old cultural identities. Notwithstanding, the formation of a new hybrid identity, there exists a sharp binary of hill-valley and indigene-immigrant identities. This paper examines the process of formation of a new cultural identity i.e. hybrid identity amidst existing old, but sharp identities. In this context, it examines some of the villages of the foothill of the Assam-Nagaland border, which present a unique site of co-existence of new and old identities, but not without tension.

The ethnic composition of foothill villages especially in the D Sectorⁱ of the Assam-Nagaland border is a hotchpotch of various identities. It comprises various indigenous communities, migrant communities from Assam, and other parts of

India, and Bangladeshi immigrant "Miya"ⁱⁱ community, the local people in the Merapani foothills regard Miya as illegal migrants.

Before the advent of the British in the Brahmaputra Valley in the nineteenth century, the dense forests in the foothills were cleared by the Ahoms for their military arrangements to protect their borders from the hill tribes. Saikia (2008) argued that such temporary settlements by Ahom kings did not last for long, and the terrain soon reverted to the dense forest (p. 43). However, the officials of the East India Company found this no man's land very rich in timber resources. To extract forest resources in the name of the scientific Forest Conservation Policy, they converted the huge forest tract of the foothills into a Reserve forest. They not only converted "jungles" into "reserved forests", but also made way for human settlement in these forest tracts by establishing a forest village, locally known as "Bon Gaon" or "Taungiya Village".

In 1905, the forest department of Assam established four forest villages in the Doyang Reserve Forest in the Sivasagar district of Assam province. They were Merapani, Choudang Pathar, Kachomari and Amguri. These forest villages provide shelter to tribes, and forest resources provided them with a source of livelihood. However, the process of settlement for the people in the forest village is continuous and did not stop even after independence. Post-1950, the forest villages of upper Assam foothills witnessed a new surge of inflow of landless Assamese peasantry. The migration into these foothill forest villages took place due to the shortage of agricultural land in the valley due to a massive earthquake in 1950 which caused extensive landslides, subsidence, and fissuring in the valley. In addition, it also changed the course and configuration of the Brahmaputra and its tributary flows in the upper Assam areas. Many of these landless peasants migrated to the foothill forests villages in search of cultivable land. Saikia (2008) has argued that peasant migration in Assam was also encouraged by the then Assam government led by the Congress Party, primarily driven by their populist agenda to settle landless rural families in forest land (p. 44). Furthermore, the population increased in these foothill forest tracts due to the border skirmishes that emerged in the Assam-Nagaland foothill areas. In 1970, the then Assam government to safeguard its border from Naga intrusion created a habitation belt of half a mile width in Nagaland from Kakodunga to Doyang. This belt is known as "half-a-mile settlement", where the government allotted ten bighas of land to each landless family who had migrated from neighbouring areas. These forest tracts were further populated by another wave of immigration during the 1970 and 1980s when landless peasants arrived without the support and encouragement from the

government (Saikia, 2008, p. 44). Most of these immigrants were either displaced peasants from upper Assam due to inundated floods, or former labourers of tea gardens whose contracts had with the owners of the tea gardens come to an end. These landless people searched for cultivable land, cleared the forest tract in the foothill border and settled therein. The most recent wave of immigration to these forest tracts of foothill border is from lower Assam districts. They are none other than the erstwhile East-Bengali origin peasants, who settled in Assam since the last quarter of colonial rule. The reason behind the inflow of Bangladeshi origin immigrants to the forest tract of the foothill border could be that during the 1970s and 1980s, there was an agitation against the influx of illegal Bangladeshi migrants to Assam. Consequently, large infiltration took place in the foothill, and these illegal immigrants sought shelter under the aegis of Naga landlords in most of the disputed forest tract of the border. Thus, the giant forest tract of the Assam-Nagaland foothill border is converted into a multi-cultural society, which was earlier once no-man's-land.

Merapani subdivision is located in the Doyang Reserve Forest along the disputed D-Sector of the Assam-Nagaland border. Its geopolitical characteristic is that it lies on both sides of the border. As an inter-state border demarcates Merapani, two different names are known on either side of the border. The area which belongs to Assam is known as Merapani Bazaar, and the other side is known as Merapani foothill for the people living in the Wokha district of Nagaland. Merapani Bazaar is the central location for the people on either side of the border. Merapani Bazaar consists of various business communities that are primarily settlers from outside Assam. They are Biharis, Marwaris, Bengalis, Punjabis, Manipuris and immigrant Bangladeshi. Apart from these communities, a few Assamese are also engaged in business there. However, there are hardly any Nagas in business and trade in Merapani Bazaar. Despite the presence of various outsiders in the central location of the Merapani, locals have a stronghold on the bazaar. The president and the secretary of the Merapani Bazaar Committee are Assamese. A few Nagas have their petty business in the Veloguri area of Merapani foothill adjacent to the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) camp.

Assamese is a linguistic group that comprises various ethnic groups. In Merapani village itself, various ethnic Assamese like Ahoms, Chutiya, Bodo Kacharis, Thengal Kacharis, Sonowal Kacharis, Mishings, and Rabha exist. There is an interesting fact that among the Bodo Kacharis in Merapani village, only a few can speak Assamese, whereas others Bodo speak their mother tongue, i.e. Bodo. However, in common parlance, they are often referred to as Assamese.

Furthermore, the Assamese linguistic groupⁱⁱⁱ has included various other migrant groups like Nepalese, Adivasis and Miya.

In the Merapani foothill, the dominant ethnic group is Lotha Nagas; most of them settled in the area after the Merapani War^{iv}. Before the war, the Merapani foothill was used by the Assamese peasants' as paddy fields. In my fieldwork, I met Nogen (name changed), a school teacher who owned ancestral agricultural land in Merapani. During the discussion with Nogen and his wife, they became emotional about their paddy fields in the Merapani foothills. To quote Nogen, "My father-in-law had paddy fields there. However, he sold the paddy fields to some Naga before things get worse pre-war. At that time, the Nagas used to fend us off at gunpoint. Furthermore, we had to sell the fields at nominal prices. Like us, many had to sell their land at nominal prices. Now the land belongs to them, and we still cultivate the fields together". Amidst these Lotha Nagas, few Nepalese, Adivasi, Manipuri and Miya live as sharecroppers^v in the Merapani foothills.

However, for the last few decades, the entire North-East has India resisted the settlement of the immigrant Bangladeshi. In the context of Assam, various scholars and local media asserted that the large settlement of the immigrant resulted in the displacement of the indigenous tribal peasantry. The migrants usurped the agricultural lands of the tribal who are engaged in *Jhum* (Shifting) cultivation. Most of the tribal groups abandoned their land and moved to remote areas and even to the forest areas to avoid living with strangers (Roychoudhury, 2009). However, this is not precisely the case at the Assam-Nagaland foothill border. There are a few places in the foothills like Negheribil, a few places of Merapani and Uriamghat, which are settlement sites for the Miya community. The respective governments of Assam and Nagaland to claim their authority over the disputed land settled various other communities from outside who are adept in agricultural activities. The landlords collect half of the harvested crops allowing the cultivators to retain the other half. They are ex-tea garden labourers, Nepalese and immigrant Muslim settlers. Places like Negheribil, Kuhuboto, Bokajan, Khatkhati and some other areas of Merapani village in the foothills of the D-sector are major sites of minority pockets. Interestingly, an altogether new identity is emerging in these border areas. The new identity, known as "Semiya", is an outcome of inter-marriage between Sema Nagas and Immigrant Bangladeshi settlers (locally called Miya).

Further, complexity in the human settlement has been aggravated with the deployment of para-military forces like CRPF, Assam Rifles etc. in disturbed border areas^{vi}. These disturbed areas are known as Disturbed Area Belt (DAB)

areas. The fertile land of the foothill border has been used to build huge camps for these paramilitary forces. These camps are not only galloping the land for cultivation but also hampering hill-valley interaction. The military camps coming up in large acreages not only usurped traditional community land, by doing so they had also cast a disjunctive effect on the traditional social and economic life of the peasant society. Creating enclosures in large areas, also severely disrupted traditional inter-village communication in the foothills.

PERSPECTIVE & METHODOLOGY

As natural borders between the plains and the hills, the foothills occupy a crucial position in the socio-political and economic landscape of Northeast India. Kikon (2013) highlighted that the foothills are heavily militarised spaces with "[heavy deployment] ...of military forces, competing insurgent groups and extra-constitutional regulations" (p. iv). Following the interactionist theory of H. Blumer (1969), the society of foothills in the Assam-Nagaland border is producing an "idioculture". Fine (1979) defined idioculture as "...a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and customs shared by members of interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction." (p. 734). The shared experiences of members in the group are used to construct social reality. Idioculture pretends as the culture is localised in nature. It is an invisible task to understand the cultural pattern of an entire society. The present study uses Blumer's premise of understanding culture and tries to understand the interaction in the society by considering culture creation as an outcome of this interaction (cited in Fine, 1979, p.733).

In order to understand the hybrid identities in the foothills, this paper looks into the foothills through the lens of Bhabha's concept of "Third Space"^{vii}. Foothills are a third space where the cutting edge of "translations" and "negotiation" occurs. This study tried to understand such negotiations and translations by analysing social interactions and social networks that generally prevail in the foothill border. The society in the foothills consists of several communities/ethnic groups, whose relationship with one another is often marked by cohesion-conflict; disputes are often related to land and other mineral resources. However, live as neighbours and share varied common lived experiences. In the existing social interaction, the different ethnic groups develop nexuses and various working relations and maintain their distinct social identities and boundaries. Thus, foothills can be considered a third space, which appears to be messy and chaotic, and where ethnic groups practice hybrid culture and social practices locally known as "khichri culture"^{viii}.

Here, the hybridity arises from the flow of information and the movement of people around this is ever-evolving, interconnected and interactive space. It is witnessed that the culture in foothill is mostly looked down upon by both the hill and the plain people just like in colonial discourse', hybrid identity has been used as a term of abuse for those who are products of mixed-breeds or miscegenation (Irdus, 2012). Various proponents of hybrid culture believe that the mixing of migrant and the local (host) cultures has been advantageous and constructive for socio-economic development and the progress of shared identity (ibid.). While Bhabha defines hybrid culture, enunciate the importance of hybridity:

"...the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge." (Rutherford, 1990).

Thus, the emergence of this new position set up a new structure and power. In the present study, it will be explored how the new structure is emerging (emergent collectivity) in a multi-ethnic society located in a space "in-between"^{ix}.

It has been found that in Nagamese^x, the people of hill and valley are referred as *pahar manuh* and *plain manuh* respectively, whereas the people of foothill are referred with an abusive term '*gondogul jegar manuh*', also referred by Kikon (2013). The use of abusive terminology by the people of both the plain and the hill areas reflects how they consider the position of the people residing in the foothills. The foothill people, practice both shifting and settled agriculture. They are even engaged in cash crop plantations like rubber and tea, where profit maximisation is the main motive. The foothill people also celebrate both hills and valley festivals and have kinship ties within both groups. In the foothills, few communities like Nagas and Ahoms have strong ties with their kins in the highlands of northwest Burma and Thailand. At the same time, other groups like Nepalis, Muslim Bengalis, and Adivasis trace their historical ties with the communities in the Brahmaputra valley and beyond, even in the Chotta Nagpur plateau of Central India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. In the above social and historical backdrop, the paper explores how the residents of the foothills are negotiating, and establishing social orders in the midst of arbitrary "border conflict"^{xi} and ethnic feuds between both the states Assam and Nagaland. The "life-world" and everyday lived experiences of people living in the foothill border of Assam and Nagaland are always overshadowed by violence and militarisation. Here, the paper tries to capture the everyday lived experiences of the different communities in the foothill villages, their negotiations,

and sharing in different fields like economics, culture, and polity.

An ethnographic approach is a preferred methodology to describe the culture of any social world [foothill] (Fetterman, 1989; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993). In the present study holistic ethnography was opted to study multiple groups within a social unit, as such the same approach was used in having detailed experiential perspectives of different ethnic groups in the same foothill village. Using holistic ethnography in the present study, the culture of the foothill has been described by analyzing the beliefs and practices of the people living on the fringes. The behaviour and interactions of the different ethnic groups with each other in the foothills question the hill-valley dichotomy and indigene-immigrant dichotomy.

The study was conducted between the spring of 2017 and the winter of 2018 in the foothill villages of the Assam-Nagaland border. The primary data for the study was collected mainly through participant observation and semi-structured group interviews with the various stakeholders like villagers, politicians, government officials, NGO and social service organizations, businessmen, journalists, student union leaders, para-military forces jawans and officials, etc. To study some specific events and persons for which case study method opted. Field notes were taken during nine months in the field which were later on used for data analysis. In addition, discussion or dialogue was organised with participants rather than interviews. As such, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with the respondents. The household listing of the village was done to know the demographic pattern and social networks in the village. Secondary data consisted of archive data, pamphlets of political parties, wall writing and hoardings, and artefacts collected from a variety of sources.

Unless and until the data are referenced in the paper, the other data used are collected during my fieldwork with the communities of the foothills. However, it was very difficult to conduct fieldwork in such a volatile area where the identity of a person is always suspected. I have disclosed my identity to my respondents wherever necessary that I am a research student from the University of Delhi. In any sociological research conducted on human subjects, as a researcher, I should take all the steps necessary to protect the privacy and confidentiality of my subjects/respondents especially when I am working in a region where everyone's identity/ is suspected. As such, I tried to keep the anonymity of my respondent's name and their place of interview and other details were kept confidential. Mostly the names used for my respondents in the paper are fictitious. Furthermore, as a women researcher, I found a lot of difficulties in collecting data for which my

research area was later narrowed down. For instance, the life of Merapani during the daytime is very different from the night. As a woman researcher, I was not allowed by the locals (especially my host family) and even not advisable to collect data during the night because it was very risky to observe "illegal" subjects/processes.

FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

Formation of Hybrid Identity

The post-partition migration of Bengalis, particularly Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh to North-East India has long been an explosive political issue. The local communities have apprehension about being overwhelmed by migrants. Despite the apprehension, it is observed that a hybrid identity i.e. Semiya offer a critique of the indigene-immigrant dichotomy in the in-between space. All multi-ethnic societies do not follow the same policies and practices to integrate with immigrants. Different societies have different histories, cultures, and institutions. As such, cultural adaptation and integration policies and practices will differ accordingly.

Inter-community marriages in a multi-cultural society are inevitable. In Merapani, inter-community marriages between Assamese and Nagas, Nagas and immigrant Bangladeshi, Assamese and immigrant Bangladeshi are found. Many local respondents believe that the Miya community deliberately enters into marital relations with Naga society. As a consequence of inter-communities marriages, new identities are emerging in these border areas. The new hybrid identity known as Semiyas is an outcome of inter-marriages between the Sema Nagas and the Bangladeshi immigrant settlers (locally called Miya). M.A. Singh (2009) mentioned that Semiya or Sumia was first coined by a local journalist in 1980 who investigated Niuland in Dimapur District.

During my fieldwork, I often enquire with the Naga elders of Merapani, "Why Naga girls are getting married to immigrant Bangladeshis?" In reply, I often came across the statement, "We do not allow such marriages in our village. We are making our girls aware of the consequences of such marriages. It will bring a crisis to our Naga society. If some of them are marrying, it is also a fault of our Naga youths. Our boys are very lazy bums; they hardly work. So, most of the household and economic responsibility is taken care of by the women of the house. Our girls, to lead an easy life, are marrying Miyas."

Nagas are also facilitating the settlement of the Miya community on the foothill

border. Borgohain and Borgohain (2011) mentioned a few things that keep Nagas numb about Bangladeshi (Miya) "invasion" of their lands. They mentioned that the most important reason is that the Miyas are very hard-working and they work in agricultural fields and construction sites of the Nagas at very low wages. Besides, businesses need cheap labour, politicians need vote banks, and insurgent groups need people for extortion and using them for smuggling and other petty crimes. It is observed that fertile and sparsely populated land in the newly created subdivision of Nagaland, like Niuland, is a breeding ground for the Miya population. Their resilience is quite commendable. It is also to be noted that their assimilation rate is much higher than other communities in the region. They quickly adopt the language where they live, because communication is a significant tool for earning their livelihood.

Miyas are bonding with Naga society through marriages, but Nagas also try to accommodate them through practices like family adoption. The business families or landlords in the foothill villages and towns adopted Adivasi, Nepali and Miya children, teenagers or families who are mostly migrants. The relationship between the landowner and the adopted family is very exploitative. When landless migrated families are adopted, they are given the household family name and are often given new names and counted as family members. Both the male and female members of the adopted family work as labourers for the landlord. The male members work as labourers in the landlord paddy fields and rubber plantations, as construction workers, and also help the family in their business, etc. Most of the adopted female members work as agricultural labourers in the paddy field and work as domestic helpers in the landlord's house. The adopted family/individuals have to toil their labour without many incentives. When the adopted families and individuals perform well, they hold a good position in the family and community. However, when they fail to perform, they are reminded of their landlessness status and lack of culture. The exploitative adoption practices in the foothills of the Assam-Nagaland border also determine the social and political networks of the landless adopted families/individuals. The landless migrant/immigrant communities had no choice other than to live and accept these exploitative relations to obtain security and protection. Kikon (2013) rightly pointed out that the family in the foothills adopted the rhetoric of kinship to consolidate labour service, exchanges and payments. The exploitative adoptive policies in the foothills render social recognition to the adopted migrant/immigrant families/individuals. It also helps them to acquire a piece of land in the foothills.

Another important economic feature that helps to strengthen cultural ties in the

foothills is the practice of sharecropping. It is witnessed that in the disputed foothill border, the Naga encroachers practice sharecropping with migrated minority groups like Adivasi, Nepali and Miya. In Nagaland, sharecropping has no legal status as in the state of Assam, but it is widely practised. Nagaland has a unique landholding pattern^{xii} under Article 351 (A) that restricts land leasing.

The exploitative sharecropping system is popularly known as *Adi* in the foothills. The Nagas, with the ulterior motive of garnering the fruits of cultivation in the encroached land on the foothills of the border, are encouraging the creation of pockets of landless minority people like Immigrant Bangladeshi, Adivasi, and Nepalis who are quite adept in agricultural activities. As mentioned earlier, the Nagas collect half of the harvested crops and allow the cultivators to retain the other half. Similarly, Assamese landlords also practice sharecropping with the migrant communities. The migrant sharecroppers do not recognise themselves as farmers but as *Halwa*^{xiii}. They are cultivators and do sharecropping on others' land. They do not possess any land in the foothills. The following excerpt and analysis from the field will throw light on the exploitative sharecropping practices in the foothills. In the field, one day while I was travelling in a local conveyance, I met Sibu Goyary (name changed), an Adivasi^{xiv} sharecropper, landless, vulnerable, and exploited by the landlord in the foothills. On that journey, he informs me about his occupation, where he lives in the foothills and finally he also invited me to his hamlet in the foothills. When I visited him in his house on a winter afternoon, he started narrating about his hard life in the foothills. He always dreams of owning a piece of land and becoming a farmer. He also informed me about the exploitative nature of sharecropping practices in the foothills. He mentioned that "Ideally as a *halwa*, our landlord should provide us ration, clothes, houses and other necessities, but we do not get anything from them. Sometimes they do not give us the agreed half of the harvested crop". Casual labour earns Rs. 250 to Rs. 300 per day in the foothills, whereas the earning of a sharecropper is much lower than even casual labour. Still, most of the people of migrant communities prefer to become a sharecropper than casual labour. Sharecropping practice provides legitimacy to the landless migrant communities in the foothills. When I asked migrant settlers about their arrival in the foothills, they often replied, "Go and ask my landlord. They will tell you about my arrival in the foothills." The landlord and migrant settlers (sharecropper) relation is cordial and deeply treasured because migrant settlers rely upon the landlord families to fortify their conspicuous settlement in the foothills.

Landlord families often adopt landless poor migrant families in the foothills. During the fieldwork in Merapani, in the host family, I met Rubiya Bai (name

changed), a Miya woman who used to be a house helper for them. She informed me: thirty-five years ago she was adopted by my host family. In the neighbourhood, she is also popularly known as 'Bubu hator gharor Miyani'. She is working as a maid in Bubu's house^{xv} for the last three and a half decades. She does all the household chores in Bubu's house. In an afternoon, she narrated her story:

"I came to this place with my family before the Merapani War. My family was impoverished, and Abba was a Halwa in Bubu's paddy field. I was just a toddler when the Merapani war broke out. We lost our small paddy field in the war; a pair of cows, a goat, and even our small hamlet were burnt to ashes. The war pushes our family into a more impoverished condition. I never attended school, and from a very young age, I was adopted by Bubu's family. Bubu's eldest brother was my age, and we used to play together in our childhood. Gradually, I become gharor manuh for Bubu's family. They treat me as their family member. I also perform most of the household chores in the family, from cleaning to cooking. When I lived with Borma (Bubu's mother, who now lives in the ancestral house) in the Gaor Ghar, I accompany her everywhere. Borma also takes me to village Namghar to attend Gupini Naam every Thursday. Almost ten years back, I also took Xaran (proselytisation) under the Namgharia (local priest). After I took Xaran, the other village elderly also take food from my hand. When Bubu's elder brother got married and shifted to this new house in the town, I also shifted from an ancestral house to this new house to help natun buwari (new daughter-in-law) with the household chores. So, I am greying my hair with this family since my childhood."

Rubiya Bai's story is common in the foothills. Business families and landlords of Merapani foothills adopt the children or teenagers of migrant landless families. These migrant landless families mainly belong to Nepali, Adivasi and Miya communities. However, these adopted members of the family; contribute to the household chores, fields and plantations. They were required to work their way into the hearts of the family. Very often, household members reminded them to "work harder" and be "grateful" for the benefits and advantages they get in turn. It was a double-edged sword. Like Adi (sharecropping), there is another reciprocal free labour service system, which is locally known as "Howri". The system of Howri also strengthens the networks and social ties in the foothills.

The various socio-economic practices in the foothills like sharecropping, family adoption, and inter-community marriages give birth to the hybrid identities that can be identified as 'cultural commons'^{xvi}. Whether it is in kinship/familial relations or a multi-ethnic society, conflict/tension is bound to arise about one thing or another. So, to resolve the dispute/tension, one would have to step back and construct some criterion or criteria—for adjudication of the conflict, which can be from their practices and habits that transcend those social ties. Thus, the socio-economic settings which emerged in the space in-between -primarily drawn from a non-discursive, the repertory of customs, habits, and practices- can be located as foreground principle of conflict management in the foothill border.

Latent Tensions in the Foothill Villages

The assimilation processes in the border villages are, however, not without some latent tensions, leading to more hostility among the ethnic groups living in there. Many local people, academicians, and pressure groups are concerned about the looming hybrid identities and Miya community in the border villages. A study conducted by IDSA (Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses), 2009 pointed out that "...immigrants are desirous of marrying natives to secure social sanction for their settlement, and this is particularly reported in areas bordering Assam." Borgohain and Borgohain (2011) made a sinister allegation that there is an official strategy to alter the states' demographic pattern, and offer monetary incentives to the immigrant Bangladeshi on marrying a Naga woman. The emergence of Semiya community remains very controversial and sensitive. During the fieldwork, it was found that the Nagas want to deny the existence of hybrid identities. One of the respondents remarked, "Semiya is just a joke. It is a baseless claim." While another respondent (Aao Naga from Mukokchang) also cautioned, "Do not indulge yourself in these subjects. It will be risky for you to research Semiya. Those places are highly criminalised. You will not be able to conduct your field research amidst those criminals." Further, he also mentioned that some people accept the existence of hybrid identities like Semiya, whereas some may take it as an insult to the entire Naga society. However, few social media pages accept the presence of Semiya. One of the Facebook pages named "Nagas by Blood" has a post titled "Immigration in Nagaland", authored by Zhokusheyi Rhakho, and mentioned the presence of Semiya. Rhakho also quoted Subhir Bhowmik's celebrated work 'Trouble Periphery', and provided a count of Semiya that is about 80,000 to 100,000, foreboding a major threat to Nagaland demography, a possible source of future tension. Rhakho opines that the Nagas have felt the danger of such demographic change, but they are either helpless, too lazy, or selfish to do anything. Once a Naga

student leader even claimed that

"The children of the immigrants, who marry local girls, are often referred to as 'Sumias'... These children are also confused about the religion they should adopt. In most cases, they are given Naga names. So, they cannot be detected by the authorities concerned when they apply for advantages like jobs, which are meant only for the indigenous people of Nagaland..."^{xvii}

The Naga Student's Federation (NSF) also imposed restrictions on Naga girls to marry Miya. A regional daily The Assam Tribune reported a statement of Naga student leader that NSF will impose a ban on Naga girls marrying immigrants from Bangladesh, but at the same time, he also stated that this ban could not be strictly imposed^{xviii}. The NSF and other student bodies of the state put regular checks to prevent the influx of illegal immigrants. Especially during the wake of the publication of the draft and the final National Register of Citizenship (NRC) report in Assam, the NSF assigned its student volunteers to verify the documents of non-locals and even directed the Inner Line Permit (ILP) holders to carry documents like voter ID cards, AADHAR cards, etc. The defaulters would be handed over to the district administration and police for further legal actions^{xix}. In the wake of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019, the opposition parties in Nagaland, like Nagaland Pradesh Congress Committee (NPCC), alleged that exemption of Nagaland from CAA based on ILP is just "a plain hoax to fool our people^{xx}." They argued that "the act of exempting states/areas under ILP and Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution was complete eyewash since any immigrant getting asylum in any part of the country and after obtaining citizenship could easily travel and sneak into those protected areas to settle down^{xxi}."

The Dimapur incident of mob lynching of Mr Sayed Farid Khan in 2015 was claimed to be the result of resistance toward marriage between Naga women and immigrant Bangladeshi in the foothill areas of Nagaland. On March 5, a mob broke into the jail, dragged him out, stripped him naked, beat him up, pelted him with stones and dragged him towards the centre of Dimapur town. It was reported by a section of media houses and intelligentsia that the root of this violence could also be traced to Naga's antipathy towards immigrant Bangladeshi settlers marrying Naga women. The offspring of these marriages are demanding ST status. Even various national and international media houses also claimed that the brutal killing of Khan was an attempt by a section of Naga society to tell the immigrant Bangladeshi settlers to stay away from Naga women and the entire episode had the

National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) backing. However, Kikon (2015) is different from the above argument and pointed out that while characterising Naga society as xenophobic, the voices of the citizens of Dimapur, who were the first to condemn the gruesome action of the mob, were drowned out. Apart from this, we also forget to question the existing patriarchy in the foothill society in the whole episode. Kikon (2015) further argued, "...the task of locating the dignity and purity of any society is unquestionably placed at the hands of leaders and collectives who consider women and the marginalised and poor as non-speaking subjects without any agency."

The study "A Study on Illegal Immigration into North-East India: The Case of Nagaland" claimed that many interviewees in the study raised concern about the possibility of the voters' list in Nagaland being doctored to include the Semiya as well other immigrants. Furthermore, various academicians of the region also raised their concern about the growing aspiration of immigrants in commercial hubs and foothills of the Assam-Nagaland border. Patricia Mukhiem, the editor of Shillong Times in 2003, wrote an open letter to the then Chief Minister of Nagaland Mr Neiphiu Rio, which raised concern about the threat from immigrants who are curving their niche in Nagaland:

"It may not be too long before somebody with the power of numbers (population) demands a Union Territorial status in Dimapur. Its market areas already look like a mini-Bangladesh, albeit more lucrative^{xxii}."

In my fieldwork in Dimapur, Ms Manisha Borkotoky, a social activist (Education Advisor, Education Initiatives Pvt. Ltd), also informed me that in the city of Dimapur, Naga Student Union recently stopped the recitation of "Azaan"^{xxiii} on the loudspeaker. It is evident that Miya is trying to raise their status in the local social hierarchy; they encounter fierce resistance from the indigenous communities, especially from the Nagas.

CONCLUSION

Merapani or various other foothill villages on the Assam-Nagaland border are a space in-between where cutting edge transactions take place among different ethnic groups. Few groups like Assamese, and Lotha Nagas in the Merapani foothills consider themselves as native or 'son of the soils' is dominant in terms of numbers, land resources and power. Whereas the migrant communities like Miya, Adivasi and Nepali try to adjust themselves to the local society of Merapani. Gradually, the Miya population is numerically overpowering the other migrant communities and

native ethnic groups and giving birth to hybrid identities like Semiya/Sumia through social intercourse. They are also trying to raise their social status in the local social hierarchy and secure the social sanctions for their settlement through inter-community marriages, adoption and sharecropping with the local communities in the bordering villages.

Notwithstanding the features of 'cultural commons', the foothill villages sometimes reflect a hostile environment. The social and economic processes were held to forge solidarity in the highly fictionalised society of the foothills; however, it could not create social solidarity among the ethnic groups living on the fringe. People lived together, but it is a "forced" collectivity because a constant resistance from the local people affected the assimilation process among the locals and 'others' in the foothill villages. The hybrid identities did not represent the real nature of the emerging social structure. The harmony visible on the surface was manufactured, mainly for the "economic interdependence" among the various ethnic groups in the foothill villages. In the foothill villages, the different ethnic categories with distinct social boundaries emerge from dynamic yet anxious inter-ethnic interactions. As Barth points out,

"...ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a social system does not lead to its liquidation through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence" (Barth 1969, p. 10).

Within all sorts of complexities, one can see some form of togetherness and reciprocity. Patricia Mukhiem (2016) pointed out that in the North-East, it is safe to assume that "othering" camouflages many other disorders - social, political and economic. It is observed that only a handful of politicians and elite media houses try to create a rift between hill-valley and indigene-immigrant; they neglect the fundamental problems of foothill villages of the border. Singh (2016) pointed out that conflict is inbuilt or inherent in collectivity, but people still live together separately.

Notes:

ⁱ D-Sector: There is a bone of contention between Assam and Nagaland over a 434-kilometre long border. In other words, about 66,000 hectares of land are disputed. This interstate border is divided into six sectors A, B, C, D, E and F. These sectors include Sivsagar, Golaghat, Jorhat and Karbi Anglong districts, all of which presently lie in Assam. Nagaland claims that sectors A, B, C and D belong to the Naga tribes and should not be a part of Assam.

ⁱⁱ In the present study, I will refer entire East Bengali Muslim Peasant Community who settled in the Brahmaputra valley as Miya. During my fieldwork, I encountered the word Miya frequently used by the Nagas, ethnic Assamese, Adivasis, Nepalese and Miya themselves. In the popular media such as Newspaper reports, Facebook pages and local publications and even academic writings and government records the Miyas are referred to as Immigrant Bangladeshis. This is the reason I used the words 'Miyas' and 'Immigrant Bangladeshis' for the same group throughout the paper. Going back to the migration history of Miyas or Immigrant Bangladeshis, they entered Brahmaputra valley during colonial times as East Bengali Muslim Peasant Community. Like any other frontier region, the population density of Assam was low and the local wage labourers were not attracted to the plantation. As such, the colonial rulers recruited labourers from other states of India, especially from Chotta Nagpur Plateau. This community is referred to as "Adivasi". It was estimated that tea garden workers and their descendants become the sixth-largest population in Assam by 2021. However, the colonial government did not stop there. They also saw potential in the low lying areas of the Brahmaputra flood plains for earning revenues. Subsequently, in the early twentieth century, the colonial administrators encouraged the settlement of Muslim migrants locally known as 'Miya' from densely populated deltaic eastern Bengal. Especially, when the demand for raw materials for the jute industry went up in Bengal, the Miya community migrated more in large numbers. Thereafter, the poor peasants started coming on their own as social networks were established between the two regions. This inflow of poor peasants never stopped to the Brahmaputra valley till date.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Assamese linguistic group: The left rhetoric in Assam argues the aspiration of neo-elites to make Assam a nation province for the Assamese. This led to the widening of Assamese linguistic identity to accommodate the Muslims of Brahmaputra valley as well as the tea tribes within the fold of Assamese nationalism. Muslims of Assam was rechristened as Na Asamiya (New Assamese) and encouraged to barter their identity and strengthen the claim to make Assam the nation province for the Assamese. The immigrant Muslims from erstwhile East Pakistan readily shifted their identity to save their stomach.

^{iv} The Merapani War: On June 4, 1985, a war was fought between two neighbouring states-Assam and Nagaland, the war not only have political importance but is also important from a socio-economic standpoint. It took a heavy toll on the life of people and affected the age-old social relations which were maintained between Nagas and Non-Nagas in the foothills. It affected the entire Doyang region which lead to the displacement of 7,996 families Gupta, Shekhar (2013). Merapani village between Assam-Nagaland border becomes a bloody battlefield, India Today, retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19850630-merapani-village-between-assam-nagaland-border-becomes-a-bloody-battlefield-770165-2013-12-20>

^{v v} Sharecroppers: Here in the foothills, the sharecroppers are mostly the migrant settlers like Adivasi, Nepali and Immigrant Bangladesi (Miya).

^{vi} Disturbed Border Areas: In view of the deteriorating law and order situation in the areas on the Assam-Nagaland border especially after incidents of 5th January 1979, prohibitory orders under Section 144 Cr.P.C., were promulgated as a precautionary measure, prohibiting the movement of civilians from dusk to dawn. Subsequently, the Reserved Forests and some other areas along the border were declared as 'Disturbed areas' under the provisions of the Assam Disturbed Areas Act, 1955 and Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 from time to time.

^{vii} The Third Space is a term coined by cultural and post-colonial theorist Homi. K. Bhabha in his seminal work 'Location of Culture'. It refers to the interstices between colliding culture, a liminal space that gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.

^{viii} Khichdi is a crude mixture or a hotch-potch of all food we consume, rice, lentils, vegetables which is a common dish in Indian subcontinent. But here, my respondents are referring to a mixed culture exhibited in the foothills village of Merapani

^{ix} Homi Bhabha refers to the "in-between" spaces as "terrain[s] for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself....It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the inter-subjectivity and collective experiences of *nations*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated."- Bhabha Homi K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London : Routledge, (p. 1-2).

^x Nagamese is a Creole spoken widely among the people of foothills. The growth of Nagamese as a lingua franca of Nagaland and its foothills can be date back to the Pre-British era. There are about twenty-three Naga languages, all mutually unintelligible. The Naga tribes live in close proximity to each other but within a geographical territory, a specific tribe lives in. As such, there was no common tongue for them. But gradually, a common medium of communication emerged between the Naga tribes which later termed Nagamese.

^{xi} With the re-arrangement of colonial Assam into different states since 1963 the issue of inter-state boundary disputes became one of the nagging issues in Northeast India. The bone of contention between Assam and Nagaland, however, is the British 1866 notification. Assam stands by the 1925 notification as it finally demarcated the boundary between Naga Hills District and its neighbouring districts in Assam. But, Nagaland does not. It, instead, is in favour of the 1866 Notification, and therefore, wants its territorial re-adjustment in this line. But it is not acceptable to Assam. In fact, Nagas were not ready to accept 434k.m. long boundary adjoining Sivsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hill Districts of Assam.

^{xii} Landholding Pattern: In Nagaland, the land is owned either by the village community as a whole or by a clan within the village or by individuals. There are no records for conferring upon such ownership rights but the individual rights are exclusively determined by tradition which is also referred to as customary laws. These Customary Laws are un-codified, and yet very effectively applied and interpreted by the traditional Village Councils in the event of any dispute. Thus, the landholding pattern in the state of Nagaland is unique, most of the land (more than 88%) is owned by the community. To establish individual landholdings in the state is an arduous task. Clan or community lands are allocated to willing individuals for cultivation. Outsiders are not allowed to possess/own land in Nagaland.- Government of Nagaland (2012). Vision 2025: Food for All, Department of Agriculture and Allied Departments, Government of Nagaland. Retrieved from <https://agriculture.nagaland.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/VISION-2025-DOCUMENT-low-resolution.pdf>

^{xiii} Halwa is a colloquial Assamese term for a land tiller in farmlands.

^{xiv} Like any other frontier region, the population density of Assam was low and the local wage labourers were not attracted to the plantation. As such, the colonial rulers recruited labourers from other states of India, especially from Chotta Nagpur Plateau. This community is referred to as "Adivasi". It was estimated that tea garden workers and their descendants become the sixth largest population in Assam by 2021.

In the Merapani region, especially in the foothills, many landless ex-tea garden labourers settled as sharecroppers with either Naga or Assamese landlords.

^{xv} Bubu (name changed) is one of my respondents in the Merapani foothill. He was also my host family during my fieldwork in Merapani which I conducted in the year 2017-18.

^{xvi} Cultural Commons: are non-discursive practices that are possibly used as law and norm in the governance of a social group. Akeel Bilgrami (2021) mentioned two features of cultural commons: they must be *shared* without rivalry among the agents involved. A second feature, more obviously true of the land and the environmental commons than of the knowledge commons, though increasingly true of the latter, is that agents *sustain themselves* on it.

^{xvii} See "Ticking Alien Bomb", at: <http://www.nenanews.com/NEE%20Aug.22%20%20Sept.6,%2003/Cover%20Story.htm> (accessed June 10, 2009) in M.A.Singh "A Study on Illegal Immigration into North-East India: The Case of Nagaland", IDSA Occasional Paper No. 8, 2009.

^{xviii} See "NSF wages war on Bangla influx", Assam Tribune (Guwahati), August 11, 2003, in M.A.Singh "A Study on Illegal Immigration into North-East India: The Case of Nagaland", IDSA Occasional Paper No. 8, 2009.

^{xix} See "NSF to Check Illegal Influx", Assam Tribune (Guwahati), August 8, 2018

^{xx} See "CAA camouflaged by ILP to deceive Nagas: Cong", Nagaland Post (Dimapur), December 17, 2019

^{xxi} Ibid.

^{xxii} See M.A.Singh "A Study on Illegal Immigration into North-East India: The Case of Nagaland", IDSA Occasional Paper No. 8, 2009.

^{xxiii} Azaan: A call for prayer/namaaz by Muslims.

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Article: Intertwined Education and Social Inequality: A Sociological Analysis of Schools and People Groups in Nagaland

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Intertwined Education and Social Inequality: A Sociological Analysis of Schools and People Groups in Nagaland

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Abstract

No society is free from social inequality with any exception to Naga society. The paper is an attempt to study issues of social inequalities in Nagaland with reference to educational accessibility provided in the 'backward areas'. Additionally, it explores credible contributors for outcomes of the school results in backward areas. This linkage will help in nuancing social inequality and vice-versa in Nagaland. The study employs the qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. The polarisation of Naga tribes into advanced and backward categories for reservation and development purposes has percolated and immersed into the fabric of the society. Locating the tag of backward, it tries to contour problems related to education in backward areas that contribute to further backwardness of certain people groups in Nagaland.

Keywords: Social inequality, Education, Backward people group, Advance people group, Nagaland.

Introduction

"...the problem is not simply why inequalities come into being, but why despite efforts of many kinds, they refuse to disappear." Andre Beteille (Gupta, 2005, p.320)

Social inequality refers to the existence of socially created inequalities. Invariably, power and prestige are unequally distributed between individuals and people groups across human societies. It consists of the different privileges which some men enjoy to the prejudice of others, such as that of being richer, more honoured, and more powerful or even in a position to exact obedience (Bottomore, 1965 as quoted in Haralambos, 2009, p. 27). Beteille (1969) considered that even the simplest communities are not free from inequalities of power. The existing inequality between different people groups has been reproduced to maintain a status quo and in many cases the social status has been transferred to their heirs or the

next generation. No society is free from social inequality. Naga society has been considered to be an egalitarian society by colonial ethnographers and anthropologists (Vashum, 2000, p.22; Kuchle, 2019, p.240; Yeptho, 2016, p.1711). However, contrary to this notion there are many facets of inequalities that have existed then and are more conspicuous now. There are grey areas of inequality and the emergence of class formation in Naga society which contradicts the representation of tribal equality in various forms of media and publications (Kuchle, 2019). The social polarization and stratification of Naga society as a result of the western education system has resulted in creating asymmetry in structures of power and wealth which also brought bureaucracy and elitism, or a Euro-American class system to a formerly classless society (Thong, 2012, p. 903). Today, Naga society is differentiated into sections of stratified positions among others in the category of 'Advanced ⁱ' and 'Backward ⁱⁱ' people groups in Nagaland. Khiamniungan (2014) examines inequalities in Nagaland between the Advance and Backward tribes of Nagaland, locating the demand for its separate statehood by Eastern Nagas. She unfolds reasons such as unequal infrastructural development, the role of Christianity in imparting education to Advanced people groups and now domination over the Backward people groups. Khiamniungan places ill governance as the main factor for such a socially unequal society in Nagaland. Kikon writes that the coming of modern education employed the Nagas which led to the formation of a new class of 'educated middle class' which emerged as an important factor that moulded the political history of the Nagas (Kikon, 2003, p. 236).

Contextualizing social inequalities

Social inequality is a determining factor that impacts many the aspects of life even to access quality education (DiMaggio 1982, as cited in Stolley, 2005, p.132). Inequality in education is also a form of social inequality that is linked to many problems in society. Freire saw inequalities in the polarisation of society into two opposites and calls it dehumanisation. He argues that education was never neutral. For Freire schools either domesticate and socialize students into the dominant's group ideology as legitimate or empower them to transform themselves or society (Solorzano, 1989). His critical pedagogy is uniquely situated to address this dominant ideology and described the process of realizing dominant ideology through critically engaged practice as 'conscientisation' (Freire, as cited in Bolin, 2017). He saw society divided and hierarchical and education acted as a tool used by the dominant group (oppressor) to rule and legitimize oppression. Instead of education being critical, he found 'education as the exercise of domination, stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived

by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression' (Freire, 2005, p.78). He argued that a thorough understanding of oppression must always take a detour through some form of class analysis and the oppressed can overcome the contradiction in which they are caught, by perceiving the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can free and transform (Freire, 2005, p.13). For Gramsci, education was a part of ideological hegemony and embedded in a relationship with hegemony. According to him, hegemony is achieved through establishing consensus rather than oppressive force. The lower classes accept their social roles and consent to the rules enforced by everyday institutions. So, hegemony is achieved through the establishment of an organic link between civil and political societies (Gramsci, 1971). An institution like school produces and disseminates hegemonic power. Hegemony exists in all aspects of human life. The field of education is no exception to it. The elites through education are able to produce and promote their ideologies that justify their position by making their beliefs seem general (Mc Donald & Coleman, 1999, as cited in Syukur, 2019, p.74). Kozol studies inequalities based on class and race disparities and affirm that unequal schooling perpetuates social inequality. The disparity in quality of education segregates people as a result of disparity in schools' qualities. Every districts or group have its unique educational problems and needs and that, 'equal funding for unequal needs is not equality'. He argues state unequal funding and distribution of resources are the 'decisive force in shaping inequality' (Kozol as cited in Coleman, 1992, p. 138).

Bourdieu uses the concept of merit to explain the mechanism of the institutional form of cultural capital based on which, the students of upper and middle-class backgrounds can appropriate this cultural capital more easily than other students. In India with the acquisition of merit, the upper and middle strata of upper castes are dominating in higher education and public employment (Nash, 1990 as cited in Raj & Gundemeda, 2015, p.129). Reproduction of social hierarchies is legitimized by the school, in that it converts the existing inequalities into an academics hierarchy and conceals this reproduction beneath a cloak of an ostensibly meritocratic and democratic selection process (Dawson, 1982, p.153). Social selectivity in system of education remains a strong agenda of social inequality (Kreckel, 2006). Generally, sociologists agree that education is the most important factor influencing individual life chances in societies. Education is an important social institution that is also responsible for the socialization and full capacity development of an individual. At the national level, despite the massive expansion of the education system in India, inequalities continue to be visible at all stages of

education ranging from non-completion of primary schooling to low transition rates striking most among the socially and economically disadvantaged section of society such as Schedule Caste (SC), Schedule Tribe (ST) and socio-religious minority (Nambissan & Rao, 2018, p. 02).

In the context of Nagaland, Humstoe and Jamir (2017) linked education inequality with income inequality, stating the importance of education for the development of human capital. Beteille (1969) considered that even the simplest communities are not free from inequalities of power, and if these generally appear small or negligible, this may partly be because we assess them according to standards that are not always appropriate to them. According to Beteille, the forms and elements of inequality can change with time and space. The existing inequality between different people groups has been reproduced so as to maintain a status quo and in many cases the social status has been transferred to their own heirs or next-generation (Dasgupta & Prakash, 2013, p.103). In the study by Andre Beteille, sources of inequality are not something merely to be measured by technical devices, but it is visible to the naked eyes. Hence, there is a perceivable difference between advanced and backward categories of people groups within a given society. Therefore, one can say, the advanced countries are 'advanced' not only materially but also ideologically. The countries of the third world are not only 'backwards' economically but many of them are also 'traditional' in their cultures (Gupta, 2005, p. 282).

Locating Advanced-Backward People Groups of Nagaland

According to the 2011 census Nagaland state consists of eleven districts which home to sixteen major tribes. Nine tribes are considered to be backward tribes for reservation namely, Chakhesang, Chang, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Phom, Pochury, Sangtam, Yimchunger and Zeliang. Some of them inhabit the easternmost districts of Nagaland which borders Myanmar. These categories of people groups are officially listed to give special recognition within the state. Nagaland was created out of the Naga Hills areas of Assam and North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1963 becoming the 16th state of the Indian union. Tuensang district was part of North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), which later was included in Nagaland, forming a part of the Eastern Nagaland region. The areas in Eastern Nagaland - the Mon and Tuensang districts, were classified as 'Un-administered Areas' during the colonial period (Khiamniungan, 2014, p.72). Being un-administered for a protracted time, Tuensang district lagged compared to the other districts like Kohima and Mokokchung. The Nagaland Act (Act no.73 of 1962) which was passed in the

parliament in 1962 also acknowledge Tuensang district being backwards and inhabited by simple tribes. Therefore, it was to remain as a special charge of the Governor for ten years (HDR, 2016, p. 39). After statehood, in the year 1970, the government of Nagaland added an extra local reservation system by classifying tribes in Nagaland under the 'forward' and 'backward' categories. The classification of Naga tribes into Backward and Advanced has created a certain form of polarisation within the state. The social status held by different tribes in Nagaland is not the same. As such, the 'advanced' or 'forward' or sometimes known as 'western' Nagas hold a higher status in the society. These phenomena are predictably manifested in the West Nagaland with better infrastructural development and educational institutions besides better accessibility and healthcare, etc. In the year 2003, the Nagaland government also established the Nagaland Department of Underdeveloped Areas (DUDA) with the objective to cater to the needs of the underdeveloped areas and accelerate the pace of their development to bring them at par (Wouters, 2018, pp.222-223).

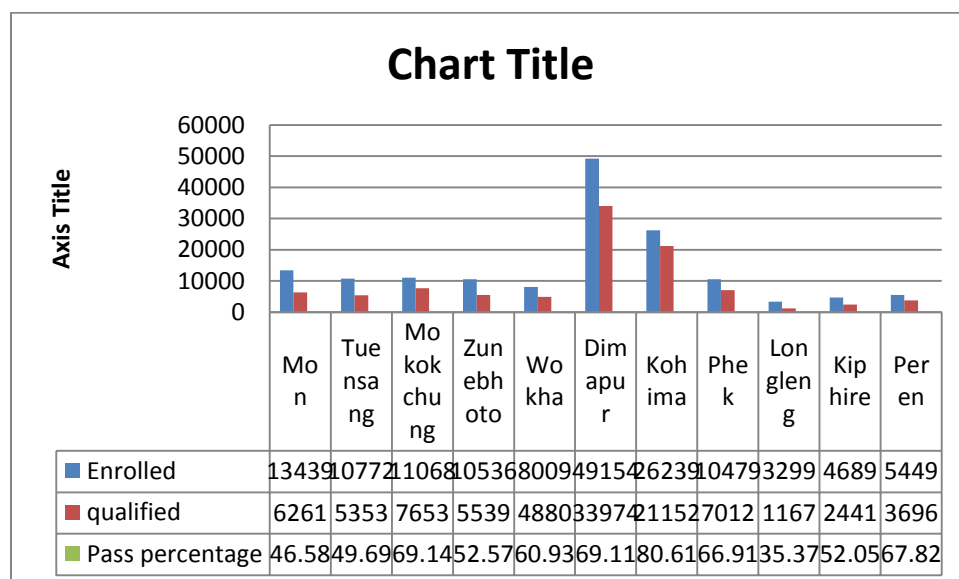
The Nagaland Backward Tribes Commission (NBTC) Bill of 2016 passed by the State government seeks to establish a commission for backward tribes in the state with a special focus on the six Eastern Naga backward tribes Chang, Khaimniungan, Konyak, Phom, Sangtam and the Yimchunger which are the predominant inhabitants of Longleng, Kiphire, Mon and Tuensang districts. This was an initiative of the government to provide special attention along with state backward quota for various state services. With the progress of time what started with 25 percent of reservation, now the quantum has increased and stands at 37%, with 25% earmarked for the six Eastern Naga backward tribes and 12% earmarked for the rest backward tribes. It may be mentioned that a roster system was also initiated in the year 2001 to ensure equal distribution of reservation among the backward tribes (Cabinet sub-committee, 2021, p.1). Hence, the local tailor-made reservations, the institutionalization of a separate state government department, etc. carved the identity of the backward tribes more prominently in the state.

Social Inequality and the Educational Case of Backward Tribes

Education among Backward people groups arrived late as compared to the other Advanced people groups of Nagaland. With the advent of Christianity and education in the advanced tribe initially, it became a factor for development and change in Naga society. With close to six decades of statehood, there is a marked difference inequality that can be observed in many aspects of society between the Advanced and Backward Tribes of Nagaland. Kuchle, in his experience of

travelling from West to East Nagaland, remarked a total shift of view of urbanization and integration as one passes from Dimapurⁱⁱⁱ or Mokokchung^{iv} to the main Town of Kiphire^v (Kuchle, 2019,p.01). Similar to his observation travelling to backward areas for fieldwork was a rather strenuous affair owing to transportation and roads issues. While in the schooling aspect of the state, various central and state schemes such as Sarva Siksha Abhiyan^{vi}, RMSA^{vii} of education, now has provided access to equal educational opportunities for all the districts. Almost every village has a government school that provides for elementary education and private schools can also be found likewise. There are a total of 2758 high schools in Nagaland and out of which, Government schools account for around 72 percent. However, shows a lower rate of performance in comparison to private schools, as it fails to provide quality education. Over a span of seven years (2014-2020) out of 41383 students enrolled, government schools have produced only 32.03 pass percentage in High School Leaving Exams conducted by the Nagaland Board of School Education (NBSE)^{viii} as observed from data collected from the office of NBSE, whereas private schools have produced 76.72 percentage out of 112695 students. Although, Central Board of School Education (CBSE)^{ix} schools are blooming with other international boards of education mostly in Kohima, Dimapur and sparsely in other advanced tribe districts, where some of the Naga students get access. Out of total 35 (thirty-five) CBSE schools in the state, only nine schools are located in different districts of backward areas. Overall, the majority of the students study under the state Board - NBSE. The records of the list of toppers from NBSE conducted High School Leaving Certificate Examination (HSLC), which happens to be the first competition for a typical Naga student, show that most of the toppers hail from the Advanced Tribes or the schools of advanced areas like Kohima, Dimapur, Mokokchung, etc. The top 20 list of the HSLC exam in the past five years (2015-2020) shows no topper from the Mon and Longleng districts. Presumably, the pass percentage is higher for Advanced Tribes. If we examine the cumulative pass percentage for seven years spreading from the year 2014-to 2020 of HSLC examination under NBSE, we will find that Longleng and Mon districts stand at the lowest pass percentage with 35.37 percent and 46.58 percent respectively. Whereas Kohima and Mokokchung stands at 80.6 and 69.1 percent (**Table I**) respectively.

Table I

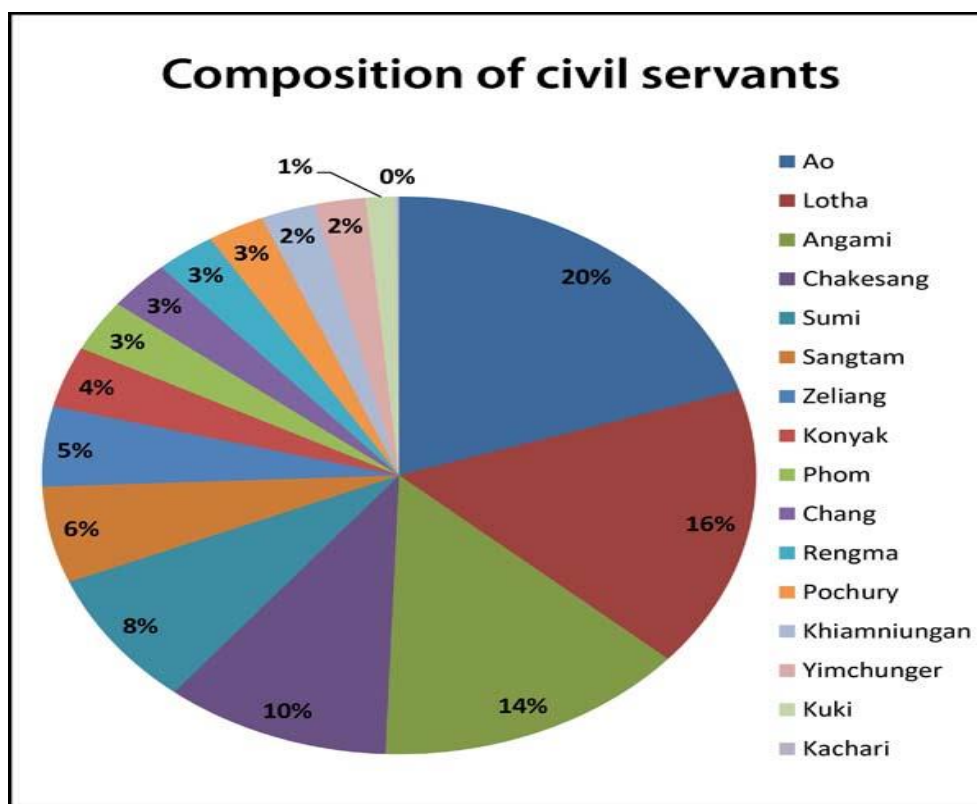


Distribution of district wise pass percentage in HSLC exams conducted by NBSE from (2014-2020) (Database NBSE)

Inter-district developmental disparities

Another perspective of looking at the difference is the distribution of government servants in Nagaland. The data reported by Eastern Mirror (2017) in (Fig I) shows that advanced tribes dominate the state list of civil servants. Also, the government employees for class B, C and D categories in the state as reported by the then minister in charge of Development of Economics and Statistics tabled the numbers of employees from the Personnel Information Management system 2017-18, P&AR shows that out of the total 1, 20,171 employees, 25,445 belongs to eastern backward tribes, whereas the remaining 92,740 is hold by advanced tribes. As an advanced tribe itself holds 22,445 which are nearly equivalent to the eastern tribes of Nagaland put together (Nagaland Page, 2019, p.4). The Human Development Indices (HDI) of Nagaland which is a summary measure of the income, education and health achievements shows large inter-district disparities in performance. Within Nagaland, the HDI was highest in Dimapur with 0.81, followed by Kohima and Wokha^x both with 0.66 and Mokokchung at 0.61. On the other hand, the Mon district had the lowest HDI with 0.50. This inter-district disparity seems to have not changed since 2001 with districts like Tuensang^{xi} and Mon still at the bottom in 2011 along with districts like Zunheboto and the new district Longleng. The Gender Development Index for the State was 0.58 in 2011, which shows a considerable improvement over the figure of 0.49 in 2001. Here Dimapur has the highest index

of about 0.72 followed by Kohima, Wokha and Mokokchung. Here again, the districts of Mon, Longleng, Zunheboto^{xii} and Tuensang are clear laggards with the GDI lying below 0.50. As in the case of the HDI, the GDI of Mon continues to be at the bottom. The Human Poverty Index combines the availability of basic amenities like toilets and pucca houses, immunisation at birth, poverty levels with education facilities and illiteracy levels. The Human Poverty Index (HPI) for the State is at about 29 percent which also shows a clear improvement over the figure of 40 percent in 2001. Once again, the districts of Dimapur, Mokokchung and Kohima are clear leaders. More crucial, the eastern districts of Tuensang and Mon continue at the bottom in terms of changes in the HPI index between 2001 and 2011, the GDI lying below 0.50. As in the case of the HDI, the GDI of Mon continues to be at the bottom (HDR, 2016, p. 32). The success in board examination, distribution of employment and the other government reports further adds to the stratifying structure as success seems to be 'embedded in structure' (Platt, 2015, p.129). This study also explores backward area accessibility to quality education and the probable contributors to outcomes of the school results in backward areas. This linkage will help in nuancing social inequality and vice-versa in Nagaland.



(Eastern Mirror 2017), Distribution of civil servants according to tribe wise of Nagaland.

Data and method

The state of Nagaland comprises eleven districts, out of which six districts fall under the category of Backward area and five under the Advance area. The study employed quota sampling to select two districts out of six Backward areas viz. Longleng and Mon and two from the Advanced area viz. Kohima and Mokokchung. According to the 2011 census, the Longleng district which homes the Phom tribe has a population of 50,484, with 562 sq.km the smallest district of the state, with a literacy rate of 72.17 percent. Mon district, land of the Konyak tribe has 2, 67,988 populations, the largest and most populous district among Backward areas, have the lowest literacy rate of 56.99 percent in the state with an area of 1, 786 sq.km. Significantly better performing advanced sample areas, the districts of Kohima inhabited majority by Angami tribe has 85.23 literacy rate with 2,67,988 population and Mokokchung, the land for Ao has the highest literacy rate of state with 91.62 percent with 1,94,622 population.

Three schools were selected in each district, two private and one Government

school based on their performances in the State Board High School Leaving Examination (HSLC) employing quota sampling. The selected sample schools are better-performing ^{xiii} schools in each district. For the primary data, both interview and questionnaire method of data collection was employed. Slovin method of determining samples was employed. This method allows a researcher to sample the population with a desired degree of accuracy when nothing about the behaviour of a population is known (Ellen, 2020).

For the sample size, based on the total NBSE enrolment of class 10 of the year 2019, using Slovin formula in determining the sample size would be 376. To calculate and obtain the sample size for each district under study, the percentage of the sample size for each district is calculated in the following way:

$$\text{Percentage of Kohima district: } \frac{\text{enrollment of Kohima district} \times 100}{\text{Total enrollment}}$$

Where, the enrolment of Kohima district is 3567 (NBSE, 2019) and the total number of enrolment for field area is 16778.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Percentage of Kohima district} &= \frac{3567 \times 100}{16778} \\ &= 21.26 \end{aligned}$$

Percentage of Kohima district is 21.26% from the total number of population for the proposed field area.

The sample size for Kohima district is calculated in the following way:

$$n = \frac{\text{Percentage of Kohima district}}{100} \times \text{Total number of sample size}$$

Where, n is the sample size of Kohima district and total number of sample size is 376.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Now, } n &= \frac{21.26}{100} \times 376 & n &= 79.9 & \text{Sample size} \\ n &= 80 \end{aligned}$$

Therefore, the sample size for the Kohima district is 80.

In the same manner, the sample size for the remaining three districts, namely, Mokokchung, Longleng and Mon is being calculated and obtained as shown in

(Table II).

Table II

Sl. No.:	District:	Enrolment : (NBSE, 2019)	Percentage:	Sample size:
1.	Kohima	3567	21.25	80
2.	Mokokchung	1542	9.19	35
3.	Mon	1851	11.03	41
4.	Longleng	382	2.27	9
Total		7342	Total sample size 165	

Distribution of District-wise sample size.

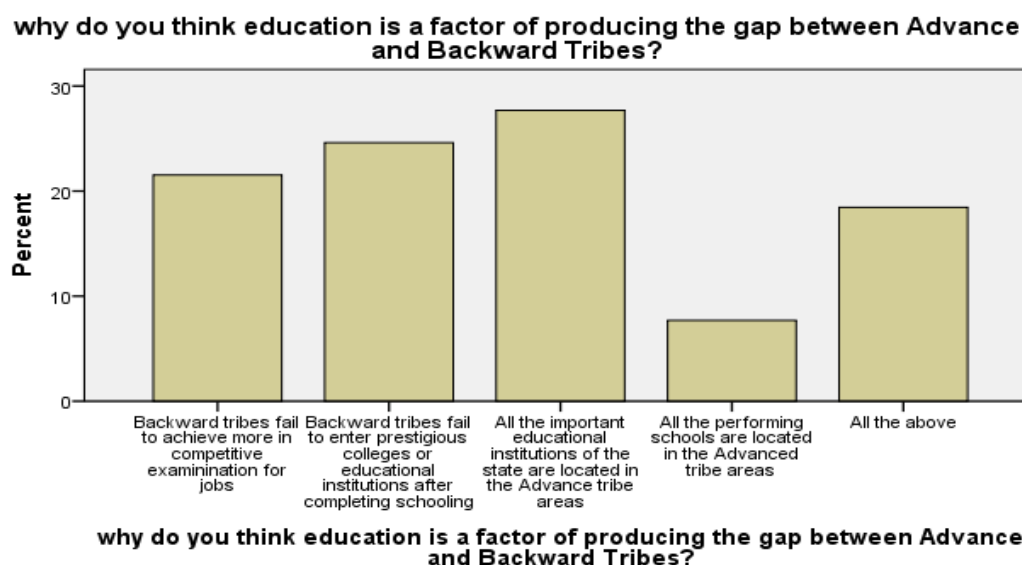
Thus a total of 165 questionnaires were employed and distributed to class 10 level students. Students of class 10 were chosen; as HSLC happens to be the first competition for any typical Naga students. A total of twenty-eight personal interviews were conducted with males and females working in different capacities; Principals, civil societies, religious organisations, and gazette officers. Twelve group discussions with the teachers also form a part of the study. Secondary data were collected from offices of NBSE and DOSE, newspapers; journals etc form the base for the secondary source.

The Backward Syndrome

Backward syndrome resonates with the concept of 'minority syndrome' as argued by Das in his study of understanding the Karbis tribe of Assam suffering from minority disabilities, experiencing social exclusion and marginalization resulting in their demand for a separate state which had resulted in ethnic unrest as one among the many cases in North East India (Das, 2015). There is a similar kind of sense of feeling of a minority among the backward tribes of Nagaland which can be attributed to a 'backward syndrome'. One of the perceived factors that inhibit institutional development and educational progress of the Backward people group is the acceptance of the tag of being 'backwards'. While enquiring among the students, it shows that out of 166 total respondents of Backward and Advance students 66 percent of the respondents affirm that Backward people groups occupy

a low position in the Naga society. Further probing into the reason, 55 percent of respondents indicate that they consider lack of proper education to be the main reason for occupying a low status in the society. They also consider education to be the factor producing a gap between the two people groups. The location of all the important educational institutions in Advanced areas, the inability of the Backward people groups to compete in competitive exams and failure to enter into prestigious colleges and institutions after schooling was the recurring causes students attributed to the continuous gap between the two people groups. Table 4 shows the distribution of their responses (Table III).

Table III



Students' responses distribution on education is a factor for producing a gap between the two people groups.

In a group discussion with the teachers, it came to light that the 'undermining self-worth consciousness' of the students acts as a mental block to the development of the people in general and students in particular. According to Rose^{xiv} (28 F), a teacher who works in a private school of Longleng belonging to the Phom tribe;

‘The main reason we fail to excel is that the students consider themselves backward and we cannot reach, we cannot reach’.

In sync with what the teacher had to say, a school principal serving in East Hills School^{xv} Longleng for more than twenty-five years confirm that students think they are not good enough. He added that they need to have the self-belief that they are good enough to excel in state board exams or for that matter any competitive exam. Abeni^{xvi} (27F) who teaches in Kohima said that the tag of backward is not allowing the people to grow. Although some have come up, the majority of them are affected by this tag. The tag in itself is degrading she affirmed.

Another aspect is the consensual response to the social structure of the state that leads them to take it as something given. The Backward people group members tend to take the status quo as something legitimate or commonsensical (Gramsci, 1971). This is perceived in what the Executive Secretary of Konyak Baptist Bumeinok Bangjum, ^{xvii}Mr Manglip^{xviii} (57 M) has to say on the reason why backward people are still lacking behind, he stated that;

‘Advanced tribe dominates because they are qualified and that is not unjust. We cannot change that fact or the mindset of our people’s ‘inbuilt mindset’ (backward). There is a vast difference in the understanding level between us (advance and backward)’.

Social Inequality and Everyday Life

The domination of the Advanced Tribe as a more dominant group than the Backward Tribe can also be understood in the way they encounter domination which gets expressed in their everyday lived experiences. During the course of observation of schools, interviews, and group discussions with students and teachers, it was observed that when the students come across the term ‘backward’, they would laugh and giggle, perhaps a tag that the students do not want to associate them with or talk about. Questions about backward inadvertently making them shy and nervous. One of the respondent remarked that the word backward reminded them of their inferior low status in society. Such encounter is not limited to the students, but corresponding evidence was also narrated by the Principal of Government Higher Secondary School of Longleng area, who cited that in her district everyone belongs to the same community and so there was no problem within the school surrounding. However, when it comes to dealing with higher authorities of the Education Department in Kohima for example, she mentioned belittlement not just by superiors but counterparts and subordinates of other people

groups. Again a Phom young teacher, Mr Mania^{xix} (25 M) recounts that people belonging to the reserved category (backward tribes) are very often the butt of a joke. He states;

‘The letter BT just makes us numb! Whenever we see in the results of job recruitment the letters BT (backward tribe) specified with names of the selected candidate, we actually cannot recognise whether the candidate is qualified like others. We may be well qualified but having those letters attached just makes us numb!’

The feeling of being numb and inferior is not only felt by youths or those engaged in the educational sector, but civil society also encounters suppression of their voices. Recollecting the experiences of dealing with Naga Hoho^{xx} the apex civil society of the Konyak tribe, Mr Yamlo^{xxi} (58 M) stated that;

‘Such kind of inferiority and feeling of us as a rare species is experienced during discussions and debates of certain matters with the Naga Hoho, in certain discussion our ENPO^{xxii} voices are not much heard.’

The dominance can also be viewed from the context in which they identify themselves in society. A Gazette officer of the Phom tribe, Aniem^{xxiii} (53M) recollects

‘Many years back there was a trend among the Phoms to keep Ao names such as Akum, Moa, etc. we love keeping Ao names as our people wanted to associate and identify with the Ao’s. Having Ao names made us feel advanced.’

The pursuit to identify them with the Advance Tribe needs to be understood from the condition that they have to speak loud in order to be heard and identified to which tribe they belong to. According to 2011 census, the dynamic of the population shows that Backward Tribe constitutes as much as 41.94 per cent of the total population of Nagaland. Efforts are often required to make their existence known as a people group. According to Chingshak Chang^{xxiv} (46 M), a teacher in Mon catholic school, he purposely chose to use his tribe name (Chang) instead of his given surname. This was so because to him, many people groups were not aware of his Chang tribe’s existence in Nagaland.

Often even powers in the hands of the Backward Tribe fail to garner the same social status accorded to advanced people groups. Sharing a lighter moment during the

interview one respondent from Phom apex student union, Mr Nuklo^{xxv} (32 M) narrates with laughter the joke that goes around in everyday life Interaction;

‘This tag of backward should be removed! Even the so-called Ministers and MLAs (Member of Legislative Assembly) although they share the same rank and file with those of Advanced Tribes, they are ridiculed with tag such as-, ‘backward Minister ase ki kobo’! (What to do a mere Backward Minister!).

Paucity of Motivation and Reference Group

According to Merton, a member of a particular group, another group is a reference group when members of a group strive to be like the members of the second group in some respect, the second group serves as the reference group of the first (“ChromeIAS,”n.d). Any individual in a society, when he finds one progressing in life, he desires to progress and try to imitate and take the value or standards of other individuals and groups (Merton, 1968, p.282). Beteille mentioned that the obstacles are many before backward classes for free and open competition. Besides, objective factors such as lack of means, subjective factors like lack of motivation and consequences of centuries of organised discrimination adds to their despair (Beteille, 1983, p.100). One of the determining factors that add to further strengthen the reproduction of the gulf between the advanced and backward tribes is the lack of motivation and intellectual leadership.

The importance of motivation is very crucial for any individual success in life. It serves as a drive to reach the goal and determination. A school Principal of Mon district who had served around twenty-five years as a teacher in King Henry Higher Secondary School Mokokchung remarked that there is a major concern with the students and parents in Mon and that is their lack of motivation. He added that in King Henry school junior students invariably want to perform better than their seniors, which is missing here in New Horizon Higher Secondary School. This is a uniquely placed scenario of status quo and reproduction of academic mediocrity in the backward district such as Mon.

Another principal from Longleng district, Prakash Kumar^{xxvi} (49M) stated that;

‘From interaction with the students, I learn that they hardly aim to achieve sixty to eighty percentages in the exams. They are contented with forty or fifty percent they are more than happy with a mere pass mark. Whereas in the school where I worked before students were

very competitive among themselves including their parents. You see even community, parents and society need to encourage the students to excel.'

Quizzing the teachers on why there are less toppers from backward areas, teachers said that in advanced area schools they have the role model of successful seniors that always inspire or ignite them. They also mentioned that in backward areas many parents are still ignorant and so they fail to inspire and encourage their children. Schooling is much more than just sending kids to school, a respondent remarked. Sharma (47M)^{xxvii} who teaches Math is one of the reputed school in Kohima noted that teachers enjoy teaching in Kohima as students are competitive with one another which enable the schools to produce toppers. A teacher of Government Higher Secondary School Longleng who had being transferred to many districts adds that in Kohima and Dimapur not only the students but the parents and schools compete with each other which is a great motivation. No doubt, such kind of scenario could be true in any district between government and private schools. Talking about lack of determination among the youths, Apex Student Organisation President of the Konyak tribe, Mr Angki^{xxviii} (29 M) stated:

Nijor laka determination ekta nia in konyak tribe (there is lack of self-determination in Konyak tribe). In the race of development, we cannot expect the advanced tribes like Ao, Sema, Angami to wait for us. Another important reason why 'we' Konyak are lacking behind among all the other backward tribes is that we don't have a good neighbour. For example, the Phom tribe is close to Ao area; they are getting the Hawa Pani (air and water) of Ao. Talk about Chang tribe in Tuensang area; since it was the first headquarter with Kohima and Mokokchung so they had opened their eyes way before and the Sangtams neighbouring to Sema. So they have an additional advantage of being in closer proximity to the advanced tribe, whereas for us, our neighbours are Arunachal and Assam. We lack such influence as that of Chang and Phom tribes.

Proxy teachers and lack of qualified teachers

According to the data collected from the Directorate of School Education, it shows that comparatively in Backward area schools, the student-teacher ratio is more. In other words, the number of teachers is less in Backward Schools. For schools in Mon and Longleng, there are round twelve and four students respectively for every teacher, which is high when compare with districts like Mokokchung and Kohima.

With regards to qualifications of teachers, out of the total number of teachers in both the districts, Under Graduate Teachers constitute about 51% in Mon and 64% in Longleng. (Table IV).

Table IV

Sl. no	Dist ricts	Total of schoo ls	Total numbe r of Govt.sc hools	Total number of students (1-12)	Total numbe r of teacher	Stu de nt tea che r rat io	Below graduate level	Gradu ate	Po st gra du ate	B.ed qualifie d
1	Mon	308	227	19958	1594	12.5	817 (51%)	585 (37%)	192 (12%)	184 (11%)
2	Mok okchung	259	197	9896	2570	3.85	891 (35%)	1251 (49%)	428 (17%)	572 (22%)
3	Kohi ma	281	170	11907	2012	5.91	751 (37%)	822 (41%)	439 (22%)	611 (30%)
4	Lon gleng	111	88	3586	785	4.56	504 (64%)	239 (27%)	42 (5%)	71 (9%)

Student-Teacher Ratio and Teachers Profile of Government School, Nagaland, (Class 1-12), (database: DOSE).

One of the major problems in the state education system is the existence of proxy teachers. It refers to the practice in which a government-appointed teacher illegally appoints another person to work in one's place for consideration. It is one of the most common problems which results in the quality of education being compromised. Recently in the year 2020, the Directorate of School Education through its verification drive detected 438 proxy teachers which demonstrate the gross problem in the state. It was a common narrative discussed during group discussion and interviews with Teachers, Principals and Civil Societies of the two

districts. Commenting on the problem of proxy teacher, Iralu ^{xxix} (52M) vice president of Angami Public Organisation said that government schools are equally provided but the existences of proxy teachers make a disparity in the quality of education. The General Secy. of Konyak's apex Students Civil society Langpong ^{xxx} (36M) pointed out that though they carry out surprise checking yet, the existence of proxy teachers could not be curbed in their area. He mentioned that due to lack of facilities government employees posted in their areas don't want to come and resort to such malpractice. Discussing on the existence of proxy teachers in Longleng area, Yangli ^{xxxi} (29F), Phom Lady Teacher who is serving in Government Higher Secondary School Longleng cited that the practice of keeping proxy teachers was not limited to single tribe but her people who stay in Kohima and Dimapur were also included. In fact, she added that her tribe might outnumber the other tribes in keeping proxy.

The existence of proxy teachers in backward areas like Mon and Longleng comes with great loss. Looking at the NBSE record of NIL performance from the year 2008-2019, it is observed that some government schools in Mon and Longleng have been consistently underperforming in Matric examination for over five years. For instance, in the case Longleng, out of twelve schools recorded so far for nil performances, six schools come in this category of discussion. In sync with the report the president of Phom Student union, Nuklo (32 M), disclosed that in their area two high schools were shut down owing to underperformance. When they detect any anomalies such as proxy, they report it to the concerned department, but not much help is extended, and no proper action is taken. In addition, it was also mentioned that the Sub District education Officers (SDEO) or District Education Officer (DEO) who are transferred to their area by the government are mostly those with poor health, nearing retirement, etc. Hence, not only do they lack good teachers but also a good administration force, he added. Students' body with the help of donations received from well-wishers often employs private teachers to teach Maths and Science and also conduct special coaching for the HSLC candidates. But in one or two months they cannot help to improve most of the students. Instances such as these go on to show inconsistencies and a lack of political will on the part of the state to bring about significant changes in these so-called backward districts.

While talking about quality education in private schools, Aien ^{xxxii} (34 F) a lady Post Graduate Teacher (PGT) from an advanced tribe who is currently working in Mon higher secondary school added from her experience that even during Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El.Ed) ^{xxxiii} programme classes most private teachers

don't even know how to speak English and most teachers are not qualified. Hence the unemployed youths who fail to find employment in urban areas, return to their area in hopes of finding one. Also much to her shock and astonishment, one of her students who dropped out of High school was serving as a substitute teacher in their village. Such instances contours lack of economic resources, owing to which, quality education in Backward people groups areas gets compromised. Furthermore, the schools in these areas fail to attract qualified teachers because the schools are mostly in no position to pay salary like those schools in Kohima and Dimapur. The principal of a catholic school in Longleng, Father Phillip^{xxxiv} (48 M) stated

We cannot employ qualified teachers because we cannot pay them. Here in backward areas, we cannot charge a higher amount of fees like in Kohima and Dimapur where parents are financially stable to pay higher fees. But here most parents are farmers so the maximum we can charge is four to five hundred monthly. Suppose if we increase the fees structure to eight hundred then we end up losing students as parents will go in pursuit of schools with lower fees structure.

Bourgeoning opportunities, social inequality and the status quo

Kikon& Karlsson (2019) in their book 'Leaving the land' talk about the journey of migration of Naga youths in various metropolitans cities of mainland India in pursuit of jobs. They try to understand the migration of youths who fail to get employment opportunities in their homeland as a result of prolonged armed long internal conflict, militarization, and a stagnant economy coupled with ineffective governance. And the new life that the indigenous migrants envisioned which is completely different from the reality back home makes the question of return more uncertain. The *Wayfinding* of better opportunities in life leaves lesser scope for coming home. Akin to it, people in Mon and Longlen districts in their pursuit for wayfinding of better opportunity and education lead them to leave their home for Kohima and Dimapur. Hansula^{xxxv} (26 F) who earlier had worked in Backward area, presently serving in Mount Zion School, Mokokchung shared from her experience that it's challenging to find good and experienced teachers, especially Science and Math teachers, to work in the Backward area. They feel reluctant to work owing to the distance and salary package. The schools also suffer from the transfer of many good students to Advance areas which the teachers attested for low performance. The transfer of bright students for better education or the lack of

job opportunities and poor development makes it clear that the area has failed to attract and retain bright students and employ their educated youths. The Principal of a private school in Longleng, Prakash Kumar (49M) stated;

‘Primary section, they may study here in Longleng but after that, they relocate to Kohima, Dimapur. Many good students have left this school. They opt to leave because they feel that they will have better opportunities (school and job opportunity)’.

Being exposed to better schooling and opportunity in life makes the return uncertain. It was mentioned that even after the completion of education, parents want their children to live in Kohima and Dimapur even though they may not be doing anything, and the parents are willing to sacrifice just to retain their wards there. While interacting with Ching^{xxxvi} (12M), a domestic helper in Mokokchung from Konyak tribe it was learnt that he along with his parents considers the education provided in Mokokchung government school is far better than that provided in Mon district government school as teachers teach mostly in their dialect and not in English

Conclusion

Education rests on the principle of equality as it is an agency for equalizing the educational opportunities of an individual by improving life chances for achievement. Many aspiring Naga students depend on the reservation policy of the state. There are mixed opinions among the Nagas with regard to the reservation policy, especially among the backward tribes. The Eastern Nagas consider it as their legitimate right and seek to increase the reservation percentage. The prevalence of the job reservation policy has enabled Backward tribes like Chakhesang in climbing the social ladder and improving their condition. For an instance the Chakhesang has 75 civil servants, which is more in comparison to an Advanced tribe like the Sumi with 58 civil servants (Eastern Mirror, 2017). With the change in times, conditions and perceptions as the state need to re-look and review the policy. The polarization of Naga tribes into Advanced and Backward categories for reservation and development purposes has percolated and immersed into the fabric of society. There is inequality of social status enjoyed by the different people groups which casts an overarching effect on all spheres of life. As a result, a norm like situation has been created which is constructed and accepted (Guziec, 2015). The established structure of society creates a hegemonic principle that flows down from students’ expectation of themselves and their belittled and even degraded feeling of the backward tag. The motivation of the students gets arbitrated by such feeling

of de motivation and inferiority complex. In addition, the looming presence of corruption of proxy teachers and insufficient opportunities for employment are undoubtedly important dynamics that work together to make backward area more vulnerable to social inequality. Education as an equaliser is questioned owing to the existence of constraints related to the accessibility of quality education. As such it is sheer inequality in education that needs to be explored and understood in conjunction with the advancement of time.

ⁱAdvance word is used as an administrative category used in Nagaland for job reservation in Nagaland. Advance or also known as forward tribes consisting of Ao, Angami, Lotha, Rengma and Sema tribe of Nagaland.

ⁱⁱ Backward word is used as an administrative category used in Nagaland for job reservation. Nine tribes are considered to be backward tribes for the purpose of reservation namely Chakesang, Chang, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Phom, Pochury, Sangtam, Yimchunger and Zeliang

ⁱⁱⁱDimapur is one of the districts in Nagaland which is the main gateway and commercial centre of the state

^{iv}Mokokchung district of Nagaland is mainly occupied by the Ao(advance tribe) Naga tribe which is politically and economically the most important urban centre in northern Nagaland

^v Kiphire is newly formed ninth district of Nagaland which was carved out of Tuensang district home to Yimchungru, Sangtam and Sumi Naga tribes

^{vi} SSA: Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan or SSA, is an Indian Government programme for universal primary education

^{vii} RMSA: Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan is a centrally sponsored scheme of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, for the development of secondary education in public schools throughout India

^{viii} NBSE: Nagaland Board of School Education is Nagaland's state agency for the promotion and development of secondary and higher secondary education.

^{ix} CBSE: Central Board of Secondary Education is a national level board of education in India for public and private schools which is controlled and managed by Union Government of India.

^xWokha is a district in Nagaland which home to the Lotha Naga tribe

^{xi}Tuensang district is the largest district of Nagaland. Chang, Sangtam, Yimchunger and Khiamniungan tribes lives in this district

^{xii}Zunheboto is a district of Nagaland, inhabited by Sema Naga tribe

^{xiii} Based on NBSE records of school performance in the HSLC examination district wise, those schools in each district whose pass percentage and performance are comparatively better are referred as better performing schools.

^{xiv} Rose is a social science teacher of St. Thomas High School, Longleng (Rose (28 F), interviewed on 27/10/2019 in Longleng-India).

^{xv}Pseudo name has been used here.

^{xvi} An English teacher at Clare Higher Secondary School, Kohima (Abeni (27F), interviewed on 12/02/2020 in Kohima-India

^{xvii} Konyak Baptist Bumeinok Bangjum is an organization of the Baptist Churches of the Konyak Naga tribe. It's headquarter is at Mon.

^{xviii} Executive Secretary of Konyak Baptist Churches organization (Mr Manglip (57M), interviewed on 12/11/2019 in Mon-India).

^{xix} A social science teacher at East Hill High school, Longleng (Mania (25M), interviewed on 29/10/2019 in Longleng-India)

^{xx} Hoho is a Naga term, the meaning of which is Parliament. Naga Hoho is the apex tribal body of Nagas.

^{xxi} President of apex Konyak civil society (Yamlo (58M), interviewed on 11/11/2019 in Mon-India).

^{xxii} Eastern Naga Peoples' Organisation (ENPO) is the apex body of six Naga tribes namely Konyak, Chang, Yimchunger, Sangtam, Phom and Khaimniungans

^{xxiii} Vice Principal of Government College, Longleng (Aniem (58M), interviewed on 27/10/2019 in Longleng-India).

^{xxiv} Chingshak (46M) interviewed on 12/11/2019 in Mon-India

^{xxv} President of apex Phom Students Union (Nuklo (32 M), interviewed on 29/10/2019 in Longleng-India)

^{xxvi} Principal of East High school, Longleng. Serving for more than twenty years (Prakash Kumar (49M), interviewed on 26/10/2019 in Longleng-India)

^{xxvii} Sharma (47M) interviewed on 13/02/2020 in Kohima-India

^{xxviii} President of apex Konyak Students organisation (Angki (29M), interviewed on 10/11/2019 in Longleng-India)

^{xxix} Iralu (52M) interviewed on 15/02/2020 in Kohima-India

^{xxx} Langpong (36M) interviewed on 10/11/2019 in Mon-India

^{xxxi} Post Graduate Teacher of History serving at Government Higher Secondary School, Longleng (Yangli (29F) interviewed on 25/10/2020 in Longleng-India).

^{xxxii} Post Graduate Teacher of English serving at Government Higher Secondary School, Mon (Aien (34F), interviewed on 10/11/2019 in Mon-India

^{xxxiii} Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El.Ed). A programme conducted by National Institute of Open Schooling India, which provides designed package for in-service untrained teachers as a result of Right to Education Act of India making mandatory for every teacher to gain professional training for teaching

^{xxxiv} Principal of St. Thomas High school, serving for more than fifteen years (Father Philip (48M), interviewed on 25/10/2019 in Longleng-India)

^{xxxv} Science teacher at Mount Zion School, Mokokchung (Hansula (36F) interviewed on 5/12/2019 in Mokokchung-India)

^{xxxvi} Domestic helper from Mon district, studying in class nine at Mokokchung Government Higher Secondary school(Ching (12M) interviewed on 8/12/2019 in Mokokchung- India)

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Article: Negotiating the Question of Caste, Islam and Indian Muslims: Caste Elements among Meos of Mewat

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Negotiating the Question of Caste, Islam and Indian Muslims: Caste Elements among Meos of Mewat

--- Altaf Hussain

Abstract

Caste system is a basic social structure of the Indian society. In the past, there was a common view among scholars that the caste system is unique to Hindu society and an integral part of it. Therefore, very rich literature has been produced on the Hindu caste system and its various aspects. But, in recent times many social scientists have also recognized the existence of caste-like features among the non-Hindu religious communities particularly the Muslims of India. The main objective of this paper is to revisit the issue of caste among Indian Muslims in general and the Meos of Mewat in particular. The paper will analyze the existence of castes like attributes among Meos of Mewat from a sociological and historical perspective which is widely overlooked in the prior works on the theme and Meo community. In the end, this paper will also going to deal with the emergence of Tablighi Jama'at revival movements among Meos of Mewat and its intrusion into the social and cultural life of the Meo Community and how Meos respond to Tablighi interventions, particularly in their socio-cultural life.

Key words: Caste, Islam, Indian Muslims, Meos, Mewat, Tablighi Jama'at.

A Brief Analysis of Caste, Islam and Social Stratification of Indian Muslims

The caste system is a basic social structure of Hindu society and an essential part of it. Scholars have studied caste in its various parameters in a variety of ways at a national, regional and village level. Ghaus Ansari (1960, p. 1) rightly said that there already exists a great mass of literature on the Indian caste system and there is hardly any aspect of this phenomenon that remains untouched. But, unfortunately, such studies were confined to the Hindu caste system. But in recent times several social scientists and anthropologists' works on non-Hindu religious communities in a different parts of India recognized the fact that other religious communities of India like Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs are also stratified in the lines of the caste system. More importantly, various sociologist and anthropologists studied various

Muslim communities in a different part of India and they also recognized the fact that caste-like features also exists among Indian Muslims. This paper is going to deal with the issue of caste among Indian Muslims in general and Meos of Mewat in particular.

Firstly, it is important to know the stand of theoretical Islam on the issue of caste distinctions. Islam religion emerges as a revolutionary ideology, mainly, based on the twin premises; the unity of God, and the brotherhood of mankind. Islamic faith theoretically stands for co-existence, brotherhood, and egalitarian society. It is also proclaimed in the Holy Quran in Surah Al-Hujrat (Versa, 49:14) that: - O mankind! We have created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes where you might get to know one another. The noblest of you, in Allah sight, is the most righteous of you. Allah is wise and all-knowing. Even in his last sermon, the Prophet Mohammad categorically declared Beware! All mankind is from Adam and Eve. The Arabs have no superiority over a non-Arab nor is the non-Arab superior to an Arab. A dark-skinned man has no superiority over white-skinned man, nor is a white-skinned man have superiority over a dark-skinned man except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constituted to the brotherhood (Rahman, 1996, p. 4). This is evident from the Prophet's examples and those of his companions as well. For instance, Prophet Mohammad belonged to the highly respected tribe of Quraish, a few months before his death married Qutaiba, the daughter of Qais, who was a weaver by occupation. The first Caliph Abu Bakr, who had a distinguished lineage and family background, married off his sister Umm Farwah to a man who was a weaver by occupation (Habib-al-Rahman, 1985, p.14). Reuben Levy (1957, pp. 53-66) also indicates a picture of the society during the early period of Islam as being a great ideal of equality. For instance, with reference to *Kitab-al-Aghani*, he quotes a number of facts to show that a princess of the noble Quraish tribe had no superior position than a Beduin. Prophet's marriage to a lowly slave, and that Ka'ba - the most important place of worship was accessible to all Muslims. Thus, it would seem that while the early Arab society was structured on the principle of the tribal aristocracy based on birth, Islam still did not constitute an elaborate system of social stratification. In fact, it was its broad humanistic perspective, tolerance, and its vision of egalitarianism that fascinated millions of people to its fold. (Momin, 1975, p. 580).

Ghaus Ansari (1960, p. 28) noted that during the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammad, most of the battles fought in the name of Islam and were confined to the boundaries of Arabia and after his death; numerous attacks were launched

outside the Arabian soil. The idea of equality among Muslims was practicable only in the then prevailing conditions of Arabia. In the course of the expansion of Islam and its contact with other complex cultures and democratic forms of political organization, social equality within the community gradually disappeared. The very structure of Islam itself in this process became the victim of social discrimination. Some social scientists also highlight that Indian Muslims practised an elaborate system of social stratification since the establishment of Muslim rule in India. Yoginder Sikand (2004) mentioned that,

The *Ashraf - Ajlaf* division is not the invention of modern social scientists, for it is repeatedly mentioned in medieval works of *Ashraf* scholars themselves. To these writers, the Muslims of Arab, Central Asia, Iranian and Afghan extractions were superior in social status to the local converts. This owed not just to racial difference, as local converts generally being dark-skinned and *Ashraf*, lighter complexioned, but also to the fact that *Ashraf* belonged to the dominant political elite, while the bulk of *Ajlaf* remained associated with the ancestral profession as artisans and peasants, which are looked down upon as inferior and demeaning.

Imtiaz Ahmad (1966, p. 270) further noted that,

Birth as a principle of status and honour was considered as very essential in the early Muslim society in India. In the administrative system, the position of status and authority was assigned to the members of the families of foreign origins, who had descended either from the accompanied invading armies or from the original immigrants. Barni informs us that the early Turkish Sultans contemptuously treated the Muslims of local origin. Iltutmish dismissed thirty-three persons from government services because of their birth in the lower caste. When he appointed Jamal Marzuq as the *Mutassarif* of *Qannauj* on the recommendation of Nizam-ul Mulk Junaidi, Aziz Bahruz objected to this appointment on the ground of his low status of birth. Iltutmish not only cancelled his appointment but instituted an inquiry into the genealogy of Nizam-UL Mulk himself. When it was found that the *Wazir* belonged to a weaver family, Sultan had lost confidence in him. Thus, a lower caste-born person neither could be recommended for an *Iqta* nor appointed to the post of *Khwaji* or *Mudabbbin*. Following the same

practice, Sultan Balban dismissed lower caste-born persons from all-important offices. Sayyid Ashraf Jahangari writes in one of his letters that, Balban had made thorough inquiries about the families of all his office and government servants. Expert genealogists had gathered in Delhi from all provinces of the country to help him in ascertaining the family status of all these persons. Muhammad Tughlaq consciously initiated the policy of giving preference to foreign-born Muslims in administration and government, and systematically ignored the claim of Muslims born in India.

Denzil Ibbetson (1911, p.14) also observed in British India that in Punjab, conversion to Islam had no effect on the caste of the converts, his social customs are unaltered; his rules of marriage and inheritance are unchanged. During the British colonial rule, all the census reports of British India (from 1881 to 1931) and several glossaries of caste and tribe from various parts of India claimed the existence of caste-based distinction among the Indian Muslims. The census of India, 1901, mentioned about 133 social groups prevalent among the Indian Muslims. It also indicated that the Muslim community was largely divided into *Ashraf* and *Ajlaf* social groups which were almost analogous to the Hindu caste system. In later years, sociologists such as J. H. Hutton, E. H. A. Blunt, G.S Ghurye, S.C Dube and M.N. Srinivas reinstated the existence of caste elements among the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent through their ethnographic works. British ethnographers examine the issue of caste among Indian Muslims on a Varna basis and differentiated them based on origin and occupation. However, all the existing information we have in British India on this theme is firmly vague, fragmentary, and fragile.

In post-colonial India, several social scientists have presented either historical or sociological studies about Indian Muslims and reported the existence of caste-like features in their particular works and communities. Ghaus Ansari (1960) was a prominent figure, who specifies that the Muslims in the Uttar Pradesh comprised of two major ethnic sections; (i) those who claim themselves to be the descendants of early Muslim immigrants, such as Saiyad, Sheikh, Mughal or Pathan, and (ii) those indigenous origins whose ancestors were proselytized to Islam. The former section is collectively called the *Ashrafs* or *Shurafa* and the latter is called the *Ajlafs*. He categorized the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh into four major blocks, namely, priests, warriors, commoners, and serfs. In this way, he attempted to compare these four groups with the four Varna's of the Hindus society. S.C. Misra

(1964) also examines caste and social hierarchy among Muslims of Gujarat. His work mainly deals with a socio-historical investigation of the communal organization of the Muslim community in Gujarat. He argued that the social stratification among the Muslim communities residing in Gujarat is patterned by the Hindu caste system with some significant differences. Zarina Ahmad (1962, pp. 325-336) also observed that the structure of Muslim society in India does not reveal the Islamic ideals of social equality. She pointed out that even the Ashraf Muslims (Muslims who claim to be of foreign descent) resemble the Hindu caste cultures in many aspects. She noted that Ashraf society includes an endogamous group system, restricted mobility among castes, prohibition on eating and drinking, and is organized on a hierarchical scale. She further observed that social groups among the non-Ashrafs (Muslims of Indian origin), approximate even more intimately to the Hindu castes. It is evident that early works tried to understand the issue of caste among Indian Muslims on a general and Varna level.

During the 1980s, Imtiaz Ahmad brought a volume, which deeply enriched the available literature on the structure and the functioning of the caste-based stratification among the Muslims spread across the different parts of India. The book comprises ten empirical studies carried out by sociologists and social-anthropologists in multiple cultural and geographical settings of India during the late sixties and early seventies. Ranjeet K. Bhattacharya (1973, pp. 107-32) studied the concept and ideology of Caste among the Muslims of Rural West Bengal and observes that despite claims to adhere to the egalitarian ideology of Islam, there is a rigid system of stratification present among west Bengal Muslims. M.K.A. Siddiqui (1973, pp. 133-156) in his work on Caste among the Muslims of Calcutta argues that the concept of caste is opposed to Islamic beliefs, but the caste-like system is functionally present among the Muslims of Calcutta. Leela Dube (1973, pp.195-230) in her case study among the Laccadive Muslims observes that the caste among the Muslim groups on the Island can be compared with the Hindu caste system, though it is not similar in many matters. Victor S. De'Souza (1973, pp. 45-60) study on the Moplahs on the South-west Coast of India also observed that the Muslim status group of Mysore and Kerala are hierarchical stratified and observed endogamy. Zarina Bhatti (1973, pp. 89-106) work on status and power in a Muslim dominated village of Uttar Pradesh observes that the system of social stratification among Muslims can be best understood within a caste framework. She argues that the Muslims in Kasauli had a caste system similar to that of the Hindus, and that the Muslim caste structure had its roots in a political-economic system, which was part of the existing Hindu feudal system in India. In his overview, Imtiaz Ahmad

(1973) mentioned that some features of casteism are certainly prevalent among Indian Muslims. He also observed that, unlike the Hindu caste system, the pattern of stratification among Muslims does not enjoy any ideological justification. Ahmad concluded by saying that, the caste system exists among the Muslims but it differs from the Hindu model in certain important respects. Ahmad also notices that caste among the Indian Muslims is due to the influence of the caste system among the Hindus.

In the last couple of decades, many other social scientists like Masood Alam Falahi, Hasan Ali, T N, Madan, and Parvez. A. Abbasi has also reported the presence of caste-based distinctive features such as endogamy, hierarchy, occupational specialization, and hereditary membership in their respective studies. Recently Anwar Ali (2005) credibly demonstrated the reality of caste among Muslims in northern India, particularly Bihar. He has researched the lives of the low and backward amongst Muslims and noted how these Muslims have been forced to live on the margins in sub-human conditions, how they have been systematically discriminated against by society, the forward, by the religious leadership, by the political parties. He further writes that how upper caste/class Muslims continue to maintain their hold over various waqf boards, important madarsas, mosques, *darghas*, tombs, and minority educational institutions. The majority of IAS and IPS

and other reputed services among Muslims still belong to upper caste Muslims. He writes that the journey of Muslims Dalit and Hindu Dalits started more or less with the same social, educational, and economic status. However, in independent India, the constitution provided the Hindu lower caste and tribes, the status of scheduled caste and scheduled tribes and gave them a means of improving their situation. However, the Muslim Dalits were left to the mercy of Allah.

On the other hand, several scholars insisted that the system of social hierarchy among the Muslim groups is disparate and incomparable to the Hindu caste system on any grounds. They studied and considered the Muslim's social stratification along the lines of social classes of high, middle, and low, which developed through political power and landed aristocracy among the Muslims of India (Faridi and Siddiqui, 1992). A.R. Momin (1992, pp. 8-17) emphasizes the Islamic literature where he has effectively established the fact that the 'caste system' has no conformity with Islam. He argues that Indian Muslims have developed features of caste in their social structure, but that the caste system is considerably weakened and not similar to the Hindu caste system in several ways. For instance Jamil Farooqui (1992, pp. 18-30) stated that the caste characteristics are not found among

Muslim's 'pseudo-caste'. In addition, he concluded that the Muslim social structure could not be explained in terms of caste groups because they do not form the basis of social stratification in Muslim society. Ziauddin Ahmad (1992, pp. 30:50) also argues caste among Muslims is not similar to the Hindu caste system in various ways. He further observes that the caste system cannot stand on its own without the support and sanctions of religion, and conceptions of purity and pollution. Therefore, among the Muslims of India, it cannot strike roots. He says actually, among the Indian Muslims there are classes of high, middle, and low, which developed through political power and landed aristocracy. Many other social and religious scholars strongly believe that there is not any real conformity to the caste system among Muslims. They also view that social stratification among the Indian Muslims is not comparable in any respect to the Hindu society. But, in reality, the Muslim community remains as diversified, fragmented, and caste-ridden as any other community of India. The real fact is that caste is much of an objective reality within the Muslims, affecting their interpersonal, social, and economic relationship, like it, is in any other community of the Indian society (Alam, 2003).

The existing literature, on this theme, indicates that there are mainly two broad methods to study the social structure of the Indian Muslims. The first method is the one opted by Ghaus Ansari, Zarina Ahmad, and Satish Mishra, in which they carried out a study on the growth and evolution of the Muslim society across centuries and they strived to comprehend this idea on the macro-level in their respective studies. The second approach follows a sociological method, chosen by most of the sociologists who conduct fieldwork by selecting a particular community or coterie of a region and spending enough time having an explicit interaction with them. These findings are piled in a systematic disquisition of the communal and cultural aspects of the existing social structure. A close analysis of the Indian Muslim societies undoubtedly demonstrates that like the Hindu social system, the Indian Muslim social structure is also tangled in nature and varies across communities and regions. Therefore, it is very obvious that the above-mentioned approaches do not seem sufficient when used solitarily because a proper outline and information of their history are quite paramount for the conventional understanding of their existing social structure. Thus, it is required to assemble both historical and sociological perspectives in a local setting, which is often overlooked in the former works on this theme in general and the Meos community in particular. Hence, this study is intended to accumulate both of these methods to understand the existing social structure of the Meos of Mewat profoundly.

Some sociologists and anthropologists studied the social system, Kinship, and

customs of Mewat's Meos community. For instance, Shamsuddin Shams (1983) provides considerable insight into the belief system and social profile of Meos of Mewat. Pratap C Aggarwal's (1966, 1969, 1971) also wrote one book and various articles on the social structure and culture of Meos of Mewat. His work helps us to understand the social structure and culture of Meos of Mewat. His work's primary aim is to identify and interpret the social-cultural change caused by a modern institution and religious reformation in Mewat after 1947. Abha Chauhan (2003) conducted a field study in Mewat. This study tries to comprehend the operational ideologies of the Kinship organization of the Meos and current variations as well as its influence on the lives of the peoples. This study depends upon the field works across the villages of Nagina then Ferojpur block of Mewat district in Haryana. Recently Raymond Jamous (2003) works on the Kingship and Rituals of Meos of Mewat is important work to understand the Meos kingship and social institutions of Meos of Mewat. Very recently Yoginder Sikand (2002) also works on the origin, development, ideology, organization and consequence of Tablighi Jama'at movement among Meos of Mewat. Amir Ali (1970) also survey the social-economic profile of Meos of Mewat. He largely examines the social-economic and cultural outline of Meos of Mewat from the past to the present. In recent times. Shail Mayaram's (2003, 2017) writings have aroused considerable interest in the past as well as the customs of Meos.

Area of Study: Mewat

The area, Mewat, is a distinct, socio-cultural and historical region of Northern India. In medieval times, the Persian sources usually preferred Mewat as the land of Meos and Khanzadas. During the medieval times, the inhabitants of Mewat included the group of Meos, and other cultivating classes such as Khanzadas, Jats, Gujjars, Ahirs, Rajputs, Baqqals, Brahmans, Minas, Thathars, and Malis (Fazal, 1949, pp. 202-06) During the British Rule, Mewat laid in South Delhi and included the parts of the British Districts of Muttra (Mathura), Gurgaon, a considerable portion of Alwar (Ulwur) and some parts of Bharatpur (Hunter, 1886, p. 418) A Meo poet has rightly described the area of Mewat as;

इत दिल्ली उत आगरो, अलवर और बैराठ
कालो पहाड़ सुहावणो, जाके बीच बसे मेवात।
नू तो सारी जात ही, बसां एक ही साथ

(अपर) मेव घणी तादात मे, नू बाजे मेवात II¹

Even in the present context, it is difficult to ascertain the Mewat boundaries because Meos are scattered over the districts of four states, namely, Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. Mewat has situated approximately 64 km to the southwest of Delhi, roughly corresponding to Modern Alwar and Bharatpur districts of Rajasthan and Nuh district of Haryana. It comprises the nine modern-day Tehsils of Tijara, Kishangarh, Alwar, Lachmangarh (Alwar District), Deeg, Nagar, Kama (Bharatpur district), Nuh, and Firozpur Jhirka (Nuh district) respectively (Bhardwaj, 2012, p. 220) Therefore, Mewat, the land where the 'Meos' live, is a cultural area rather than an administrative unit or a natural region. It is a composition of various Hindu and Muslim social groups but is mainly known for the Meo community.

Meos of Mewat: Origin, Islamisation, and Cultural Practices

Since, about five centuries, the Meos, are a dominant landowning sub-caste of Mewat in Rajasthan and Haryana and enjoy the privileges available to both Hindus and Muslims (Aggarwal, 1966, p. 59). The Meos claim that they belonged to the *Kshatriya* clan and their origin can be traced to Suryabansis, Chandravansis, and Agnikuls of the Rajput nobility glittering with such appellations as the Tomars, Yadav, Chauhans, and Rathors. Based on the marriage legend between Dariya Meo and Sisbadni Mina, the British ethnographers have proved that, in the past, the Meos and the Mina were connected in a marriage relationship with each other, and hence, they belong to the same race (Cunningham, 1885, Powlett, 1878, Crook, 1975, Ibbeston, 1911). Yoginder Sikand (2002, p. 110) stated that 'while it is almost certain that many Meos are indeed of Rajput stock, it seems very likely that among them there are many who are the descendants of 'lower' caste converts who either before, or after, their acceptance of Islam, laid claim to Rajput ancestry to enhance their social standing.'

Despite various views existent regarding the origin of the Meos, they were regarded as Upper-caste Rajput by the caste living within their territory including the Brahmans, Jats and Ahirs. There are again several views regarding the Islamisation of the Meos, particularly of when and how the Meos embraced Islam. According to A. Cunningham (Cunningham, 1885, pp. 24-25) the conversion did not take place

¹ It Delhi and Agro, Alwar and Bairath Mewat is situated in the middle of Kalo mountain. No, all the castes are there, just sit together (Upper) Meo Ghani Tadat Me, Nu Baje Mewat II

until the reign of Feroz Shah Tughlaq. According to W.W. Hunter (Hunter, p. 419), it is feasible that the original Meos, together with a few other castes, proselytized to Islam at the time of Ghazni in the eleventh century. British colonial ethnographers also emphasized that the Meos embraced Islam due to the cruelties inflicted by Sultan Balban and the other Muslim emperors on the Meos. (Cunningham, 1885, pp. 24-25). On contrary, the Meos believe that they were converted to Islam during the earlier phase of its spread in India. They traced their first proximity with the Muslims back to Mohammad Bin Kasim's attack on Sindh in the 8th century. The Arab invaders toiled intensely to unfurl Islam in Sindh. The Meos believed that their habitation was spread out to Sindh at that time and must have come under the influence of Islam. The Meos further believe that the second phase of the outspread of Islam among the Meos began at the time of Mahmud Ghaznavi in the 11th century, when Sayyaid Salar Sahu, Mahmud Gaznavi's brother-in-law, was in the command of the royal force. He established himself in Ajmer and started conquering the areas around Ajmer, where his son Sayyad Salar Masud Gazi defeated Tejpal, a Meo chieftain, at Dhandgarh near Rewari. Tejpal is believed to have embraced Islam and thus became the first known Meo Muslim. (Sakoor, 1974, p. 317). British ethnographers persist in the forceful conversion of Meos but the medieval sources do not provide any reliable information which proves that Delhi Sultanate and Mughal rulers forcibly converted Meos to Islam. Interestingly, the process of Islamisation of the Meos in terms of their adoption of certain Islamic practices such as nikah, burial, Eid celebration and christening Islamic names began during the late 17th and early 18th century with the help of *Dak Meroras* (Meos who were working as post-carriers in Mughal administration) (Bhardwaj, 2012, pp. 246-247). Their Islamization is still in the process even after the Meos embraced the Islamic faith long back.

Meos of Mewat: Peasantisation and Social Transformation

The Meos or Mewatis are mentioned firstly in the Persian sources. Minhaj Siraj and Ziauddin Barni mentioned that the Meos or Mewatis were involved in cattle-lifting, theft, robbery, and highwaymen activities during the 13th century. He also added that the early Meos settlement was either located on the hilltops or closely surrounded by the Aravalli hills (*Kala Pahad*). Now, it is conspicuous that the geographical setting played a considerable role in their early activities in this region. It is interesting to note that Meos who were the cattle-lifters, highwaymen, and robbers of the 13th century, since the Mughal period, particularly under the reign of Emperor Akbar, have undergone a vital transformation in the economic and social status of their society; they began to own zamindari rights in many

Parganas of Alwar, Tijara, and Sahar Sarkar of Agra Suba. The fact that the Meos uphold the zamindari rights alongside the other upper caste coterie of these Parganas indicates their increased premier social and economic status during the 16th century. Interestingly, this transformation among the Meos in the 16th century was not just restricted to their migration to plain areas, conversion to agriculture and landed caste, but was also apparent in other aspects. Abul Fazal in the *Ain-i-Akbari* mentioned other Meos of *Dak-Meoras* and *Khidmatiiyyas*, who worked as postal carriers and royal guards. Abul Fazal has referred to Meos as *Mewrah*, and he tells us that they were the natives of Mewat, and were famous as runners, and one thousands of them were employed by Akbar as post-carriers and were called *Dak-Mewrahs*. (Cunningham, 1885, p. 22). Even during the late 19th century, in Gurgaon, the Meos held 387 out of the 1264 villages, or say one-sixth of the land covering the entire south (Channing, 1882, p. 8). In Alwar, the Meos were numerically the first race in the state and the agricultural portion of land possessed by them was considerably double that of any other class of cultivators in the state. They occupied about half of the Alwar territory (Powlett, 1878, p. 3). They also occupied substantial land in Bharatpur state during the colonial period. As it was mentioned earlier, the Meos were Sudra for the Qanungo and Patwaris, a criminal tribe for British ethnographers of the 18th century. Despite this, they were regarded as the upper caste Rajput by the other caste people living within their territory including the Brahman and other Muslim and non-Muslim social groups of Mewat.

Meos of Mewat and their social organization

The entire social and political structure of the Meo community is based on their *pal-gotra* system. Most gazetteers, ethnographies, and census data compiled in the second half of the 19th century and early part of the 20th century have mentioned that Meos are subdivided into five *bans*, twelve *pals* (Pal means 'to nourish' or 'to look after') (lineage or bigger unit consisting of several *gotra*) and thirteenth *pallakra* (has the same meaning as Pal, except that it signifies smallness inferior status) of the Pahat and fifty- two *gotra* (small clan organization). They also mentioned that these divisions were identical to those that were found among Jat, Gujar, Mina, Ahir and Rajput of Mewat region. The *pal* is the basic unit of Meos kinship and segmentry polity. There is no record as to when and why Mewat was divided into Pal system. Now, all the 13 territorial sites of the Meo pals stand deserted and ruined. Each *pals* are further sub-divided into *thambas* (sub-territorial lineage) each of which is believed to have descended from a single ancestor. Thus *thamba* division is associated with the son of the founder of the *pals* to which they belong. People belonging to the same *thamba* feel closely related. *Patti* is another

term used for particular *Muhallas* of the villages associated with one of the sons of the founder of the villages. *Thok* is also the term of their division, and a prominent Meos of each *thok* is called *numbardars*.

Table-1. Details about Meos *Bans*, *pals*, and *gotras*

Name of Vamsh	Names of related Pals	Villages associated with Pals	<i>gotras</i> (clan)
Tomar (Rajput)	Balot	12	Mangria, Sirohia, Baliayana.
	Ladawat	355	Nanglot, Kataria, Sukeria Gonchia, Bodiyan
	Ratawat	12	Jamnia, Bilawat, Majlawat
	Derwal	82	Kanger, Bigot, Marag, Mander, Tawar, Saugan, Kahout
Jadu (Rajput)	Demrot	757	Gorwal, Mewal, KadNai BadNai
	Chirklot	386	Baghtia, Bhoslia
	Pundlot	84	Singalia, Machhalia
	Dulot	352	Kharakia, Bhabhla, Jounwar Lamkhera
	Nai	210	Besar, Batlawat, MahaJatlawat, Sailania Bahmanawat, Nahrawar Khanjadoo, Morejhangal Guma!, Kheldar
Chuhan (Rajput)	Pahat(Pallakra)	360	Kanwalia, Chaunker, Chaursia, Chauhan, Bhan
Badgujar	Singhal	210	Badgujar, Loka
Rathor (Rajput)	Kalisa	12	Bharkatia, Khokhat, Pawar Chalukia
Gor, Kachwaha (Rajput)	Dehngal	360	Sagrawat, Gor, Khuswal
6	13		52

Question of Caste among Meos of Mewat: An Analysis

It is fascinating to know that the Meos elucidated themselves and others in terms of *zati*, or *biradari* like the Hindu community rather than their religious community. The term *zat*, or *biradari*, is commonly used among both the local Mewati Muslims

and the Hindus, to designate a social status, stature and an endogamous ethnic unit. Thus, *zat* or *biradari* is the most important denominator of one's status and identity among the Muslims of Mewat. For instance, when a Meo addresses a member of another community he/she calls that person by his/her name and *jati* together like *Mamur Nai*, *Chotta Luhar*, *Dhanni Chamar*, *Jawahar Bania*, *Mulchand Khati*, *Pawan Bania*, *Sakir Mirasi*, *Mahbub Fakir*, *Sakina Nayan*, *Magri Luhanan*, and so on. In the Mewat, the term '*jati or zaat*' is equal to '*jati*' as is the case with the Hindu caste system. It is the most important denominator of one's status and identity. The relationship in the Mewat is categorized and hierarchied based on *jati* or *zati* with the common marker being the adherence of a person to the *unchi jati* (high caste) or the *neechi jait* (lower caste).

Further Muslims of Mewat are hierarchal arranged in the social order. The Meo who claim that they were converted from Rajput Hindu caste and are a major landowning community in Mewat region are at the top of social order. It is interesting that apart from upper caste converted Muslims other Muslims social standing depends upon their occupation, such as *Sakka* and *Nai* were higher in social standing than the *Luhar*, *Kasai* and *Teli* (oil pressure) and *Mirasi* were lower in social standing to the all Muslims due to the occupation, which they follow. It appears that apart from the higher caste converted Muslims; the lower castes Muslims follow the same occupation, which they followed before conversion to Islam. Partap C. Aggarwal (1971) in his case study of a Chavandi Kalan village in Mewat region of Rajasthan during 1980s, observed that, the peoples of Chavandi village hierarchical in the lines of *unchi jat* (high caste) and *nichi jat* (lower caste). He noted that the sixteen castes were residing in that village both Hindu and Muslims, they were divided into three ranked clusters the *unchi jat* (high castes), the *kamins* (service castes), and the *Harijans* (untouchable). He describes that Brahmans, Meos, Sikhs, Banias and Khatri were on the list of *unchi jat* (high caste) in that village. He further notes that *kamin* (services castes), out of nine castes in this group, three, *Khati*, *luhar* and *Nais* were clean Shudras. They practice their traditional caste occupation according to the *jajmani* rules. He further observed that *Fakirs*, *Sakkas*, and *Mirasis* were Muslims service castes, which serve the land owning Meos by the *jajmani* rules. Their social standing was lower than the *Nais*, and *Luhars* Muslim groups of that village. He further observed that *Harijans* (untouchable), there were two castes of untouchable in Chavandi Kalan: the *Chamars* and the *Bhangis*. They were at the bottom of the hierarchy of that village. So, it is clear from above that Muslims of Mewat are unequal but they are not ranked with each other unlike the Hindu Varna system. However, they are stratified

as lower and higher caste/*jati* like that of Hindu society. In every Mewat village, all the Muslim and Hindu caste or *jati* are ranked concerning each other. Further, the interaction between the Meos and the lower caste (both Hindu-Muslims) is structured by patron-client relationships which are known as the *jajmani* system in Northern India. The basic *jajmani* arrangement is still prevalent among the Muslims of Mewat but in recent times we have observed some considerable changes in this system.

Another important aspect of the Muslims of Mewat, mainly, among the Meos is that they are an endogamous group and do not marry outside their community. There is a very famous saying among the Meos of Mewat that '*vote or chori to qaum ko hi dene chaiye*' (vote should be given to their leaders and the marriage of their girls must be held within their community only). A similar idiom is popular among the Jats of Haryana too, that, '*Jat ke beti Jat ko, jat ke vote jat ko*'. But, in the past, there were some cases of them marrying other Muslims, but such cases were contested by the Meos of Mewat. I would like to share an episode from the 1960s, in which a Meo lawyer living in Alwar who had married outside his *zati*, admitted that he could not return to his natal village with his wife because his agnates would never tolerate such a state of affairs (Jamous, 2003, p. 19)

The Meos primarily stress caste/*jati* endogamy, but, matrimony between a Meo man and non-Meo Muslim women from within or outside Mewat are accepted, however, it is not preferred. Such marriages only take place in a situation when a man is more than 20 years old and is poor, handicapped, divorced, or widowed. It is important to note that in Mewat social fabric if a man marries outside his *zati* or region, his better half is unanimously called '*Paro*', (meaning a woman who has been purchased or brought into the Mewat region from another social group or region). Here it would be significant to mention the experience of one of such women named Rubina. She belongs outside Mewat and is married to a Meo of Guhana village near Mewat district. She describes her situation as '*we Paros, belong nowhere, we are treated like animals. If a man has to choose between leaving a local woman and an outsider, he will surely kick the outsiders out. She also describes that we don't get as much love and respect as local women (Hindustan Times)*'. I have also observed that if a woman who does not belong to the Meo society and Mewat region and gets married to someone from Mewat, then she is usually addressed as *Paro*. Even their children are addressed as *Paro ki*, and *Paro ka* (*Paro's daughter and Paro's son respectively*) by the local men and women. Their parents even face multiple difficulties while finding a suitable match for their children within the Meo groups. This apparently proves how Meos consider

themselves as a distinct social group and are always conscious of this dissimilarity even after intermingling with the people who do not belong to Mewat or are not Meos.

Along with the Meos, other social groups of Mewat such as Nai, Mirasi, Sakka, Kasai, and Luhar also marry within their group and observe endogamy rigidly. For instance, there is a village called Sudaka in the Mewat district of Haryana, where an 18-year old, Maimuna eloped with a Meo guy named Idris, who resided in her village. She was attacked with a knife neck to naval by their family members for this act. Later to protect her family's izzat (honour) Maimuna was forced by her family to marry her cousin Aijaz who lived in another village (Gandhi and Sharma, 2009, p. 2). It is very clear that with a few exceptions, , among Hindu castes, rules prohibiting inter-caste marriage, were stringently enforced by all Mewati Muslims and Hindu caste of Mewat region.

Each *zati* in Mewat as a whole is endogamous. However, this does not mean that any male member of the *zati* can wed any women of their *zati* or *biradari*. As I already mentioned, Meos and other social groups are divided into several exogamous groups. During the late 19th and early 20th century, a Meo could not marry within his/her pal, gotra, and thamba. Marriage inside the same clan is severely prohibited and restricted because as per their belief, '*goti so bhai baki ke asnai*'. Besides this, the Meo code of marriage rigidly prohibits a man from marrying not only in the *gotra* to which his father belongs but also from marrying in the *gotra* of his mother or say, even from the *gotra* to which his maternal grandmother belonged (Weston, 1911, p. 51). Even at present, marriage between a boy and a girl belonging to the same *gotra* is considered amounting to incest. For example, in 2010, a twenty-two-year-old constable plus an 8-times National Wrestling Champion, Ekhlaas, of Dwarka village, Mewat (Haryana), got married to Anjum on 9th May. Even though, Anjum's ancestors had migrated from Haryana to Rajasthan about a century ago, when the *khap panchayat* of Dwarka village came to know about his marriage with her, it asked him to terminate his marriage to Anjum. But on his refusal to do so, the panchayat asked the village people to ex-communicate him and his family. One of the believers of the gotra tradition, Ramzan Chaudhary, the head of the *gotra panchayat* justified Ekhlaas and his family's ex-communication. He says that no doubt we are Muslims, but at the same time we strongly love and follow our tradition and customs and hence we do not allow marriage in the same gotra (Milli Gazette, 2010). There is another episode in which Haji Kallu of the village Satputyaki (Nuh block, Mewat district) fixed his daughter's marriage in the Ranika village (Nagina block, Mewat district). When the

zati panchayat of Satputyaki and neighbouring villages came to know that Haji Kallu fixed his daughter's marriage in the gotra 'Derwal', to which he also belonged, it asked him to terminate this marriage. But he refused to do so, and therefore, the biradari panchayat of that village not only boycotted Haji Kallu socially but even the people of that village and their neighboring villages destroyed his 20 acres of crops to punish him. There exist several such instances in Mewat, where a person marrying in the same *gotra*, along with his/her family, is subjected to harsh punishments, by the *gotra* or *pal* panchayat.

In Haryana Jat community always practice strict village and *khap* exogamy. Like these communities, in the past Meos not only avoided marrying in their village but also prohibited marrying in any of the villages in their *thamba* or even *pal*. Because Meos believes that each village, *thamba* and *pal* belonged to one ancestor, therefore, each boy and girl in the village, *thamba* and *pal* is brother and sister. The village men address the females of the village as 'sister' or 'daughter' depending on their relative age, irrespective of *pal*, *gotra*, and *castes*. Along with his/her village, as Wilson points out, a Meo man could not marry a woman from his mother's village and his father's mother village in the late 19th and early 20th century. (Samul, 1911, p. 51). Abha Chauhan (2003, p. 81) in her fieldwork based on the Nagina and Jhirka villages in Nagina block and Ghata village in Ferozpur Jhirka blocks of Mewat district in Haryana, observed that ninety-two percent of the respondents in the sample said that they were following the rule of the village exogamy strictly. None of the Meo households in the three villages recorded any case of intra-village marriage. In recent years, there has been a distinct change in these rules, such as father and son marrying in the same village and matrilineal cross-cousin marriages being arranged.

Though, Islamic and Tablighi Jama'at ideology permits and insist on both cross-cousin and parallel-cousin marriage but these rules are strictly forbidden by the Muslims of Mewat. A Meo cannot marry any woman whose relationship with him is close enough to be traceable and a woman whose relationship is traced through consanguineal kin. Interestingly, in the post-partition period, when Tablighi Jama'at was well rooted in Mewat, it tried to question the practice of avoidance of cross-cousin and parallel cousin marriage, but, the Meo community never paid any heed to their instructions. For instance, in 1963, there were some religious ulemas (religious teachers) who tried to organize patrilineal parallel-cousin marriages, i.e, marriage between the children of two brothers. Maulvis of Uttawar, Ruparka, and Ghasera villages had sponsored three cases of marriage between the children of two brothers. The Meos of Mewat not only boycotted these marriages but also attacked

the Maulvis. One was brutally butchered and ploughed over (Sharma, 1969, p. 183). There was another case when in 1998, a boy and a girl of two brothers were put to death in a village in Firozpur Jhirka block because of cross-cousin marriage (Chauhan, 2003, p. 78). Another episode occurred in Kisangarh (Rajasthan) where a boy wedded his uncle's daughter. This was an arranged marriage and the explanation given by the guardians of the bride regarding the marriage was that Islam did not prohibit such marriages. The Public's opinion was annoying as this marriage was regarded as nothing more than an incestuous union and the couple was eventually expelled from the village (Shams, 1983, p.74). In another episode, a Meo of Gurgaon district arranged the marriage of his son with his brother's daughter, asserting that Islam allowed such marriage. The Meos of the village were infuriated at this attempted 'incest' and they beat the culprit and banished him out of the village (Aggarwal, 1976, p. 278) Now more fascinatingly, the Tablighi Jama'at has abstained themselves from telling Meos about the *chacha-taya ka nikha* (cross-cousin marriage). In these incidents, it results that on the grounds of social custom and marriage alliances, especially, in the marriage arrangements, Meos have been contradictory to the precepts of Islam and Tablighi Jamaat. This proves that despite the widespread penetration of the revivalist movement of the Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat, there still exist many practices which the Meos follow in opposition to the teachings of Islam and Tablighi Jama'at.

There is a belief among sociologists and anthropologists that social mobility is much easier among Muslims compared to Hindu society. Such as the common proverb quoted during the late 19th and early 20th century in the ethnographic and census reports on the Sheikhs says: "Last year I was a butcher, this year I am a Shaikh; next year if prices rise, I shall become a Saiyad (Crook, p. 302). Imtiaz Ahmad (1973, pp. 157-167) noted that Siddiqi Sheikh of Allahbad claims to be the descendants of Abu Bakr Siddique, the first caliph of Islam. In reality, they were converted from the Kayastha caste to Islam collectively. He further noted that they had succeeded in forming a new status, identity by the abandonment of traditional customs and rituals and adoption of Islamic custom and tradition and establishment of marital links with the families of supposedly *Sheikh* origin and descent. But, this paper suggests that social mobility among Mewati Muslims is not an easy work as far as Muslims of Mewat are concerned. There is a popular story in Mewat about a Patwari enquiring about the caste of a *Mirasi*, who happened to be sitting beside a Meo. The *Mirasi* answered, I am a Saiyad, hearing this the Meos was outraged and spoke with every bit of anger, if he, a *Mirasi*, can be a Saiyad, then I, who am a Meo, claim to be God himself. In Mewat even the *Kasai*, (butcher) groups also

claim that they are Sheikh and they are from Quraish clan, to which Prophet Mohammad belonged. They also claim that their social status is higher compared to other service castes of Mewat. However, Meos has never recognised their claim and they are considered as *nichi jati* (lower caste) in Mewat even at present.

The exact idea of ritual pollution and purity that existed in Hindu society is not found in the Muslims of Mewat, though, there is some semblance. For instance, during the late 19th century the lowest of the menial castes- sweepers, *chamars* and *dhananks*, either lived in separate quarters at a little distance from the main village or on the outskirts of the village. All other tribes lived in the center of the village. Where there were both Hindus and Muslims, inhabit different blocks of the village site (Gurgaon District, 1910, pp. 32-33). Raymond Jamous (2003, p. 20) also observed recently in his study that Meo represented nearly 40 percent of the village population, occupied over half of the residential space, and lived in three quarters. The quarters of two untouchable castes, the *Chamar* and *Bhangi* lay in the east. The Brahmins and the *baniya* each had their quarters, west of the main street, which divided the village down the middle along a north-south axis. West of that street lay the well-circumscribed quarters of the *kumhars* (potters), the *kasai* (butchers), the sonar (goldsmith) and the luhars (blacksmith). Those quarters were separated from the backward castes by a street to avoid any spatial contact with them. The different Muslim service castes comprised a few families, all of whom shared the same quarter and cemetery. Jamous further found that the Meo buried their dead in their cemetery (*kabristan*) and other Muslims castes shared a separate cemetery. I did not find any recent example of a separate cemetery for lower caste Muslims of Mewat. In the daily life the Meos, like most other castes; accept the principal food prepared by the upper caste. But the latter, like the *baniyas*, were vegetarian and refused to eat anything cooked by the Meos, even though they acknowledge their high-caste status. The Meo used the barbers as cooks, who prepared the *pakka* food on ceremonial occasions. They refused to accept any food prepared by lower and backward castes at home. In particular, they refused to enter *Fakir's* house because, as a funerals priest, he was to contact with the impurity connected with death and burial grounds.

The caste *panchayats* are used to socially control deviant caste members so that the cohesiveness of the caste group is maintained. These types of traditional *panchayats* are found throughout the Indian subcontinent. They are called by different names in different places like *Khap* in Haryana, *Pal* among Meos of Haryana and Rajasthan, *Hatu panchayat* and *Parga panchayat* among the Munda tribe of Jharkhand. Similar *Khap panchayat* in Haryana upholds the concept of

bhaichara on a *gotra*, caste or territorial basis. On the similar lines of *khap*, Meos of Mewat have *pal* system, which upholds the concepts of *bhaichara* on *gotra*, caste and territorial basis and individual relations. This system maintains *gotra*, village exogamy, but caste endogamy in the similar way to *Khap*. Further, this system prohibited cross-cousin and parallel-cousin marriages. Meos have *panchayat* at *thamba*, *gotra* and *pal* level. The Meos *jati panchayats* play an important role in enforcing rules of exogamy, defining condition of divorce, punishing for breach of promise in marriage and checking cases of sale of girl. These *panchayats* issue diktats for excommunication and expulsion of people who marry within the *gotra*. Traditionally, each *pal-gotra* and each *thama* had a chief, a *chaudhari*, (leader) who was chosen from specific families within the dominant clan. In the principles, the *chaudhri* would occupy his position until his death and his eldest son ought to succeed him. Each *pal*, *gotra* and *thamba chaudhari*, wields great influence on the members of his unit and he is economically well off and socially respected. Similar to the Meo society all other Muslim service castes such as *Nai*, *Mirasi*, *Fakir*, *luhar*, and *Sakkas*, have their *gotra panchayats*. Each *gotras* headed by *chaudhris*, those play an important role in maintaining the caste endogamy and exogamy at *gotra* and village level. Therefore, it looks like the Muslims of Mewat have the same caste or *jati panchayat* similar to the Jats and other Hindu communities of North India.

Social and Cultural Impact of Tablighi Jama'at Movement among Meos of Mewat

Some scholars firmly believe that Islamisation may be offered as an effective antidote to the ideology of caste. In this perspective, Tabligh Jamaat movement started in 1926 with the slogan “*Aye Musalmano Musalman bano*” in the Mewat area by Maulana Mohammad Ilyas (1885-1944). Tabligh Jamaat was started by Mohdammad Ilyas but it was his father Maulana Mohammad Ismail in the late 19th century who firstly takes initiative to reform Meo workers in the *Banglewali* Mosque at Hazrat Nizamuddin, New Delhi. In the initial years, Maulana Ilyas established a large number of mosque-based religious schools or *maktabs* and *madrassas* in Mewat to appropriate Islamic belief and practices. But, Maulana Ilyas soon was disappointed with the progress of the spread of Islam through the regular *madrassas* and *maktabs*. Further, Ilyas around 1926, came-up with Tablighi Jama'at idea that is unique in its simplicity and its effectiveness. Tabligh means “to communicate” or “to preach” and the term Tabligh Jama'at literary means preaching party. He first motivated Muslims to go in-group of ten people often to Meo village. This group would go to a village, invites local Muslims to assemble in the mosque and present their message.

Tabligh Jama'at peoples in largely 1930s stressed on following 15 points- (1) The *Kalima* (2) *Namaz* (3) attainment and diffusion of (religious) knowledge (4) embracing of Islamic appearance and dress (*shakl o surat*) (5) seclusion of women (6) performance of *nikah* (the Islamic form of marriage) (7) devotion to Muslim dress by the Meonis (Meo women) (8) non-deviation from Islamic beliefs and non-acceptance of any other religion (9) protection and preservation of mutual rights (10) participation of respectable persons in every public meeting (11) pledge not to impart secular education to children before they have received basic religious education (12) pledge to strive for the preaching of religion (Islam) (13) adoption of Islamic ceremonies and rejection of non-Islamic ones (14) observance of cleanliness (15) pledge to protect the dignity and respect of one another (Nadavi, 1983, p. 11) Further, Maulana Ilyas adopted the six-article (chhe number) course of teaching which formed the essence of this movement. Tablighi Jama'at now spread through the world and become one of the largest Islamic movements in the world.

Most the scholars who work on the origin and spread of Tablighi Jama'at movement among Meos of Mewat have emphasized that the Tablighi Jama'at movement has considerably affected the social structure, customs, and traditions of Meo society. For instance, Partap C Aggarwal (1966) states, 'One can confidently predict that in few years the way of life of the Meos will become completely Islamized. He further argues that after partition the Hindus no longer regard them as Kshatriyas, and they are becoming 'full Muslims''. Inder S. Marwah (1979, pp. 96-97) argues that because of the Tabligh movement the Islamic influence on the Meos increased considerably and it has resulted in the rapid Islamization of Meo community. Abha Chauhan (2003, p.78) also stated that the pressure on Meos to leave the customary practices and adopt the religious ones, especially with the increasing role of Tablighi Jama'at, whose influence in the mid-1930s but became sufficient after 1947, is felt largely by the Meos. Wahiduddin Khan (1988, pp. 17-18) argues that due to the Tabligh Jama'at movement "the whole of Mewat was transformed great spiritual excitement and enthusiasm could be seen among the people at large. They changed their way of dressing and grew beards, shaking off one by one almost all the pre-Islamic customs that they had retained after their conversion. Lending or borrowing on interest as well as robbing, looting and dacoits decreased considerably. Liquor consumption comes to end. Hence, most of the scholars except Shail Mayaram have emphasized in their studies that the influence of the Tabligh Jama'at, in the social and cultural life in Mewat undergoes Islamisation rapidly, particularly after the partition of India had a great impact on Meos life.

There is no doubt that Tabligh Jama'at movement had affected Meo community considerable in many socio-cultural practices but, simultaneously this movement and its ideology had experienced a strong resistance from the social structure and cultural practices of Meos of Mewat. For example, despite the long penetration of Tabligh Jama'at among Meos of Mewat, which stressed the Islamic appearance and conduct, the performance of marriage in an Islamic style, social change in the Islamic direction, do not observe the *gotra* system, great stress gives on equality and brotherhood, the influence of caste or *zati* remains strong. The Meos still feel proud of calling themselves the Suryavanshi and Chandravanshi Rajput. They still described themselves and others in terms of *zati*, or *biradari* as like in Hindu community rather than a religious community. Even today, Muslims of Mewat are stratified along the lines of *unchi zaat*, (high caste) and *niche zaat* (lower caste) similar to the Hindu community of North India. The basic *jajmani* arrangement still exists in Mewat but it has been considerably weakened and it is rapidly disappearing as in Hindu society. Even, the traditional *gotra*, *pal*, and village exogamy rules, which the Tablighi Jama'at dubs as 'un-Islamic', are existent in the Mewat and are observed not only by the Meos but also by the other social groups living in the Mewat region. This is apparent from the efforts of Tablighi Jama'at which expresses its utter dismay by stating that '*gotra vali gari to chal hi rahi hi. Rokhte hain to bavandar hota hai*' (the gotra system has been going on smoothly, whenever, we try to check it, it invites a lot of clamors). The Muslims of Mewat practice endogamy rigidly. Marriage between the Meos and the non-Meo Muslims is not preferred. Even today, cross-cousin and parallel-cousin marriages are strictly prohibited among the Muslims of Mewat. The recent attempts of Tabligh Jama'at to "purge the Meo Muslims of these non-Islamic practices" have been vociferously contested by the Muslims of Mewat. More interestingly now, the Tablighi Jama'at has abstained from telling Meos about the *chacha-taya ka nikha* (cross-cousin marriage). This also evident that Tablighi Jama'at movement faces a strong resistance from as far as Meos social institutions are concerned. The Meos of Mewat generally use proverbs like '*Meo to Meo hi rahnge Mullah nahi banange*'. This proves that the Muslims of Mewat, particularly the Meos, resisted Tablighi Jama'at ideology whenever they intervene in their social and cultural practices.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that there is a remarkable difference between theoretical Islam and the existing social reality of Indian Muslims. Theoretically, Islam stands for

social equality but in reality, Indian Muslims are socially stratified and divided into the caste lines. This is also evident that the Indian Muslim social structure is also very multifaceted and differs from one area to another and one community to another. This fact is manifest in the social structure of Mewati Muslims. Each zati in Mewat region is endogamous and practices hypergamy. Meos of Mewat still severely prohibit marriage within *pal*, *gotra*, and village exogamy. Cross-cousin and parallel cousins' marriage is still forbidden among the Muslims of Mewat. Hereditary membership and hierarchy among the Mewati Muslims are still prevalent. More importantly, such social and cultural practice is still prevalent among the Muslims of Mewat despite the great efforts and hard work of Tablighi Jama'at, who stressed equality and brotherhood since the 1920's. A deep sociological and historical investigation of the Muslims of Mewat also indicates that the social and cultural practices of Indian Muslims govern by their prevailing social-cultural context, not by theoretical Islam. In the end, this work suggests that for a better understanding of the social structure of Indian Muslims we need to put together sociological and historical approaches within a given region, culture and community.

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Article: Assemblages and Documents as Tools for Managing Complexity: A Study on the Practices of Adaptation to Floods

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Assemblages and Documents as Tools For Managing Complexity: A Study on the Practices of Adaptation to Floods

--- Mridusmita Dutta

Abstract

To live in a risk society needs elaborate attempts to control and tame chances that is a threat to our existence. To enhance or scale-up security we need intervention through programmes or policies. Interventions of this kind exhibit the willingness of the government and its citizens to provide and receive a conducive environment of fewer floods, diseases, better roads and bridges, less corruption, etc. The endeavour here is to explore the rationale of such interventions in a landscape of natural disaster vis-à-vis floods in Assam. Programs of improvement are embedded in the knowledge practices in terms of how is a problem defined, how will it be tamed and how calculations will be applied and what will be excluded. These sets of questions lead us to the ethos of analytics of governmentality that is concerned with a stratum of 'knowing and acting' to a phenomenon. Unlike, sociology of governance or governmentality per se which emphasises illuminating the inherent tendency of the state to exert power or hegemony as its centralizing objective, analytics of governmentality is concerned with particular schemes of thought, diagnosis of its deficiency and promises of improvement. This article engages with the adaptation practices to the annual occurrence of floods (as a scheme of thought), various practices and heterogeneous elements coming together to tide over the natural disaster (promise of improvement) and engagement with any deficiency or contestations. This ongoing research attempts to look into the construction of floods as a domain that can be controlled, the assumptions and linearity in the character of adaptation efforts in governance and the different layers of complexities that emerge in these practices.

Keywords: Natural disaster, Adaptation, Assemblage, Documents.

Introduction

What does it mean to live dangerously in a risk society? It is a deep philosophical question that confronts ideologues and policymakers to embrace danger as a condition for life in the future. The risk posits us to embrace security as an

indispensable tool that needs to be achieved to evade traumatic experiences. For catastrophic events in the face of climate change, man-made and natural disasters, terrorism per se reveals our vulnerability to threat, loss and injury. Henceforth, a plausible reversal of advocated risk through a continual process of improvement is deemed as resilience for societal enrichment. Resilience is still a modern concept where it is presumed that disasters be it natural or man-made, environmental degradation, climate change, terrorism are all external problems that can be mitigated with internal policy solutions. However, the obsession with the discourse of resilience has a risk of presuming asymmetrical future within a single episteme. But a close inspection we discover that we are no longer living in a world that belongs to one hand to the past and the other to the present; but we coexist in worlds that overlap and co-exist (Mol, 2002).

The consequential making of the present undoubtedly has its roots in the history of the Brahmaputra river and how its geography and history have shaped its basin. But this research work endeavours to look at the Brahmaputra not circumscribed by its history; but what is unsettling or how different reality is emerging at a temporal scale. The entry point to the enquiry is made in understanding governmental interventions that set out to improve the world. Tania Murray Li in *Will to Govern* draws attention to the mundane way the rationale of improvement schemes-what they seek to change and the calculations they apply. The modus operandi of the improvement schemes lies in assembling diverse elements-discourses, institutions, forms of expertise and social groups to address an urgent need. This highlights my research question: how the elements of an assemblage are assembled to produce a single order. Further, I engage in exploring the mechanisms of simple calculations that come to stand in terms of more complexity in the kind of asymmetries they produce.

Methodology and field

From the perspective of analytics of governmentality, the focus is on creating a regime of truth by assembling particular apparatuses and discourses, carving certain ways of conduct as to how to intervene in a particular problem and being attentive to their assumptions, presuppositions, their regimes of vision and spots of blindness (Rose, 1999). Studies of governmentality often mentions “assemblage” to be the central concept to visualise the intervention in any phenomena to produce desired outcomes. According to Foucault (1980), discourses, institutions, technology, administrative laws and measures, scientific statements, and moral and philanthropic propositions are heterogeneous elements that constitute the apparatus

to produce the will to improve. Henceforth, in turning our attention to the practices of adapting to floods, in the context of Dhemaji, the process of documenting the practices of preparedness to the natural disaster, in terms of lists and documents (of people affected, relief required, lives lost), plans (the Assam Disaster Manual) and technology (communicating the onset of floods through artefacts like satellite imaginaries, textual messages and mails) form a vibrant set of primary data. Therefore, the study employs artefacts constituting technology, documents and bureaucrats at the local level to explore the contingency of “assemblage” in disaster risk management in Assam.

Moving beyond the cosmological and questions pertaining to political ecology, the study takes the liberty to make refraction from the binary distinction between object: subject, nature: society and interrogate chaotic and unruly change cognizant in the landscape of natural disaster and what emerges as a resultant formation in the process of “assemblage”. In other words, how is the assemblage represented and interpreted?

Profile of field

Historically, floods had been a part and parcel of life in the Brahmaputra valley. The riverine communities, especially the Missing community planned their agricultural activities and socio-cultural calendar keeping in mind the annual cycle of floods. It is also pertinent that the availability of land meant the low lying lands were kept fallow for the river water to flow in. However, the 1950 earthquake altered the geomorphology of the river. Floods, erosion and sand casting became important factors of natural degradation making governance difficult. In contemporary times, these issues are still reeling to be apprehended and governed.

Subansiri, one of the important north bank tributary of the Brahmaputra creates havoc for the floodplains located at its lower part of the basin, every year. At the same time, this region also has a higher chance of devastation owing to the risk of a breach in the embankments of the Brahmaputra. Dhemaji district located in the Subansiri floodplain always has the risk of annual aberrant floods. Floods may be episodic or recurrent based on contextualising the same to the ubiquitous nature of this hydrological phenomenon. Therefore, Dhemaji, given its hydro-meteorological and topographical location, was identified as a site to conduct a sociological inquiry into its adaptation practices and efforts at the local bureaucratic level. The present study is a part of an ongoing study in understanding how a community affected by floods and its various stakeholders are responding commensurately with the necessary tools, knowledge and institutions.

Additionally, the Dhemaji Circle Office, Emergency Department and Water Resource Department were selected to explore the knowledge practices and their practices of adaptation to floods. Sonarighat, a village in Dhemaji district was selected to comprehend the sensibilities and experiences of floods. The study is qualitative and various methods of data collection have been used such as observation, open-ended interviews and focus group discussions. Two consecutive annual cycles of floods have been observed across the aforementioned field sites in 2019 and 2020 to benefit the study.

Preparing for floods

The primary tool to forecast flood induced risk is the flood early warning system (FLEWS). Flood forecasting and warning system arean essential elements in regional and national flood preparedness. It includes hydro-meteorological observation provided by weather radar satellites and an automatic hydro-meteorological station network. The inputs and reports from this technology is supposed to provide the real-time of probable risk offloods. As an alternative to better mitigate flood preparedness, this system is also reliable because of its low-cost effectiveness. Appropriate and effective intervention by the government, bureaucracy, stakeholders, decision-makers and the scientific community simulates to the response to the response by the flood early warning system, maintains a respondent at the Emergency Department of Dhemaji.

For intervention meant to tame unruly water needs a demarcation of a bounded area to bear effective results through the process of rendering the field technical (Li,2007). In preparing for the floods, during the months of March-October, any kind of information on the water level is provided by Arunachal ie Upper Siang and Lower Siang. “We are dependent on these two districts. An increase in the water level in Pasighat raises the alarm here for Assam” maintains the Circle Officer of Sissiborgaon, under Dhemaji district”. The National Disaster Management Authority (2015) mandates state coordination in providing information regarding any kind of natural disaster. So in terms of the flood, the rise of water level or its probability is communicated from the emergency department in Dhemaji to the respective circle offices through messages or e-mails. The information then percolates to the respective village headman (gaonburha) who then mobilises himself to the edge of the river to gauge the rise in water level for authentication.

The project head at the Emergency Department, LohitGogoi maintains “Although we take cognizance of the report sent by the neighbouring state of Arunachal, sometimes a delay in transmitting the report becomes a problem. Moreover, we

need to be prepared before relying exclusively on technology. Water –reading of the water levels of the Brahmaputra is taken by the Water Resource Department everyday that is submitted at my office at sharp 8am. I take that further to the higher officials to keep a record of the substantive rise in water levels. What we have been observing is that few cycles of rain in the plains prior to the onset of monsoon reach a dangerous level threatening security; in such instances, the satellite imaginaries of floods and water reports from Arunachal do not essentially overlap.” The process of translating of probable floods through images of satellites backed by large calculations flashing on the computer screen of the Emergency Department in Dhemaji is not met with much urgency.

It is in such mundane practices of bureaucracy where technologies of large scale that are extended across States with the concern of greater probability to mitigate floods make refraction. The assemblage that was meant for better communication to tame the chances of floods is made tricky in terms of its translation. For in the process of translation of technology by the actors having the authority to choose and make calculations for the information provided by the neighbouring State becomes complex when non-human actants enter the social fabric. The weather above the river essentially becomes the deciding factor for reliance on technology. Further, the volume of water released to the river basin through precipitation dictates calculation for the actors/disaster personnel in Assam. If the weather acts uniformly across the Brahmaputra Basin, then the Emergency Department takes cognizance of water reports from Arunachal along with the satellite imaginaries of floods. Sometimes, incessant rains in the month of August elevates the water level in Dhemaji without any alarm for Arunachal. At such juncture, when the non-human agents begin to exert their agency on such networks to mitigation of any kind of natural disaster breach collectives within an organization(bureaucracy). Henceforth, the general coordination mandated by the National Disaster Management Authority (2015) becomes particular in face of the local contingencies. The aerial topography in terms of images, the weather over the river basin, the agentic ability of water and the calculations of the social actors’ at the bureaucratic level come together to define “risk” or emergency for floods in Dhemaji.

Practices of mitigating floods

The primary intervention to govern and mitigate floods lies in the dual mechanism of providing *compensation and relief*. In terms of compensation, it essentially requires tools to collect, process and calculates the quantity and amount of

compensation to be released and to whom. The village headman is supposed to make a list of the affected people and submit the same at the corresponding circle office. The making of this list entails a specific procedure. As for instance, a person is claiming compensation for his lost livestock. This requires essential documentation (photographs) of the dead carcass. Additionally, compensation for the destruction of houses entails documentation in terms of nature of the house (concrete/thatched), the water level inside the house/frontyard. If a life is lost during the course of floods then compensation depends on the number of persons within a family. The questionnaire that is used to collect all this information is essentially a document that puts a person's claim to compensation into words. These documents arrive at the circle office only to be sent to the District Commissioners' office to be sanctioned by the DC. Accordingly, hard cash is released from the concerned authority at that office. This sequence of actions undoubtedly objectifies the commitment of welfare by the Government for its people and the people devastated by the floods as well. Henceforth, the very process of writing and maintaining documents contributes to the construction and objectification of an organization committed to working for the welfare and improvement of their condition in the face of natural destruction.

The materiality of governing the floods was exemplified in documents. In keeping track of rising water levels, dissemination of information to lower authority offices, lists of villages and people affected, people receiving the amount of relief and compensation all depicted the organizational structure to provide stability or control to the devastation caused by the annual floods. Documentation, as a process, maybe easily overlooked because it is usually seen as providing direct access to what they are documenting (Hull, 2012). And it is because of the ordinariness of documents, the consequences of it remain analytically invisible (Brenneis, 2006). In exploring the practices of governance to floods, documents represent a tool to control a natural phenomenon (floods) to secure a habitable present.

According to Michel Callon (2002), writing devices (documents) give actors a new definition. In other words, the various actors (bureaucrats/ officials) involved in the processing and disseminating of compensation cease to be narrative wherein they come to be defined by these writing devices. In this sense, actors do not exist outside of them as the sequence of actions suggests (ibid). The argument is that documents as texts help in classifying the reality to make the devastation caused by floods manageable. In simple words, documents perform to format the reality (Callon, 2002). Formatting the reality of devastation caused by floods through documents supplies stable governance and control over the excess water in a

landscape. “The legitimacy of this process guarantees transparency to our compensation” maintains ToponChamua, a respondent from the Sissiborgaon circle office. “We try our best to avoid any kind of corruption while providing relief and compensation. Only those affected people receive our aid whose name appears to be on the list provided to us by the LaatMandal, which is further approved by the District Commissioner before releasing the funds.” Such pedagogy of governance talks about the writing culture and how through such practices the formal rules and regulations of the organization are maintained. However, the way documents are sought to provide compensation and relief to aid adaptation to annual floods get distorted in their meaning when its inherent aim was to improve the condition of the affected people.

Prakash Taid, a respondent in the Sissiborgaon Circle Office, puts it with a concerned face. “We cannot deny that there happens to be much anger, resentment and frustration of the people at the ground when our officials are there distribute relief. The list of people who qualify to receive relief is prepared by the laatMandal which is submitted at the circle office. Further, it is accepted by the Circle officer which is then forwarded to the DC for its approval. Next, the FCI office is directed to release the basic essential food items according to the amount that is sanctioned to be released. By the time, it is loaded on a truck to make its way to the allotted village it takes a good amount of two days. Delay in this process, results in affected communities being resentful. Sometimes, there is violence and mishandling of officials too. Generally, we do not report such cases of violence”. The amount of time people had to wait in order to improve their condition by receiving relief; comes to be in contestation with the very nature of the metric (documents) that are being employed for the governance of floods. When documents are placed within the concept of “assemblage” the asking of “how” do documents represent a complex phenomenon of floods leads us to observe the consequences of documents rather than looking at them from their mediating role. To restore the analytics of documents, Bruno Latour (2005) maintains that we need to look at documents as things that transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry. In this context, documents attain a kind of vibrancy or agency to exert their significance, and change the meaning/signs it is supposed to carry to the objects/subjects they are referred. This line of thought allows us to look at bureaucratic discourses not simply as “texts” that are given an abstract form from their material form-files, graphs, forms and reports; but to consider the materiality of it with technology and other practices within an organizational structure (Hull, 2012).

Vishal Pegu (41) was one of the recipients of compensation from the authorities. But it was his brother, Prakash Pegu (39) who was eligible for the compensation but missed by particular criteria. His frontyard, during the night, was filled with water reaching up to his chest. In the morning when a representative of the Government came for inspection along with the gaonburha (village headman) water had receded. The components making up for the water were muddy frontyard with leeches. Prakash Pegu did not qualify for compensation. Undoubtedly, these affected people become protagonists where the writing device gains precedence. What we may miss as a fact is the elusive character of water that contributes to being a weak trait in this assemblage of floods. The construction of a technical domain focusing on representation tends to overlook the *form* of the excess water that comes to be defined as floods. The people involved in the preparation, collection and processing of lists, documents, and files necessarily do not have to deal with the *form* of the magnitude of any natural catastrophe. Henceforth, the assemblage persuaded by the Assam Disaster Management Authority comes to have a weak trait that is not commensurate to measuring or representing the agentic ability of water. The force with which the water is uprooting the bamboo trees of a household, making abrupt inroads into a landmass that was never expected by the villagers, twirling the concrete houses leaving the imprints of its form, erosion per se reveals the personality of the annual floods that fails to be taken into consideration. According to Bruno Latour (1996), this strand of bracketing out the social context which is referred to as *semiotic*, in this research I refer it to be in the context of adaptation to floods, will be always open to criticism. This is because semiotic often refers to giving meaning to associations/assemblage and making it more descriptive, denying the true nature of the entities (Latour, 1996). It is only when a third node, a non-human entity enters the picture that reveals the weak trait of “meaning” (ibid).

Therefore, the text (manual) Assam State Disaster Management Authority provides for adaptation to any kind of natural disaster, the writing devices (documents) that are used to format the preparedness/devastation to floods and the practice of using these texts helps us to reveal what is lost in this process of *representation* when it is adjoined with the externality of the floods. Using a non-human node illuminates how textual entities, actors and nonhuman entities connect without abandoning their distinct characteristics. This association amounts to the Actor-Network Theory that Bruno Latour has been defending. Latour (1996) maintains that extending semiotics to unrelated elements; instead of focusing on “*meaning*” would reveal how networks extend further.

Conclusion

In the age of virulent environmental catastrophe, the discourse of resilience and security attempts to deliver a sociality with abrupt external shocks into our social systems. Recouping from the prediction of the same need predicted by science, experts and policymakers that puts our focus on the future to gauge the probability of risk. At the same time, excessive anticipation of the future comes to be termed the ontological spin (Sahlin, 2013). This new approach gives anthropology an orientation to building better futures by critiquing the present problems (Latour, 2013; White, 2013) and valorising post-humanist avant-garde (Descola, 2013; Kohn, 2013). The most significant critique of this ontological turn lies in their tendency at holding the turbulent present at bay and imagining a habitable future where any kinds of differences are not allowed to matter (Bond & Bessire, 2013). My ethnographic endeavour benefits from the critique of this ontological spin. The hope for a symmetrical habitable future would be utopian if we fail to provide a plank to the present; to better comprehend the future. Natural science and statistical computations posit the problem of scale creating enlargement of our focus in a planetary crisis. But is it possible to study the conditions of existence and science and technology today? According to Wittgenstein (1999) simplicity and familiarity are the things hidden from us which make them nearly invincible. In other words, what are the consequences when simplifications are made to probabilistic events like floods? The modern world is full of technical and scientific simplifications that provide the basis for action (Mol, 2002). Simplifications are more or less linear endeavours that have the tendency to compress layered realities or complexities. This inevitably raises theoretical and practical engagements. This research is an attempt to manoeuvre the path of simplistic adaptation to floods in governance, illuminate and discuss the complexities within it and associate the same with a world that is co-existing and exhibiting their adaptation to floods.

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**Article: Understanding Cultural Sensitivity and Competence in Health Care:
Reflections on Antenatal Care from Rural Lucknow**

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Understanding Cultural Sensitivity and Competence in Health Care: Reflections on Antenatal Care from Rural Lucknow

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Abstract

Time and again, the idea of cultural diversity has been stressed in healthcare delivery and management. While dealing with community health it becomes imperative to know about local culture and perception i.e. people's knowledge and beliefs about health, disease and treatment, as it determines their behaviour related to it. The extent to which the relevance of these factors is recognised by healthcare workers and incorporated into practice determines the level of trust of the community in the institutional healthcare system resulting in positive health outcomes. Antenatal care is one such domain where the cultural sensitivity of healthcare professionals plays an important role as it directly influences the status of maternal and neonatal health. With the high rural population in India having a stronghold of traditions over it, the relevance of cultural sensitivity increases manifold.

Keywords: Cultural sensitivity, Cultural competence, Antenatal care, Maternal health, Public health

Introduction

Health is an important development concern as it entails in itself issues of social justice, equality and human rights besides primarily taking into account the complete physical, mental and social well-being of an individual. Not only is good health a basic right of every individual but appropriate, equality-based and dignified delivery of healthcare services is a requisite for enhancing the belief of the community in modern medical science.

The absence of good health is not only marked by its clinical manifestation i.e. disease rather ‘illness’ as well, the latter being a cultural construction of ill-health. Kleinman, Eisenberg & Good (1978) assert that the modern medical profession has in due course become ‘discordant with lay expectations’, wherein a higher focus of medical practitioners remains on identifying the *disease* and its management, and less attention on managing *illness*. They further state that such an approach to health management reduces the faith of people in modern medical science or its health benefits, on the contrary, resulting in larger dependence on ‘popular’ and ‘folk’ sectors of healthcare. Thus, increased empathetic involvement of health service providers is essential to up-scale the outreach of the benefits of modern healthcare services even in communities and regions which are less privileged and/or those which have a higher inclination towards their *traditional culture* (Foster, 1962).

The Healthcare system predominantly involves both, the service providers and the stakeholders at large i.e. the community. However, while dealing with health it cannot be said that the onus of positive health outcomes lies solely on either the healthcare provider or on the care-seeker (as there is an array of socio-cultural, economic, psychological and other factors working) but, as noted earlier, definitely a more enhanced and empathetic involvement of the ‘provider’ eases the way for the ‘receiver’ or care-seeker, especially where the force of traditions is high.

Even in communities where modern healthcare practice has made inroads still the level at which they should be able to bring a positive change has not been possible. Foster (1962) has pointed out that any kind of technological advancement, be it in the field of health, does not at the outset ensure rapid and open acceptance in all instances. It is so because local culture and traditions, social institutions and various psychological factors bear an impact on health, and there is no dearth of evidence suggesting the same (Paul, 1955; Foster, 1962;

Foster & Anderson, 1978; Napier et al., 2014). However, how a community at large is engaged in healthcare seeking is also determined by the factors e.g. what are the available healthcare resources at their disposal, who is the ‘provider’, and what kind of health needs of the people are being fulfilled etc.

Informal healthcare providers like shaman, medicine men, healers etc. enjoy local trust, draw respect and faith of the community, and have a wider acceptance by venturing into the social space of the individuals, than an ‘outsider’ physician treating patients in a formal setting like government or private hospital or clinic. Communities having a stronghold of *traditional culture* find it less easy to incorporate practices which do not hold an explicit sanction of their local customs or traditions as they remain divergent from their traditional knowledge. The most detrimental impact however can be observed in the form of non-compliance or lesser inclination towards the use of modern health services which affects a positive health outcome. Thus, to increase the level of acceptance for institutional services in such communities the role of institutional healthcare workers becomes even more important and sensitive.

Antenatal care (ANC) in tradition-bound communities is one area where a greater reliance on traditional care can be witnessed (Manocha et al. 1992; Bloom et al., 1999; Chapman, 2003; Nelms & Gorski, 2006; Zamawe, 2013; Rout, 2016; Shewamene, Dune & Smith, 2017; Mawoza, Nhachi & Magwali, 2019), even when a complete absence of exposure to modern medicine cannot be claimed in them. In such a situation an effective reach of modern medical practice in the community depends upon healthcare professionals, i.e. to what extent the specialist understands the local culture and whether it seems to them essential or not to incorporate local perception for better treatment and health management, and how well they are able to deal with the perceptions of people regarding illness and disease. It is so because local beliefs and practices if not taken into account or disregarded are sure to create a lack of seriousness and belief from the side of

care-seekers, ultimately affecting the health.

The present paper in its content tries to explore the significance of cultural sensitivity and competence among institutional healthcare workers (clinicians) with regard to antenatal health. The paper is based on intensive fieldwork done in four villages of Bakshi ka Talab (BKT) development block of district Lucknow, on antenatal care-seeking behaviour. In-depth interviews in the form of detailed case history were conducted with recently delivered women (RDW) currently pregnant women (CPW) and some special cases of miscarriage/intra-uterine death, and of physician advised medical termination of pregnancy. Healthcare workers in public health institutions present in the selected area and grassroots healthcare workers were also interviewed. Besides, Family members of some selected women (mother-in-law and husband), local traditional birth attendants (TBAs) and supernatural healers have also interacted. The observation was used for a better understanding of the phenomenon.

Cultural diversity, sensitivity and cultural competence in healthcare

Understanding of culture, cultural diversity, ideas of cultural relativism and cultural pluralism has been the focus of anthropological enquiry, which anthropologists have vehemently vouched for. These ideas extend a very important perspective that cultural plurality is an essential feature of human groups which brings forth its diversity. Each human group has its own specific culture which is valid in itself with no inherent superiority or inferiority of status. Having a dominance of tradition and customs in no way reduces the possibility of any culture or community not having the best available healthcare resources at their disposal.

The idea of cultural diversity with inherent validity has a huge practical value. While dealing with human problems of practical nature an enhanced role of technological and scientific advancement has been increasingly noted. Traditional

communities, as noted earlier, experience a challenge while adopting and adapting to fast paced scientific and technological changes. Health is one domain which has immense potential for marked improvement through scientific advancements in the field of medicine and health care. However, to what extent these advancements have been able to enter into the lives of those having a traditional culture has constantly attracted the attention of social scientists in general and anthropologists in particular.

The domain of health and healthcare has over time shown to have a dominating influence on social and cultural factors across the world. Terms like ‘social determinants’ (WHO, 2020) have been widely used while taking into account the socio-cultural context of health. However, what becomes essential is to know whether at the grass-root level social and cultural factors, cultural diversity and sensitivity are taken into consideration and brought into actual practice or not by the ‘providers’ in the delivery of healthcare services.

The need for cultural competence in healthcare has been time and again felt and reiterated in the field of medical practice, education and research. Cultural competence in health care according to Cross et al. (1989) takes into account the development and delivery of health care services ‘...in a culturally appropriate way in order to meet the needs of culturally and racially diverse groups. The word ‘competence’ as used by them implies ‘...having the capacity to function within the context of culturally-integrated patterns of human behaviour as defined by the group’. The cultural competence strategy takes into account that the cultural diversity of patients should be given due credence and be dealt with empathy so that any inequality or underutilization of health care services may be mitigated and better patient care and health outcomes may be achieved. It is an ability of health care professionals to develop a set of skills to interact with and provide effective high-quality care to patients from diverse cultural backgrounds, and to locate those socio-cultural factors that might affect the process of patient care and

health management (Carrillo et al. 1999; Betancourt et al. 2010).

The relevance of cultural competence and cultural sensitivity in providing patient-centric care remains high. It is so because when cultural beliefs and value systems of the people are taken into consideration then their belief in the formal healthcare system gets strengthened (Srivastava, 2019). However, Kleinman et al. (1978) assert that ‘...biomedicine has increasingly banished the illness experience as a legitimate object of clinical concern’. They assert that unless cultural meanings of the people, their idea about illness and disease will not be taken into account by clinicians or healthcare workers while treating, till that time belief in and adherence of patients/people with ‘formal’ treatment will continue to lack vigour. It will be ‘less satisfactory and less clinically effective’ to the people as the medical logic will not be able to find its way into their understanding and thus compliance with treatment will reduce resulting in a less effective outcome of the treatment (Kleinman et al. 1978). Thus, in order to improve the level of trust and interactions between the patients and healthcare workers and to improve healthcare utilization, it is essential that cultural sensitivity and competency should be effectively brought into practice (Thackrah & Thompson, 2013).

Pregnancy and the local rationale for antenatal care

In the selected area pregnancy is believed to be a special state and a highly vulnerable phase in a woman’s life. It is believed that proper care should be taken during this phase to avoid any complications. However, there remain some who believe that pregnancy becomes a special state requiring attention only when some health issue arises. Another commonly held belief in the area of pregnancy is that even though attention and care are required to avoid any complications still it is not a disease or a sick state as no matter how much care is taken each expectant woman faces some or the other problem at some or the other point of time in pregnancy because of associated vulnerability.

Any problem during pregnancy is either identified broadly as a physical problem or a supernatural affliction e.g. god's fury, bad dreams, evil eye, spellbound air (*shaitani-saaya*), or any supernatural misery caused by an adversary etc. Accident cases are also resigned to supernatural causes on most occasions even if resorting to medical care. In the normal course, in order to avoid any adverse situation both medical and supernatural care are sought as a preventive measure.

Risks, threats and dangerous signs associated with pregnancy are not overlooked but which problem or condition is considered to be a risk or a danger sign is uniquely defined in the area which on several occasions is different from the medical perspective e.g. haemorrhage is one important locally identified danger sign but largely explained with a supernatural logic. Treatment sought by locals could either be only supernatural i.e. visiting a *naut* (indigenous/supernatural healer), or a combination of supernatural and medical care depending on how at the individual/household level the problem is interpreted. In very few instances the treatment sought is limited solely to medical care.

Local knowledge on pregnancy-related risks or danger signs is cumulative as it is based on traditional beliefs and practices passed down over generations as well as understanding gained from exposure to modern medical practices (over the years) focussing on institutional care at grassroots level, due to the role of the state. However, in the selected area the biggest source of information on danger signs or risks or even general antenatal care is still a person's family and informal social network and only secondarily any healthcare worker. It is here that traditional knowledge gains an edge. Treatment or care sought for any problem depends upon the nature of the problem as understood. Preventive and curative care both form an important aspect of total pregnancy care in the area. For it, locals take the route of both formal as well as informal domains as what is most desired is the best possible care, according to one's capacity, for the unborn and the expectant woman. Any compromise on the belief pattern is not preferred. Formal

institutional care includes both public and private sectors but predominantly public health institutions. Informal pregnancy care includes folk and supernatural healers, traditional birth attendants (TBAs) along with an individual's family, extended kinship and social network. As local culture is bound by traditions so the informal domain of care has a dominating influence over how pregnancy will altogether be managed. However, individual experiences, socio-economic conditions, and access to health care resources also influence the course of care-seeking.

Significance of sources of care during pregnancy besides bio-medical care e.g. local healer, herbalist, TBA etc. form the psycho-social support of the people. A supernatural or indigenous healer is able to describe a problem based on day to day events and the nature of social relations of individuals (at the levels of kinship, neighbourhood and community) with an inherent supernatural rationale about the problem being faced. Such explanations are contingent upon various human emotions of jealousy, hatred etc. (Horton, 1967). They treat any problem or provide preventive care during pregnancy by incorporating the total social life of the care-seeker which is mostly absent during a consultation with any medical specialist. Thus, in the selected area the entire perspective surrounding pregnancy and antenatal care is holistic in nature considering it not only to be a physiological condition but also a bio-psycho-social reality, with a strong influence on the informal domain of care.

Understanding cultural competence in antenatal care: local view vis-à-vis medical view

In the selected development block, over the years, the extent of institutional healthcare services has increased. Over here public as well as private health institutions are present. Major public health institutions include six primary health centres (PHCs), three community health centres (CHCs) and one district combined hospital (DCH). Of them, CHCs and DCH are the main sources for

seeking institutional ANC services. At the grassroots level, auxiliary nursing midwives (ANMs), *anganwadi* workers (AWWs) and accredited social health activists (ASHAs) form the main institutional healthcare force delivering services through *anganwadi* institutions.

Preference for public health institutions for ANC services remains high in the area as they are free and affordable. Thus, the majority of expectant women have a higher exposure to public health facilities and only on lesser occasions or during some emergency a private facility is sought. However, what is important to note here is that the experience at the former is considered less satisfying. This adds up to the need for the effort for understanding what factors are responsible for it.

Local women assert, as noted earlier, that most of the information regarding pregnancy and its associated care is received from some senior females either their own family or extended social network. However, information on TT vaccination or ANC visits, in general, is given to them by grassroots health care workers. At the village level, village health and nutrition days (VHNDs) are organised in which the expectant women have a chance of interacting with ANM besides ASHA and *Anganwadi* worker (the latter two being village-based) while making the antenatal visit, but visits made to CHC/DCH and interaction with doctors/physicians are always held in high esteem and given more importance. This remains so even though interactions on most occasions are considered not satisfactory. At local PHCs the level of ANC services is not up to the recommended level. What is unique about these ANC visits made to CHC/DCH is that they are time-consuming but the time of interaction with the doctor for consultation is very short and impersonal. The doctor prescribes required tests, reports of which after being conducted are taken back to them for consultation. Although exposure to medical procedures has gained a wider acceptance in the area but the kind of interaction between an expectant woman and the doctor is believed to lack a sense of familiarity and an association which women rather feel

with grassroots healthcare workers or TBAs (or any local elderly lady providing such services with experience) or in alternative course with a local supernatural healer/herbalist. The reason for a high level of formality with a doctor is vividly explained by local women.

Except in a few cases, nearly on all visits, ASHA accompanies the expectant women for consultation with the doctor, as a part of her institutional duty. Explanation of the case is sometimes preferably taken from ASHAs by the doctor as the former is able to explain it in common medical terminology. During a consultation session, a doctor takes the medical and obstetric history of the expected woman, does physical examinations as required and asks about any problem or difficulty being faced, as a part of a routine examination. Enquiry about detailed medical and obstetric history as well as any problems being faced is the most important and sensitive aspect of the interaction between expectant women and their physician. It decides the nature of the interaction between the two and also the level of satisfaction of the former.

History taking, as noted in the field, even though an important step is the most affected aspect of the interaction between an expectant woman and the physician. Many local women reported (when details of obstetric history were collected by the researcher) that they skip giving the exact number or details about their past miscarriages or stillbirths which they believe happened due to some supernatural affliction or even fear or bad dreams. It is so because doctors do not buy their explanation and believe that such beliefs are 'irrational' and cannot be taken as an explanation for any adverse obstetric condition like miscarriage or stillbirth. On certain occasions, they are rudely dismissed. For locals, their beliefs hold immense value as they find them valid based on their traditional knowledge. Thus, in order to avoid any embarrassment, women prefer skipping the details at times. Similar is the case with an enquiry about any problem being faced e.g. abdominal cramps or case of mild haemorrhage etc. In these events even though a

doctor may be consulted but for some, the first resort is a local *naut* or a TBA in whom they instil strong faith as these illness episodes are on most occasions believed to have a supernatural etiology. If a consultation is made with a doctor and they ask about the perceived cause from the women e.g. whether any heavy labour done or weight lifted or improper food or medication is taken, many times the latter falter as some remain unclear and those who have a clear idea about the reason remain reticent at times because they believe that they would be verbally reprimanded by the doctor and be held responsible for negligence.

On the other hand, reasons for any problem being faced, if explained according to the traditional beliefs of the people (having supernatural explanations) offend the doctors. It is for this reason that doctors prefer an ASHA to be always present with an expectant woman during consultation. Bad dreams, which are locally considered to be an important cause of concern during pregnancy hold nearly no significance to a physician. Thus, any perceived problem related to pregnancy which is explained through a supernatural etiology with no apparent scientific explanation lack relevance to a physician. Locals believe that physicians show less sensitivity and understanding towards their traditional beliefs and cultural knowledge. This does not allow them to have increased familiarity with the latter. What a local healer does is, capture the social relations and life of the individuals, rest it upon psycho-social analysis and provide treatment with the use of some medicinal herbs, talismans, acts etc., which seems a 'holistic' treatment for the problem and holds value to locals.

Besides this, detailed institutional counselling on danger signs or general problems at large is not present. It is not so that counselling is not done at all but as the duration of the time of consultation with the doctor is short because of the high patient count so the information received is less and more general in nature. At the grassroots level also no serious initiative is taken to adequately counsel the expectant women beforehand. Thus, the total local view regarding pregnancy and

antenatal care which is believed to be holistic is not catered to at public health facilities.

Doctors at the local public health institutions, on the other hand, provide their take on the scenario. They remain of the view that they are invested in providing proper medical attention to the women coming for antenatal visits. They assert that there remains a shortage of time for interaction with these women as the patient count in CHCs and DCH is very high. Giving extensive consultation time to a single patient/woman would affect the services to be given to other antenatal attendees who take out time, especially for these visits and come to the hospital. Their focus remains more on providing essential ANC components to the attending expectant women as making another visit soon is not easy for many. Doctors take a more diagnostic and practical approach where for them attending the expectant women with a proper medical diagnosis and treatment is important.

Interactions with expectant women, according to doctors, shows huge variation as they come across ANC attendees with varying level of educational qualification and socio-economic background. However, what remains a common point according to them is that the beliefs of locals are tradition-bound and not based on scientific laws.

For doctors, it is any physiological condition that has to be treated as that could affect the health of both mother and unborn. They do not delve deep into enquiring the social relations as a local healer or a village level *dai* (TBA) would do. This leads to a lack of proper handling of some important antenatal concerns at the institutional end e.g. dread and anxiety associated with pregnancy. Lack of proper counselling on it leads to a continuous interpretation of it as a supernatural concern for which care and support of local healer and informal social network is sought. Cases of dread or anxiety perceived due to bad dreams are not taken to any physician. It is commonly believed that a physician can do nothing about it, rather in certain instances they are taken to the *naut*. In this regard, Foster and

Anderson (1978) opine that ‘alternate’ forms of medical care fill the gap of psycho-social support during pregnancy in the lack of proper institutional intervention in this domain. Thus, women are not able to take the advantage of modern medical practice during instances when proper institutional counselling could help in alleviating pregnancy-related anxiety. This can be done by clearing all the doubts through scientific explanations empathetically by a physician.

Not only cases of illness episodes but general counselling on diet etc. is also not considered very satisfactory by local women, who believe that doctors mechanically advise about diet and rest during pregnancy. They don’t ask about their family or social conditions, household (or other) responsibilities etc. They just prescribe a diet and if in the next visit the concerned marker/condition (e.g. Hb level) does not improve then they are scolded. Women lament the less empathetic antenatal consultations at public health facilities. They believe that the entire responsibility of their pregnancy health is put over them which is not at all in their hands as they are predominantly financially dependent besides having to bear the brunt of existing patriarchy.

In private health facilities, the patient care is believed to be better than at public health facilities still incorporation of local beliefs and values is lagging in these facilities also, the only difference being that ‘they are listened to’ i.e. women believe that women and their family have a still better chance of communicating their issue (than in public health facilities) but acceptance of their traditional beliefs is less in private facilities as well.

Conclusion

Sensitivity for and understanding of local cultural beliefs and practices is the key to providing quality healthcare. Lack of competition among physicians in incorporating cultural specificities of people during treatment not only results in reduced adherence to medical treatment by the latter but also lowers the level of

their trust in institutional care. Cultural competence increases the possibility of having a better understanding of the total condition a patient is in, the factors responsible, and how and to what extent local culture is influencing a patient's health. This helps in providing patient-centric care to care-seekers and also helps in counteracting any locally held belief against the modern medical practice in a culturally sensitive way which may have the potential of adversely affecting a person's health. To be culturally competent, as Betancourt & Green (2010) emphasize, 'a buy-in is critical' from clinicians, meaning that only when they believe in the value of local culture and traditions and their impact on quality healthcare then only they will be able to incorporate it in their practice. It becomes essential that clinicians are made to understand 'emic' views about health, disease and illness in general and pregnancy in particular in the present case through advanced training so that locals do not attribute lesser weight to the significance of institutional care.

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Health Care for the Infertile: A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

Infertility has become a worldwide problem, particularly salient in third world nations. This has spawned a rising demand for infertility treatment. In the context of India, it has become a stigmatized health issue hidden under the country's multilayered and complex healthcare system. The rising demand for infertility treatment is plagued by inequitable access and lack of information and awareness. It has predominantly affected the marginalised sections of the society and underscores the need to promote education among the infertile couples on the many aspects of infertility treatment. In this broader context, this review paper examines the prevalence of infertility in India and the socially constructed nature of infertility in the Indian society. It has also dwelled upon infertility treatments and access to reproductive technologies within the broader neo-liberal market context.

Keywords: infertility; treatments; accessibility; health; reproduction.

Introduction

Infertility is a disease marked by an inability to conceive after a year of unprotected conjugal life. Primary infertility pertains to the failure to ever achieve pregnancy; Secondary infertility pertains to the inability to achieve pregnancy after one prior-pregnancy. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), an estimated 60 to 80 million couples in the world suffer from infertility (WHO, 2004). The regions having the highest incidence of infertility are "South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa/Middle East, and Central/Eastern Europe and Central Asia" (Mascarenhas et al., 2012).

Using data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), a study by Purkayastha and Sharma (2021) found that primary infertility prevalence among women in India has decreased from NFHS-I (1992-1993) to NFHS-III (2005-2006). However, NFHS-IV (2015-2016) indicates an increase of 30.02% in the prevalence rate of women infertility when compared to NFHS-III (2005-2006). According to a WHO study, infertility prevalence rate in India falls between 3.9% to 16.8% (WHO 2004). Infertility prevalence rate is also found to vary across regions in the country as well. For instance, infertility rates for the states of Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra stands at 3.7 percent, while Andhra

Pradesh and Kashmir region have 5 percent and 15 percent respectively (Talwar & Murali 1986; Unisa 1999; Zargar et al., 1997). Furthermore, primary infertility prevalence is also found to vary across different tribes and caste groups within a region in the country (Talwar & Murali, 1986).

Infertility has several adverse consequences on the institution of marriage. It has led to, inter alia, divorce, husbands deserting their wives, social avoidance, labelling of women as inauspicious, and incomplete (Unnithan, 2010; Bell, 2009; Reissman, 2000). In some societies the infertile women are prohibited from attending social events on the ostensible reason that it is inauspicious to have the presence of infertile women on such social occasions. How people perceive infertility is an important aspect of its constructed nature within a given socio-cultural milieu. Infertility has various psychological effects on women, including, inter alia, a negative perception of self and by others, a sense of uselessness and inadequacy, loss of self-control and powerlessness, anger and self-resentment, anxiety and stress, and a sense of isolation (Greil et al, 2010).

Domestic violence is the most common problem faced by infertile women. An estimated 30 percent of women in the world have faced domestic violence in one form or another (Sharifi et al., 2022). A study done in the context of India found that about 26 percent of women have been victims of violence from their spouses (Jeyaseelan et al., 2007). Women bear the major burden of infertility. The feeling of loss that is associated with infertility affects women more profoundly than men (Greil, 1991). Although it takes both women and men to procreate, the process of treatments is highly gendered (Nadimpally and Marwah, 2016). Women bear the major burden of infertility even when male infertility is the culprit. Inhorn (2003: 238) observed that despite men contributing significantly to worldwide infertility, they “do not bear more of the social burden for infertility”. They further attribute this to the operation of “patriarchy as a system of gendered oppression” wherein women’s bodies bear the burden of infertility through the failure to achieve childbirth while men’s bodies conceal the evidence of reproductive defect. Men usually refuse to go to clinics to get themselves checked – fearing that the problem might be with them. In a patriarchal social milieu, the acuteness of the shame and stigma associated with it makes male infertility as a direct blow to a man’s ego. Thus, the perceptions around infertility and its varying consequences across different communities underline the importance of studying infertility as a socially constructed process.

The Social Construction of Infertility

Greil et al. (2011) argue that social construction of health and illness is more conspicuous in the case of infertility than other health conditions for various reasons. First, irrespective of how medical practitioners define infertility, couples may not identify or define themselves as such or seek medical treatment unless they decide to be parents. Secondly, though medical practitioners treat infertility

as a problem affecting the individual, it is often seen as a problem affecting the couples regardless of whether infertility is due to one of the partners. This, therefore, implies that defining infertility requires a negotiation not only between the individual and the medical practitioners but also between partners and the wider society. Infertility has been majorly seen as a medical problem to be treated rather than seeing it through the lens of social construction (Bates and Bates 1996). It is perceived by some as a medically diagnosed physiological characteristic called “reproductive impairment” (Greil et al., 1988: 174). Others see it as a curse inflicted upon them as a result of wrong doings in their past life.

Female infertility is commonly understood as the inability to conceive a baby or carry a pregnancy; male infertility is defined as the inability to impregnate a fertile woman (Menning, 1977). This conception of infertility, which centres on biological aspects of the problem, is widely adopted in statistical analysis of the extent of infertility. However, sociological studies of infertility should give attention to the social and subjective aspects of how people understand infertility, factoring in the socio-economic milieu in which they are located. For instance, from the perspective of social constructionists, infertility is interpreted as barrenness or a curse, which is also highly stigmatized in society (McGuirk & McGuirk, 1991).

According to WHO, infertility is a major reproductive health issue. While women’s role and status should not be determined by their fertility, in many societies, motherhood is commonly deemed as the only way for women to negotiate their significance—both within family and society (Cousineau and Domar, 2007). As such, infertility burden is perceived as gender-based (Serour, 2008; Hasanpoor-Azghady et al., 2019). Motherhood is a highly gendered role that measures a woman’s performance. Non-performing bodies of infertile women are perceived as a distortion or abnormalities that need to be corrected (Nadimpally and Marwah, 2016). In this sense, being infertile is a great loss for women because motherhood gives women a sense of identity and wider social acceptance.

Social Responses to Infertility in India

Infertility has various social, psychological and economic consequences. In India, infertility is often equated with bereavement and engenders a sense of low self-esteem and powerlessness. For women, having a child is seen as fulfillment of motherhood role and as a sign of femininity; for men, it is regarded as a sign of sexual potency. For women, infertility is perceived as tantamount to losing control over one’s own bodies. It engenders constant questioning and monitoring of women’s bodies for the purpose of finding any possible reasons for their inability to conceive. Both within the family and wider social circles, the quotidian life of infertile women becomes a subject of constant scrutiny regarding food habits, behaviour such as smoking and alcohol consumption, among others.

The following sections dwell upon the diverse consequences of infertility under relevant themes through the lens of social construction.

Name-calling: Infertility has multifarious effects in a couple's lives. But in India, infertility is generally deemed as woman's problem. The implication is that women bear the major burden of infertility problem and its gendered consequences. Various pejorative names – such as *manhoos* or *vanjh* (used in rural Rajasthan and Bhiwandi-Mumbai to connote barrenness or infertile women), possessing evil eye, and visiting tantric (person performing black magic) – are used to address infertile women that are demeaning, embarrassing and undermining a woman's self-worth (Sheoran and Sarin, 2015; Unnithan, 2010). Name-calling is more or less a universal phenomenon. Even outside India, for example, in Bangladesh, infertile women are called by various names which have negative connotations attached to them (Papreen et al., 2000). Terms such as *poramukhi* (burnt face) are used to refer to infertile women. In medical sciences too, various terminologies – such as, “hostile mucus, blocked fallopian tubes, incompetent cervix and failure to conceive” – are used for the construction of infertility as physical impairment (Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000: 324).

Societal and Familial Pressure: A woman's capability or expertise is judged on the parameters of “fertility” or the potential to give birth. More than a personal choice, it becomes the fulfilment of the wishes of the family. A woman's body is not regarded as her own, but “for others”. Therefore, decisions concerning her body are taken up by the family, community, religion, state, etc. in that order. If for any reason a woman turns out to be infertile, she is fated to confront the glares and questions of society.

Sheoran and Sarin's (2015) study in Haryana mentions a young infertile woman of 23 years who underwent various invasive procedures (hysterosalpingogram)ⁱ just to prove to herself and her family that she is not infertile and therefore cannot be blamed for it. The inability to conceive becomes a matter of concern not just for family but even for neighbours who do not think twice before getting involved in the couples' lives by pressurizing infertile women to seek treatment. When a woman is infertile, she experiences strain in her marital life. The societal perception deems it to be fair if the husband wants to remarry as a solution to infertility. However, in a reverse case of male infertility, society expects a “woman to be supportive of her partner's “infecundity and take blame in social scenarios” (Rouchou, 2013: 176).

Situating infertility in different terrains: The response against infertility varies depending on the social location of the woman, i.e., class, education, caste, religion, region, sexual orientation, among others. In other words, what is required is the situational understanding of infertility. Studies conducted by Rouchou (2013) and Boerma and Mgalla (1999) show that in China and some African countries, women go through societal pressure of having a child, and that

infertility deprives women of their basic rights, such as food, clothes, and property. In their study of male infertility in South India (Andhra Pradesh), Pujari and Unisa (2016) also found that even contemplating the idea of infertility in men is rarely entertained.

Inability to become a father affects men's masculinity and is hidden from society at any cost. In rural Rajasthan, infertility is dreaded by many and is seen as a form of "social death" (Unnithan, 2010). Unnithan further also writes that gendered and class aspects of stigma related to infertility is found to be higher for women belonging to the poor social strata. The stigma associated with infertility not only traumatizes men and women across geographical regions, but the level of social ostracisation also varies depending on the class position of women. For example, in Kerala, poor village women fight childlessness through their everyday resistance practices. The attempt to de-stigmatize themselves through those practices is mediated by social class and age (Reissman, 2000). In Haryana, infertile women do not get any financial support from in-laws and do not get any say in decision making because they fail to attain motherhood (Sheoran and Sarin, 2015).

Having discussed the socially constructed nature of infertility and its consequences in the Indian subcontinent, the sections that follow dwells upon healthcare for the infertile and the way it has been conceptualised across different intersections. Needless to say, the capacity or opportunity to access infertility treatment and care are shaped and conditioned by the various social and political process. The way infertility is experienced or the access to reproductive technologies are largely shaped by one's social location and agency (Culley et al., 2009). Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) have been looked upon from vantage points of the politics of the neo-liberal market which impose these technologies upon women's bodies but are nevertheless portrayed as technological advancements in the field of medicine.

Reproductive Politics in the Context of Neoliberalism

The advancement of technology in the field of medicine has enhanced the relations between the markets of the First-World countries and developing countries like India. Portes (1997) explains from the perspective of economic sociology about the way neoliberal policies became the norm of the global economy. Neoliberal policy has largely shaped how nation-states sought to manage their economies. It has largely assumed the form of jettisoning the primary sector, deregulation of labor laws, abandonment of steady labor force, transnationalisation of manufacturing, among others. In this milieu of neoliberalism's triumph, there has been a rapid advancement in reproductive technologies with its concomitant incorporation of Third World countries within its ambit. In this arena of alternative methods of reproduction, the bodies of

women from Third World countries have emerged as sites of medical research, experiments and as markets for such technologies.

Reproduction or self-perpetuation is deemed as a pre-requisite for the survival and development of any social group. From this vantage point, society tends to see infertility as an incapacity to fulfil this social pre-requisite of reproduction or as a collective social problem that needs to be addressed. In this context, ART is, therefore, deemed as essential social need (Salter, 2021: 6). This implies that the broader cultural values determine the acceptability or non-acceptability of alternative means of reproduction such as ARTs. However, this demand for ART reflects or further reinforces the hegemonic power of patriarchy. This is reflected in the way the demand for ARTs is constructed, framed or legitimised as a part of the benign efforts to solve women infertility problems. This is notwithstanding the fact that male-infertility also accounts for the problems of infertility (Salter, 2021).

Corea (1985) argues that these reproductive technologies are a product of the systemic patriarchy that ultimately leads to the objectification of women. Corea further has the premonition that just as the “prostitution industry” reduces a woman’s body to market commodities, the reproductive industry would soon also render women’s bodies (such as the womb, ovaries and eggs) as market commodities. Medically assisted reproduction has now turned into a mega global business. Middle-class couples, once they attain economic security, increasingly avail the services of ARTs (such as IVF, donor gametes, or preimplantation genetic diagnosisⁱⁱ) to be able to achieve pregnancy or fulfil reproduction requirement. Such pursuits have now become an integral part of the reproductive tourism and involves the purchase of fertility from women belonging to low-income countries. The development of the reproductive bioeconomy is mainly about the compliance, negotiability, and general agency of females (Waldby & Cooper, 2014).

Healthcare for Infertility: Decisions such as defining oneself as infertile, seeking treatment (or not), making a choice regarding forms of treatment, deciding about adoption or other alternative means of having a child are embedded in social process (Culley et al., 2009). Widge & Cleland (2009) argue that asymmetrical power relations between men and women, unequal gender relations and roles hinder women’s choice, access to services and facilities and possible treatments – which in turn harm women’s reproductive health.

Nadimpally and Marwah (2016) argue that along with gender, sex and sexuality get constructed through ARTs through the level of discourse, as needing control, and at the level of treatment, through regulation and medicalisation. The socio-economic and political conditions of a country – such as, inter alia, level of educational attainments and quality of healthcare – constitute vital variables that determine access to treatments in different countries (Ombelet, 2011). Data on the

economic disadvantages of infertility in low and middle-income countries is limited (Dyer & Patel, 2012). Restrictions and limited access to infertility treatment may happen due to social, cultural, and economic reasons.

Disparities in Infertility Treatment: The utilization of healthcare is different from access to healthcare. According to Culley et al. (2012), access to infertility treatment is a complex concept. It includes need, demand, and supply. Access to infertility treatment is different for developed and developing countries. In developed countries, which are regarded as well-endowed (owing to the availability of resources), where there is need and demand, the supply of new reproductive technologies (NRTs) is mostly accessible. The NRTs are expensive; in some countries, such technologies are acquired by institutions of public healthcare or are covered under private medical insurance (Serour, 2008; Inhorn and Gurtin, 2012). In developing countries, where there is a high degree of need and demand, there is a noticeable lack of supply. NRTs are either not or scarcely available or accessible. Most of the population lack the wherewithal to have access to them. It is not just that these treatments are out of reach for the low-income women, but for the middle- and upper-class women, even if they can afford them, there are very less chances that the treatments will be successful for them.

The socio-economic position of any country is an important variable when it comes to studying infertility treatments which are by and large expensive and perceived differently by different social classes. In developing countries, women of low socio-economic status have different experiences of infertility and cannot afford the various treatments of infertility. As a result, the experiences of socio-economically disadvantaged women, in general, remain invisible (Bell, 2009). Not only is there a lack of information about infertility treatment but are also subjected to less treatment as compared to affluent women. They are perceived as having high fertility levels and contributing to a rising population, while at the same time being excluded from institutions (such as society/family, market/commerce, and state) that control reproduction. While for the upper-strata women not having a child can be a choice, lower-class women do not have that luxury of choice.

Infertility Treatments in India

In Asia, the most prevalent cause of infertility is sexually transmitted infection (STI) and unsafe management of abortion and delivery (Cates et al., 1985). In India, SIT prevalence is found to be high among women having infertility and pelvic inflammatory disease (Kushtagi et al., 1991). The various treatments available for infertility, such as intrauterine insemination (IUI) in vitro fertilization (IVF), and ICSIⁱⁱⁱ are unequally accessible among the infertile population. The disparities can be understood in health care that is available in the districts. Hospitals are situated far away from homes in the villages and the health

care centers fail to meet the demand of the reproductive health services of women. Poor infrastructure and inadequate health care services lead to ignorance in treating infertility effectively.

In India, the health sector is divided into public and private. The public health sector in India is large but a mere 1.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been spent on health in the year 2018-19 compared to 9%-10% in European nations (Desk, 2021). The major difficulties that characterise the public sector infertility management include, inter alia, lack of infrastructure, skills and trainings – a typical feature of developing nations. Further, there is also the prioritisation of other health issues to the neglect of infertility treatment and the lack of regulatory mechanisms. There is a non-implementation of clear protocols at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Widge & Cleland, 2009). No days are fixed for infertility consultations in the public sector facilities and there is a lack of provision of information to patients and a clear referral chain (Mulgaonkar, 2001; Unisa, 1999)

Infertile couples are therefore more inclined towards treatment from the private sector. ART services are mostly available in the private health sector. Public health sectors, on the other hand, generally lack the necessary facilities (such as sperm banking or donor materials). Public health sectors have infertility treatment only at the primary and secondary levels and is more time-consuming for the patient. On the other hand, tertiary health care services are however beyond the reach of common people or are hardly accessible in small towns and in the rural hinterlands (Widge & Cleland, 2009).

Despite the presence of infertility treatments, it has been found that only half of the population experiencing fertility issues, go for infertility care (Boivin et al., 2007). Couples usually do not go for treatment until the time they decide to have a baby (Greil et al., 2011). The development of the various treatments in the medical field indicates that infertile couples can be helped to conceive (Culley, Hudson, & Rooij, 2012). However, studies indicate that there is less than a 50 percent chance of the treatment leading to pregnancy). For those who cannot afford the expense of IVF, the relatively cheap and low-tech treatments are drug therapy and IUI (Culley et al., 2012).

In the case of deprived sections of women, infertility is caused by lack of access to nutritious food, reproductive tract infections, etc (Qadeer, 2009; Unnithan, 2010). Sabala & Gopal (2010) argue that the modern medical system views women's bodies as vulnerable and prone to illnesses. Most of the large-scale profits in the medical industry are achieved by exercising tremendous control over women's bodies, as well as by manipulating their reproductive health. Technology and the medical community took advantage of the vulnerability of childless couples by exposing them to artificial reproductive technology with the promise of providing a biological child. These technologies are harmful to women

(Corea, 1985). The medical profession has a major role to play in assisting women through technological “invasion” and it is done to attain the ideal body for coherence and manageability. The drawbacks in healthcare discussed above demand an understanding of the loopholes in existing policies and laws in India related to the reproductive health of women.

Public Health Policy and Infertility in India

The state along with other civil bodies has addressed women’s health issues but the policies and approaches have not provided enough attention to infertility. The report by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, entitled “A Strategic Approach to Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health' (RMNCH+A) in India”, has recognized issues regarding reproductive, maternal, and child health. It seeks to comprehensively address the healthcare needs of women – from home to the community level (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2013). However, the program has a limited focus on infertility services (Sharma, 2018).

There is a lack of statistics on infertility in the NFHS-5 (2019-2021)^{iv} survey as well. The decreasing fertility rates in most states mentioned in the survey shows the pro-natalist nature of the country and a disregard to recognize the rates of infertility in the country. The National Population Policy boasts of successfully bringing down the total fertility rate from 2.9% in 2005 to 2.2% in 2017 in one of the reports released by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (2020). It has by and large overlooked the issue of infertility despite the various policies and interventions on reproductive and child health programs. While the National Population Policy is supposed to address issues of contraception, maternal health, and child survival, it fails to address infertility which is also part of maternal health. Even if infertility has been mentioned in the report, the target has been largely tribal groups and migrant populations who may not be necessarily in need of fertility regulation (Department of Family Welfare, n.d.). The only development that has happened is the propagation of infertility services, but these are limited only to the upper and upper-middle classes. For instance, ART services remain unaffordable for the socially disadvantaged group of women (Widge and Cleland, 2009).

The ART regulation bills of 2014 and 2020 sought to regulate ART banks and clinics with an aim to provide safe and ethical practice of ARTs. While the 2014 bill made provisions for establishing National Advisory Board, the State Advisory Boards, and the National Registry, the 2020 Bill speaks of protecting women and children from exploitation. However, the repeated attempts to regulate the ART industry across the country still fails to address the needs of many infertile couples. It brings in a capitalist approach instead of a well-being approach (Kotiswaran, 2020). The regulation bills speak of a lack of proper protocols and

accreditations, the absence of proper laws to protect, for example, surrogate mothers from exploitation, among others. The public health system has largely focused on pregnant women and those trying to prevent unwanted pregnancies. In this context, as much as it is important to focus on such issues, it is also necessary to extend attention to those who would like to get pregnant but are unable to conceive.

In the area of reproductive health, attention is paid to sexual health and contraceptive services rather than infertility treatment (Culley et al., 2009). It must be noted here that although there is a small fraction of the population suffering from infertility, it is an important reproductive health and rights issue. The effective prevention and management of infertility, as Widge & Cleland (2009) observe, are crucial to women's reproductive health and their physical and mental well-being.

The situation in India remains dichotomous in a certain way. For a pro-natalist country, a woman's role is centered around the ability to bear a child. While the state, on the one hand, promotes IVF and ART, which fulfills the purpose of a certain privileged section of women, on the other hand, it fails to give marginalized women access to affordable infertility treatment. It is more focused on reducing the fertility of poor women than improving it (Culley et al., 2012).

There is a lot of information on fertility statistics in almost all government reports but there is a dearth of statistics on infertility in those reports. The lack of such statistics is a result of pro-natalism in Indian society, which is also represented in the way infertility is perceived by the Indian society differed on lines of caste, class, gender, and sexuality. The barriers to ART treatment in developing countries are its expensive nature and low success rate. Barriers also include shortcomings of healthcare systems that even struggle with infectious diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, gonorrhea, and HIV; the public health strategies that that focused on reducing total fertility rates; and ignoring the experiences of infertile women in the backdrop of the disparities in infertility treatment.

Summary and Conclusion

The paper has attempted to give a comprehensive outlook on how infertility is socially constructed in different settings. It brought in the arguments surrounding reproductive politics and its interplay in the neo-liberal market. The paper then discussed infertility treatments and critically analyzed the nature of healthcare for infertile women in India. Although government facilities have infertility treatment available, it is largely ineffective. This happens for several reasons, such as the lack of coordination between gynecologists and other medical professionals. Exploitation is prone to take place as the quality and costs of private services vary. When poor women cannot afford expensive treatments, they go for traditional healers, quacks, and private physicians. This not only takes a lot of

time but also gives preference to supernatural beliefs over science (Culley & Datta, 2002).

This therefore points towards the need for taking steps that would be instrumental for ensuring that all have access to infertility treatment. Many a times, women are oblivious of the fact that they may meet the necessary criteria to avail infertility treatment. Further, they also tend to rely on the information shared to them by their family members and circle of friends. This underlines the importance of provisions for professional counselling services and other provisions of social supports (Greil & Mcquillan, 2011). In this context, various reproductive health programmes “can be an entry point for couples with infertility problems”. In certain countries, such as in India and Nigeria, various non-governmental associations have played a vital role in making infertility treatment and management accessible to the larger society (Widge & Cleland, 2009).

Infertility is a rising problem in developing countries, both in rural and urban areas. The social construction of infertility spread across different societies clearly shows that it is a universal problem and that there is a demand for its treatments as well. While some countries give the sole authority to the private health sector, in some other countries like Egypt and Turkey, there is state subsidization to cover the cost of infertility treatment. Therefore, patients’ support networks should also be implemented in tune with the right to have equitable access to infertility treatment (Dill, 2007). To minimize the stress on the couples, there is also a need for medical practitioners and counselors to make couples aware of the success rates of various types of treatment and also the possible effects of couples’ background (age, time, and termination of treatment).

There are many recommendations for the management of infertility in the public health context. Brugha & Zwi (1998) stress on the need for infertility treatment to be affordable, effective and sustainable. There are debates as to whether infertility treatment should at all be included in reproductive health and whether the government should recognize such treatments as important as others. The under-documentation of infertility-related problems among women (especially in rural areas) in India leads to less discussion around this topic both in academia and in the reproductive health-related rights of women. Public health care systems should also pay attention on streamlining infertility services in the backdrop of largely unregulated privatised health care system. This would mitigate the anxiety and financial burdens of poor patients (Widge & Cleland, 2009).

There is no government report which directly records the rate of infertility in India. This absence of statistics does not go well with the huge reproductive industry that is booming in the name of providing alternative reproductive options to infertile women. During population surveys, the enumerators take cognizance only of the number of children in each household. In short, fertility statistics are taken. Until and unless the national reports recognize infertility as a legitimate

issue faced by women, the regulation of the reproductive industry will not be possible. This underscores the need for a more research focus upon the reasons behind people not going for infertility treatment even when they know it is needed.

The stigma associated with infertility can be eradicated through awareness campaigns and free-flow communications between doctors and patients. As infertile women feel ashamed and cornered, they end up blaming themselves and, thereby, leading to various mental health problems. Therefore, support groups should be formed whereby infertile women can come together and discuss their problems with others who are going through similar situations in the presence of necessary health officials. Government must make provisions for subsidized infertility treatments and introduce them as policies of infertility care. Lastly, priority needs to be given to solution-oriented and evidence-based research on infertility.

Notes

ⁱ Hysterosalpingography or HSG pertains to a procedure that utilises X-ray to determine the shape and conditions of the uterus and fallopian tubes.

ⁱⁱ Pre-implantation genetic diagnosis or PGD pertains to a lab procedure – using In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) – to explore the presence of or reduce any genetic defects in the embryos or oocytes.

ⁱⁱⁱ Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection or ICSI is a treatment procedure, involving In Vitro Fertilization (IVF), for cases of male-infertility.

^{iv} The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5 2019-2021) presents statistics in four different schedules: Household, Women, Man, and Biomarker. The Woman's Schedule covers a range of topics – woman's characteristics, marriage, fertility, contraception, children's immunizations, and healthcare, to nutrition, reproductive health, sexual behaviour, HIV/AIDS, women's empowerment, and domestic violence.

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Article: An ethnography of the ‘labour lines’: how access shaped my study?

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An ethnography of the 'labour lines': how access shaped my study?

--- Premshila Singh

Abstract

Tea plantations being an institutional setup, getting access was a major challenge for ethnographic research. This paper illustrates the challenges I faced in getting access to the field and subsequently describes the process of entering the field, the question of insider and outsider and lastly how access shaped my study. The access led me to study the plantations through the experiences and meanings of the people staying in the labour lines. I contend that access is the key to ethnographic studies. Access does not only influence the ways we collect data but can have a profound implication on the findings and therefore shapes the overall study. Through this access that I gained during my fieldwork, I go on to examine the role of mobile phone in the everyday life of the people staying in the labour lines of a tea plantation in Assam.

Key words: Tea Plantations, Labour Lines, Ethnography, Mobile Phone.

Introduction

Health is an important development concern as it entails in itself issues of social justice, equality and human rights besides primarily taking into account complete physical, mental and social well-being of an individual. Not only is good health a basic right of every individual but appropriate, equality based and dignified delivery of healthcare services a requisite for enhancing the belief of the community in modern medical science.

Absence of good health is not only marked by its clinical manifestation i.e. disease rather 'illness' as well, latter being a cultural construction of ill-health. Kleinman, Eisenberg & Good (1978) assert that modern medical profession has in due course become 'discordant with lay expectations', wherein a higher focus of medical practitioners remains on identifying the *disease* and its management, and less attention on managing *illness*. They further state that such an approach of health management reduces the faith of people in modern medical science or its benefits

to health, on the contrary, resulting in larger dependence on ‘popular’ and ‘folk’ sectors of healthcare. Thus, an increased empathetic involvement of health service providers is essential in order to up-scale the outreach of the benefits of modern healthcare services even in communities and regions which are less privileged and/or those which have a higher inclination towards their *traditional culture* (Foster, 1962).

Healthcare system predominantly involves both, the service providers and the stakeholders at large i.e. the community. However, while dealing with health it cannot be said that the onus of positive health outcome lies solely on either healthcare provider or on the care-seeker (as there is an array of socio-cultural, economic, psychological and other factors working) but, as noted earlier, definitely a more enhanced and empathetic involvement of the ‘provider’ eases the way for the ‘receiver’ or care-seeker, especially where the force of traditions is high.

Even in communities where modern healthcare practice has made in-roads still the level at which they should be able to bring a positive change has not been possible. Foster (1962) has pointed out that any kind of technological advancement, be it in the field of health, does not at the outset ensure rapid and open acceptance in all instances. It is so because local culture and traditions, social institutions and various psychological factors bear an impact on health, and there is no dearth of evidence suggesting the same (Paul, 1955; Foster, 1962; Foster & Anderson, 1978; Napier et al., 2014). However, how a community at large is engaged in healthcare seeking is also determined by the factors e.g. what are the available healthcare resources at their disposal, who is the ‘provider’, and what kind of health needs of the people are being fulfilled etc.

Informal healthcare providers like shaman, medicine men, healers etc. enjoy local trust, draw respect and faith of the community, and have a wider acceptance by venturing into the social space of the individuals, than an ‘outsider’ physician treating patients in a formal setting like government or private hospital or clinic. Communities having a strong hold of *traditional culture* find it less easy to incorporate practices which do not hold an explicit sanction of their local customs or traditions as they remain divergent from their traditional knowledge. The most detrimental impact however can be observed in the form of non-compliance or lesser inclination towards use of modern health services which affects a positive health outcome. Thus, in order to increase the level of acceptance for institutional services in such communities the role of institutional healthcare workers becomes even more important and sensitive.

Antenatal care (ANC) in tradition bound communities is one area where a greater reliance on traditional care can be witnessed (Manocha et al. 1992; Bloom et al., 1999; Chapman, 2003; Nelms & Gorski, 2006; Zamawe, 2013; Rout 2016; Shewamene, Dune & Smith, 2017; Mawoza, Nhachi & Magwali, 2019), even when a complete absence of exposure to modern medicine cannot be claimed in them. In such a situation an effective reach of modern medical practice in the community depends upon healthcare professionals, i.e. to what extent the specialist understands the local culture and whether it seems to them essential or not to incorporate local perception for better treatment and health management, and how well they are able deal with the perceptions of people regarding illness and disease. It is so because local beliefs and practices if not taken into account or disregarded are sure to create a lack of seriousness and belief from the side of care-seekers, ultimately affecting the health.

The present paper in its content tries to explore the significance of cultural sensitivity and competence among institutional healthcare workers (clinicians) with regard to antenatal health. The paper is based on intensive fieldwork done in four villages of Bakshi ka Talab (BKT) development block of district Lucknow, on antenatal care-seeking behaviour. In-depth interviews in the form of detailed case-history were conducted with recently delivered women (RDW) currently pregnant women (CPW) and some special cases of miscarriage/intra-uterine death, and of physician advised medical termination of pregnancy. Healthcare workers in public health institutions present in the selected area and grassroot healthcare workers were also interviewed. Besides, Family members of some selected women (mother-in-law and husband), local traditional birth attendants (TBAs) and supernatural healer were also interacted. Observation was used for a better understanding of the phenomenon.

Cultural diversity, sensitivity and cultural competence in healthcare

Understanding of culture, cultural diversity, ideas of culture relativism and cultural pluralism have been the focus of anthropological enquiry, which anthropologists have vehemently vouched for. These ideas extend a very important perspective that cultural plurality is an essential feature of human groups which brings forth its diversity. Each human group has its own specific culture which is valid in itself with no inherent superiority or inferiority of status. Having a dominance of tradition and customs in no way reduces the possibility of any culture or community not to have best available healthcare resources at their disposal.

The idea of cultural diversity with inherent validity has a huge practical value.

While dealing with human problems of practical nature an enhanced role of technological and scientific advancement has been increasingly noted. Traditional communities, as noted earlier, experience a challenge while adopting and adapting with fast paced scientific and technological changes. Health is one domain which has immense potential for marked improvement through scientific advancements in the field of medicine and health care. However, to what extent these advancements have been able to enter into the lives of those having a traditional culture has constantly attracted the attention of social scientists in general and anthropologists in particular.

Domain of health and healthcare has over time shown to have a dominating influence of social and cultural factors across the world. Terms like ‘social determinants’ (WHO, 2020) have been widely used while taking into account the socio-cultural context of health. However, what becomes essential is to know that whether at the grassroot level social and cultural factors, cultural diversity and sensitivity are taken into consideration and brought in actual practice or not by the ‘providers’ in the delivery of healthcare services.

Need for cultural competence in healthcare has been time and again felt and reiterated in the field of medical practice, education and research. Cultural competence in health care according to Cross et al. (1989) takes into account the development and delivery of health care services ‘...in a culturally appropriate way in order to meet the needs of culturally and racially diverse groups’. The word ‘competence’ as used by them implies ‘...having the capacity to function within the context of culturally-integrated patterns of human behaviour as defined by the group’. Cultural competence strategy takes into account that cultural diversity of patients should be given due credence and be dealt with empathy so that any inequality or underutilization of health care services may be mitigated and better patient care and health outcomes may be achieved. It is an ability of health care professionals to develop a set of skills to interact with and provide effective high-quality care to patients from diverse cultural backgrounds, and to locate those socio-cultural factors that might affect the process of patient’s care and health management (Carrillo et al. 1999; Betancourt et al. 2010).

Relevance of cultural competence and culture sensitivity in providing patient-centric care remains high. It is so because when cultural beliefs and value system of the people are taken into consideration then their belief in formal healthcare system gets strengthened (Srivastava, 2019). However, Kleinman et al. (1978) assert that ‘...biomedicine has increasingly banished the illness experience as a

legitimate object of clinical concern'. They assert that unless cultural meanings of the people, their idea about illness and disease will not be taken into account by clinicians or healthcare workers while treating, till that time belief in and adherence of patients/people with 'formal' treatment will continue to lack vigour. It will be 'less satisfactory and less clinically effective' to the people as the medical logic will not be able to find its way in their understanding and thus compliance with treatment will reduce resulting in less effective outcome of the treatment (Kleinman et al. 1978). Thus, in order to improve the level of trust and interactions between the patients and healthcare workers and to improve healthcare utilization it is essential that cultural sensitivity and competency should be effectively brought into practice (Thackrah & Thompson, 2013).

Recalling the forgotten

As stated at the onset, there is an impressive ream of deliberations on the structural constraints in higher education in Indiaⁱ. They highlight the delimiting impact of the academic bureaucracy, stultified institutional and intellectual growth among other things. It aids in understanding an unreflective, and to a great extent anti-teacher and anti-student bureaucracy, and hence non-regenerative social science. The bureaucratic authorities, institutional structure, and governing bodies are key actors and driving factors. In such a scheme, we can easily decipher an allegedly disembodied category of teacher as an unproductive or incompetent scholar. Also, there is a narrative of victimhood in which teachers are victim of market, state, and bureaucracy and the students are victims of a bad system and bad teachers, as it were. It is, however, erroneous to mistake the pawns, the teachers and students, as docile bodies.

Likewise, there is a strong liturgy of lament about the practice of sociology in the region of South Asiaⁱⁱ. Emphasis is placed on the decline in the quality and standard in sociological researches, teaching and learning. A glorified notion of 'rigour' underpins the two other attributes, quality and standard. Paradoxically, there has been a contemporary call for pluralising sociologyⁱⁱⁱ, without a concrete plan or exemplars on 'how to pluralise'. It thus is mere hobby-horse in intellectual deliberations detached from the practitioners, teachers and learners. There are many ways of doing sociology, intellectually as well as emotionally, vocationally as well as professionally, experientially as well as textually. This is where it is imperative to juxtapose the 'diagnostic deliberations' with 'pedagogical pursuits'. In addition to comprehending the issues of structural impediments, arguably, it is imperative to explore the micro-issues involved in teaching and learning. After all, sociological

focus on inequalities out-there (social structure) cannot be separated from that on inequalities in-here (practices in the institutes of higher education). This divide between looking at self and the world is certainly as much a bottleneck as is the obsession with ‘buzzwords’^{iv}. This simple idea may not persuade the disciplinary orthodoxy, and hence the preponderance of perpetual divide between self and the other plagues the sociological attention to any issue, question, and idea on the anvil of sociological analyses.

Thinking of pedagogy in the time of pandemic requires steering clear of the dominant modes and means of analysis, and returning to the reasons why scholars resist the invitation to become pedagogues. This need not amount to falling back on the famous ‘call for indigenisation’. Much water has flown over the call for indigenisation. But behind such a call there were significant intellectual-polemical stimulus that ought to be retrieved. One such insightful observation is about ‘captive mind’ (Alatas, 1972) that was aimed at revealing the intellectual laziness of those who seldom question the content and methods of knowledge-transaction. The calling out of captive mind also aimed at incorporating the local-contextual social thoughts in the curricular and pedagogic practices of teaching and thus responded to ‘academic dependency’ (Alatas, 1993). This was not to debunk theories, which emerged in the European context; this was however to debunk the uncritical emulation of European theories. These issues, of epistemological significance, are crucial for a context-sensitive disciplinary scholarship (research, curriculum, knowledge-production and dissemination).

In this light, the backdrop of pandemic compels for a rethinking about the course-curriculum and pedagogy. Perhaps it has been much easier to talk about these and other such issues in a manner of intellectual deliberation than perform it through a curriculum, let alone pedagogy. The task becomes much more challenging when skepticism about the engagement with the contextual particularities is expressed through the phrase of ‘methodological nationalism’, an intellectual apprehension that sociology of particularities will be a compromise on the ‘universal-cosmopolitan’ characteristics of the discipline. It takes the notion of indigenous with a pinch of salt to suggest that it is a discursive product loaded with colonial legacy, orientalist approach, and idealism of nation-building in post independent countries^v. The students along with teachers spontaneously resort to the local/contextual while engaging with the textual, in a pedagogical plan to render teaching and learning into a context sensitive endeavour^{vi}. A life-threatening situation of pandemic makes this endeavour even more like an existential necessity.

And hence, the following section elucidates a possible phenomenology of pedagogic pursuits in the context of pandemic. It is not merely about online education, instead, it is about how playfully teachers and students alter the given.

Pregnancy and the local rationale on antenatal care

In the selected area pregnancy is believed to be a special state and a highly vulnerable phase in a woman's life. It is believed that proper care should be taken during this phase to avoid any complication. However, there remain some who believe that pregnancy becomes a special state requiring attention only when some health issue arises. Another commonly held belief in the area regarding pregnancy is that even though attention and care is required to avoid any complication still it is not a disease or a sick state as no matter how much care is taken each expectant woman faces some or the other problem at some or the other point of time in pregnancy because of associated vulnerability.

Any problem during pregnancy is either identified broadly as a physical problem or a supernatural affliction e.g. god's fury, bad dreams, evil eye, spell bound air (*shaitani-saaya*), or any supernatural misery caused by an adversary etc. Accident cases are also resigned to supernatural cause on most occasions even if resorting to medical care. In normal course, in order to avoid any adverse situation both medical and supernatural care is sought as a preventive measure.

Risks, threats and dangers signs associated with pregnancy are not overlooked but which problem or condition is considered to be a risk or a danger sign is uniquely defined in the area which on several occasions is different from the medical perspective e.g. haemorrhage is one important locally identified danger sign but largely explained with a supernatural logic. Treatment sought by locals could either be only supernatural i.e. visiting a *naut* (indigenous/supernatural healer), or a combination of supernatural and medical care depending on how at individual/household level the problem is interpreted. In very few instances the treatment sought is limited solely to medical care.

Local knowledge on pregnancy related risks or danger signs is cumulative as it is based on traditional beliefs and practices passed down over generations as well as understanding gained from exposure to modern medical practices (over the years) focussing on institutional care at grassroot level, due to the role of state. However, in the selected area the biggest source of information on danger signs or risks or even general antenatal care is still a person's family and informal social network and only secondarily any healthcare worker. It is here that traditional knowledge

gains an edge.

Treatment or care sought for any problem depends upon the nature of the problem as understood. Preventive and curative care both form an important aspect of total pregnancy care in the area. For it, locals take the route of both formal as well as informal domain as what is most desired is best possible care, according to one's capacity, for the unborn and the expectant woman. Any compromise on the belief pattern is not preferred. Formal institutional care includes both public and private sector but predominantly public health institutions. Informal pregnancy care includes folk and supernatural healers, traditional birth attendants (TBAs) along with an individual's family, extended kinship and social network. As local culture is bound by traditions so informal domain of care has a dominating influence over how pregnancy will altogether be managed. However, individual experiences, socio-economic condition, access to health care resources also influence the course of care-seeking.

Significance of sources of care during pregnancy besides bio-medical care e.g. local healer, herbalist, TBA etc. form the psycho-social support of the people. A supernatural or indigenous healer is able to describe a problem based on day to day events and nature of social relations of individuals (at the levels of kinship, neighbourhood and community) with an inherent supernatural rationale about the problem being faced. Such explanations are contingent upon various human emotions of jealousy, hatred etc. (Horton, 1967). They treat any problem or provide preventive care during pregnancy by incorporating total social life of the care-seeker which is mostly absent during a consultation with any medical specialist.

Thus, in the selected area the entire perspective surrounding pregnancy and antenatal care is holistic in nature considering it not only to be a physiological condition but also a bio-psycho-social reality, with a strong influence of informal domain of care.

Understanding cultural competence in antenatal care: local view vis-à-vis medical view

In the selected development block, over the years, extent of institutional healthcare services has increased. Over here public as well as private health institutions are present. Major public health institutions include six primary health centres (PHCs), three community health centres (CHCs) and one district combined hospital (DCH). Of them, CHCs and DCH are the main sources for seeking institutional ANC services. At the grassroot level, auxiliary nursing midwives (ANMs), *anganwadi*

workers (AWWs) and accredited social health activists (ASHAs) form the main institutional healthcare force delivering services through *anganwadi* institution.

Preference for public health institutions for ANC services remains high in the area as they are free and affordable. Thus, majority of expectant women have a higher exposure to public health facilities and only on lesser occasions or during some emergency a private facility is sought. However, what is important to note here is that the experience at the former is considered less satisfying. This adds up to the need for the effort for understanding what factors are responsible for it.

Local women assert, as noted earlier, that most of the information regarding pregnancy and its associated care throughout is received from some senior female either from own family or extended social network. However, information on TT vaccination or ANC visits in general is given to them by grassroot health care workers. At the village level, village health and nutrition days (VHNDs) are organised in which the expectant women have a chance of interacting with ANM besides ASHA and *anganwadi* worker (latter two being village based) while making the antenatal visit, but visits made to CHC/DCH and interaction with doctors/physicians is always held in high esteem and given more importance. This remains so even though interactions on most occasions are considered not satisfactory. At local PHCs the level of ANC services are not up to the recommended level.

What is unique about these ANC visits made to CHC/DCH is that they are time consuming but the time of interaction with doctor for consultation is very short and impersonal in nature. The doctor prescribes required tests, reports of which after being conducted are taken back to them for consultation. Although exposure to medical procedures have gained a wider acceptance in the area but the kind of interaction between an expectant woman and the doctor is believed to lack a sense of familiarity and an association which women rather feel with grassroot healthcare workers or TBAs (or any local elderly lady providing such services with experience) or in alternative course with a local supernatural healer/herbalist. The reason for a high level of formality with a doctor is vividly explained by local women.

Except in few cases, nearly on all visits ASHA accompanies the expectant women for consultation with the doctor, as a part of her institutional duty. Explanation of the case is sometimes preferably taken from ASHAs by the doctor as the former is able to explain it in common medical terminology. During a consultation session a doctor takes the medical and obstetric history of the expected women, does physical

examinations as required and asks about any problem or difficulty being faced, as a part of routine examination. Enquiry about detailed medical and obstetric history as well as any problems being faced is the most important and sensitive aspect of interaction between expectant women and her physician. It decides the nature of interaction between the two and also the level of satisfaction of the former.

History taking, as noted in the field, even though an important step is the most affected aspect of interaction between an expectant woman and the physician. Many local women reported (when details of obstetric history were collected by the researcher) that they skip giving the exact number or details about their past miscarriages or still births which they believe happened due to some supernatural affliction or even fear or bad dreams. It is so because doctors do not buy their explanation and believe that such beliefs are 'irrational' and cannot be taken as explanation for any adverse obstetric condition like miscarriage or still birth. On certain occasions they are rudely dismissed. For locals their beliefs hold immense value as they find it valid based on their traditional knowledge. Thus, in order to avoid any embarrassment, women prefer skipping the details at times.

Similar is the case with enquiry about any problem being faced e.g. abdominal cramps or case of mild haemorrhage etc. In these events even though a doctor may be consulted but for some the first resort is a local *naut* or a TBA in whom they instil strong faith as these illness episodes are on most occasions believed to have a supernatural etiology. If a consultation is made with a doctor and they ask about the perceived cause from the women e.g. whether any heavy labour done or weight lifted or improper food or medication taken, many a times the latter falter as some remain unclear and those who have a clear idea about the reason remain reticent at times because they believe that they would be verbally reprimanded by the doctor and be held responsible for negligence.

On the other hand, reasons for any problem being faced, if explained according to the traditional beliefs of the people (having supernatural explanations) offend the doctors. It is for this reason that doctors prefer an ASHA to be always present with an expectant woman during consultation. Bad dreams, which are locally considered to be an important cause of concern during pregnancy hold nearly no significance to a physician. Thus, any perceived problem related with pregnancy which is explained through a supernatural etiology with no apparent scientific explanation lack relevance to a physician. Locals believe that physicians show less sensitivity and understanding towards their traditional beliefs and cultural knowledge. This does not allow them to have increased familiarity with the latter. What a local healer

does is, capture social relations and life of the individuals, rest it upon psycho-social analysis and provides treatment with use of some medicinal herbs, talismans, acts etc., which seems a 'holistic' treatment for the problem and holds value to locals.

Besides this, a detailed institutional counselling on danger signs or general problems at large is not present. It is not so that counselling is not done at all but as the duration of the time of consultation with the doctor is short because of high patient count so the information received is less and more general in nature. At the grassroot level also no serious initiative is taken to adequately counsel the expectant women before-hand. Thus, the total local view regarding pregnancy and antenatal care which is believed to be holistic in nature is not catered to at public health facilities.

Doctors at the local public health institutions, on the other hand, provide their take on the scenario. They remain of the view that they are totally invested in providing proper medical attention to the women coming for antenatal visits. They assert that there remains a shortage of time of interaction with these women as the patient count in CHCs and DCH is very high. Giving extensive consultation time to a single patient/woman would affect the services to be given to other antenatal attendees who take out time especially for these visits and come to the hospital. Their focus remains more on providing essential ANC components to the attending expectant women as making another visit soon is not easy for many. Doctors take a more diagnostic and practical approach where for them attending the expectant women with a proper medical diagnosis and treatment is important.

Interactions with expectant women, according to doctors, shows huge variation as they come across ANC attendees with varying level of educational qualification and socio-economic background. However, what remains a common point according to them is that the beliefs of locals are tradition bound and not based on scientific laws.

For doctors it is any physiological condition that has to be treated as that could affect the health of both mother and unborn. They do not delve deep into enquiring the social relations as a local healer or a village level *dai* (TBA) would do. This leads to lack of proper handling of some important antenatal concerns at the institutional end e.g. dread and anxiety associated with pregnancy. Lack of proper counselling on it leads to continuous interpretation of it as a supernatural concern for which care and support of local healer and informal social network is sought. Cases of dread or anxiety perceived due to bad dreams are not taken to any physician. It is commonly believed that a physician can do nothing about it, rather

in certain instances they are taken to the *naut*. In this regard Foster and Anderson (1978) opine that 'alternate' forms of medical care fill the gap of psycho-social support during pregnancy in the lack of proper institutional intervention in this domain. Thus, women are not able to take the advantage of modern medical practice during instances when proper institutional counselling could help in alleviating pregnancy related anxiety. This can be done by clearing all the doubts through scientific explanations empathetically by a physician.

Not only cases of illness episodes but general counselling on diet etc. is also not considered very satisfactory by local women, who believe that doctors mechanically advise about diet and rest during pregnancy. They don't ask about their family or social conditions, household (or other) responsibilities etc. They just prescribe a diet and if in the next visit the concerned marker/condition (e.g. Hb level) does not improve then they are scolded. Women lament about the less empathetic antenatal consultations at public health facilities. They believe that the entire responsibility of their pregnancy health is put over them which is not at all in their hands as they are predominantly financially dependent besides having to bear the brunt of existing patriarchy.

In private health facilities the patient care is believed to be better than at public health facilities still incorporation of local beliefs and values is lagging in these facilities also, the only difference being that 'they are listened to' i.e. women believe that women and their family have a still better chance of communicating their issue (than in public health facilities) but acceptance of their traditional beliefs is less in private facilities as well.

Conclusion

Sensitivity for and understanding of local cultural beliefs and practices is the key for providing quality healthcare. Lack of competence among physicians in incorporating cultural specificities of people during treatment not only results in reduced adherence with medical treatment by the latter but also lowers the level of their trust in institutional care.

Cultural competence increases the possibility of having a better understanding of the total condition a patient is in, factors responsible, and how and to what extent local culture is influencing a patient's health. This helps in providing a patient-centric care to care-seekers and also helps in counteracting any locally held belief against the modern medical practice in a culturally sensitive way which may have the potential of adversely affecting a person's health.

In order to be culturally competent, as Betancourt & Green (2010) emphasize, ‘a *buy-in* is critical’ from clinicians, meaning that only when they believe in the value of local culture and traditions and its impact on quality healthcare then only they will be able to incorporate it in their practice. It becomes essential that clinicians are made to understand ‘emic’ view about health, disease and illness in general and pregnancy in particular in the present case through advanced training so that locals do not attribute lesser weight to the significance of institutional care. This paper is developed through the field encounters of my doctoral research, where I am exploring the embeddedness of mobile phones in the everyday life of the people staying in the labour lines of a tea plantation in Assam. The rationale behind choosing tea plantations was to locate the ubiquity of devices like mobile phones in the daily life of tea garden labourers and their families who were historically kept isolated. The reason for using the ethnographic method was to see the mobile phones in a holistic way and not reduce to the technology itself (Horst & Miller, 2006, p.11) and delineate the experiences of the people instead of defining them by standardised and imposed measures (Slater, 2013, p. 11). Also, the mobility aspect of the handheld device made it important for me to observe and participate in the everyday. Ethnographic studies call for a prolonged stay in the field where the idea is to immerse into the life of the people being studied.

Getting access to the field is the first and the most crucial step. The problem in getting access to the field, reveals the nature of the field, it provides insights into the social organisation of the field (Hammersley & Atkinson 2009, p. 41) in my case it is the institutionalised set up of the plantations. Plantations are colonial enterprises and still bear semblance to it. The sociocultural and political distance of plantations creates a unique cultural history of itself (Chatterjee, 2001, p.5). They present an interesting contradiction, on one hand they are embedded in the socio-economic realities of the region they are located, on the other hand, there is a clear distinction from it (Banerjee, 2017, p. 11). The present day labourers are the descendants of the indentured migrant labourers brought by the Britishers from Central India. The labourers were forced to stay in the housing lines irrespective of their social and ethnic background, the labourers were under constant surveillance and all aspects of their daily life was disciplined and controlled, and had very little or no contact with the outside world (Sharma, 2011; Behal, 2014). Over the years the management has become lenient, it became evident during my fieldwork too. Dwindling production and lack of work in the tea garden has forced more and more people to go to the nearby town and villages. However, still very restricted number of outsiders visit the plantations, and the entry to the labour lines

is prohibited (Xaxa, 2019, p. 31).

Taking the issue of access as the central theme, this paper focuses on four aspects of my ethnographic research in the plantation. First, I will describe the challenges I faced in getting access to the field. Secondly, I will describe how access is not permanent but has to be negotiated all along. Thirdly, my personal attributes and multiple identities with the community remained crucial to my access in the lines where I lived, observed and participated in daily life. Fourth and lastly, I will elaborate how access shaped my study and helped me focus on the 'everyday' in plantations which includes both work and social life. My research is not limited only to the labourers but include their families too. I contend that as an ethnographer, it is imperative to be open to the challenges and let it shape the study instead of going with some rigidly held notions about the field and line of query.

Gaining access: pre-field reflections

With the initial aim to capture the nuances of mobile phones in tea plantations, I started exploring ways to get permission to conduct my field study. I chose the district of Sonitpur in Assam, given my familiarity and the contacts I had in the tea gardens located there. I spoke to one of the Assistant Managers of a tea garden over the phone (10th October 2017), he asked me to write to the Manager. I clearly stated the purpose of my study and sent the necessary documents in the email, duly acknowledged and backed by my supervisor to the manager. However, I did not receive a reply. I also wrote to authorities of the various tea gardens located in Sonitpur. All my attempts to get access had failed. In the meantime, I met one of the managers of a tea garden (10th January 2018). He checked the application in his computer in my presence. He allowed me to visit the tea garden for a few days. However, I was not allowed to visit and meet the labourers on a regular basis. He remarked sarcastically, "Even I want to know how people in the tea garden use the mobile phone, as they are not educated enough and I have seen them using". The manager further asked me to contact the Assam Branch of Indian Tea Association (ABITA). I visited the office of the Tezpur Zone of ABITA and met the Zonal Secretary (11th January 2018). He told me being a 'local' woman, I should not have faced any problem in having access to the tea gardens. However, for the last 5-6 years, the tea gardens are apprehensive about allowing researchers to conduct studies inside plantations. He said researchers in the past have misused the access given by the gardens, leading to a negative impact on the image of the tea companies. He also spoke about the need to strengthen mobile phone network inside the gardens as it would also facilitate management activities in the garden.

During my fieldwork later, I found that despite poor network, most of the families have at least one mobile phone in the household. However the labourers say mobile phone was not needed for the work in the tea garden, rather it was mostly used by the people who go out to the nearby town and villages for work. I was also asked to contact Guwahati and Kolkata Office of ABITA and other associations like Tea Association of India (TAI).

In the meantime, I got permission from one of the biggest private individually owned tea company in Upper Assam. The owner told me they would extend all support and would allow me to conduct my study in one of their tea gardens. However, given my own experiences in finding access as well as based on the advice of my doctoral committee, I decided not to go through the owner as it might narrow down my perspective. The means through which we get access to the field affects with whom we can speak to and how the participants respond (Reily, 2009, p.5). Given my own experiences in getting permission to conduct the study and after consultation with my doctoral committee, I decided to enter the field through a Community Radio station based in Dibrugarh. The radio has access to the tea gardens. I joined Brahmaputra Community Radio Station (BCRS) popularly known as Radio Brahmaputra as an intern, assisting the community producers in conducting their live programs and also helped them in creating awareness on socio-economic issues.

Entering the labour lines as an intern

Access to the field remains one of the major challenges in ethnography, from entering the field to building rapport, problems related to access remain throughout the data collection process (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, p. 41). After contacting the station manager of the community radio over the phone, and sending him necessary documents, I first went to conduct a pilot study in the first week of April 2018. I visited a few tea gardens with the help of Radio Brahmaputra community producers and assisted them in conducting and recording radio programs. I selected two tea gardens based on the access and the rapport that I developed by visiting the tea garden multiple times during my pilot study. The purpose of selecting two tea gardens was to compare and contrast and find out how the distance with the town leads to differences in adoption and adaption of mobile phones by the people staying in the tea garden. With the help of the community producer and station manager, I fixed a house in one of the labour lines for my stay. I realised while the study was a priority for me, and all my endeavours revolved around it, when I came back after a gap of two months for my prolonged field study, access has to be

negotiated again. I believe that the authority of the station manager might have forced the community producer to agree to my field visit and the stay. When I came to the field for a longer stay in June 2018, it took me considerable time to convince the host family in the labour line. In the meantime, I continued to visit the tea garden along-with the community producer and with other people from the radio station to build contacts. The problems and the time constrain made me revisit my proposal and rethink my approach towards the study, and I decided to restrict my field to just one tea garden.

I was in the field between June 2018 to February 2019, and stayed in one of the labour lines between September 2018 to February 2019. During my stay, I came to know why the family was at unease when they came to know that a woman from Guwahati is going to stay at their house. There was also a wedding in the house, they discussed among themselves for many days, how a woman from Guwahati can stay with them with minimum facilities? Finally, after the wedding, they agreed to my stay. The woman in the host family in the line was one of my key informants, she was a *sardar* (garden supervisor). She happened to be the first woman sardar in the tea garden where I conducted my fieldwork. On Sundays, she used to take me to the various lines and made me familiar with people in positions like sardar, line *chowkidar* (watchman) and few families of the labourers. After visiting once with her, I used to go the lines alone and visit the households on my own. Also, since I had visited the lines with the people working in the community radio, few young men and women were already known to me with whom I exchanged phone numbers. My rapport with the community producer who also hailed from one of the tea gardens and my stay at the woman sardar's house was crucial in my acceptance at the community level.

Insider and outsider

In ethnography the key instrument to data collection is the researcher herself. I had two experiences in the field, which made me realise how my social background and personal attributes were crucial to my access to the plantations. During the initial period of my fieldwork (June 2018), there were two interns at the community radio hailing from Delhi, intrigued by the exotic nature of the tea plantations which they were visiting for the first time. They decided to go on their own and start clicking pictures during working hours. The field manager noted, and the Assistant Manager was called in. They were asked to give the camera and destroy the pictures. On one hand, this instance made me exercise caution during my fieldwork and I made sure my activities don't disturb the labourers during the working hours. On the other, it

reminded me of my familiarity with the field, the difficulties I faced in getting access to the field, and the field for me was not exotic and was part of my growing up. The second instance happened during the last leg of my fieldwork, in February 2019. I met a researcher from one of the public universities in India. She also hailed from Assam, but she was of different ethnic origin. With the help of the community radio, she visited the field for a week. After seeing the problems in getting access to the people and management, she abandoned the idea of researching the people in the plantations. Later while conversing with me, she assumed how her ethnic background, which has a history of conflict with the people she intended to study, could affect her fieldwork and prevent her from getting an insider perspective.

The ethnographer's role is to socialise with people and community they are studying, the idea is to gain both 'emic' and 'etic' perspective (Fetterman, 2010, p. 11). If the researcher is studying an unfamiliar setting, it might take time to mingle and gain insider perspective, while if the researcher is studying their own community there is a chance that they might miss certain aspects. The community, I am studying is not the one I belong to, at the same time being born and brought up in Assam, it is also not a community, that I am completely unfamiliar with. Growing up in a village in Sonitpur district, living around three to four kilometres away from a tea plantation and surrounded by ex-tea garden labourers, it was not a completely 'unfamiliar setting' neither it was 'home' as my interaction and understanding were limited. I was aware of the morning factory siren, the noon siren, the evening siren and also the sound of the clock pendulum inside the tea garden indicating the *bagaan* (garden) time that is 1 hour ahead of Indian Standard Time. The sound of the films that were screened during Durga Puja and Diwali, everything was audible, however, it rings more in my ears now when I am studying the lives inside the tea plantations. Therefore, throughout my ethnographic journey, a sense of self-reflexivity allowed me to evaluate my own position.

Besky (2014, p.35) argues that it was her familiarity with Nepali language and her appearance that she could just walk in the Darjeeling plantations during her fieldwork. My own identity as a Bihari married woman and familiarity with *Sadri* language was quite pivotal in building rapport with the people. Given my own background, there was no major make-over that I needed especially for the field stay, however, I made sure that I look married by wearing the symbols of marriage like *sindoor* (vermilion) and *bindi* (coloured dot worn on the forehead mostly by married women). These symbols remained the first point of query for the people whom I was meeting for the first time. The second line of the query was for how long I have been married and whether I have children. Being married helped,

especially to mingle with girls and married women and it also gives a sense of security in unfamiliar surroundings (Coffey, 2009, pp.79-83). Though one of the queries was, how can my husband allow me to stay with strangers? For the women in the tea garden, even going to their relatives' house is very restricted and if the wife tends to stay out for long, I was told, she will be looked with suspicion.

Being a female researcher, I had access to women gossips, their warmth and affection. They confided in me and shared about their mother in-laws, their natal homes and the day-to-day problems they face in the plantations. Also, few young men and women, who were either studying or were literate to varied degree remained very accessible to me and helped me in conducting interviews and discussions. The young people being the avid users of mobile phone remain the most interviewed group. From being an intern at the Radio Station during initial visits to the field to being referred to as *gotia* (guest) both these identities led me to engage with the community at various levels.

The 'everyday' and the labour lines: concluding remarks

The plantations are unique spaces, which are both the work and living spaces for the people staying in the lines, so when I say the field, the field for the participants is the place where they both live and work. As mentioned previously, the difficulty I faced in accessing the plantations made me restrict my study to just one plantation. It made me to look at the social life of the labour lines and how the spaces are produced and reproduced, taking the labour lines as the unit to understand the plantation. Further, my study included people across age groups and not only the labourers who work in the tea garden but also the retired labourers, other people who work as daily wage labourer, teachers, the young students. As the study progressed, I excluded the managerial perspective and instead confined myself only to people staying in the labour lines, which included the majority of the people, the labourers, the *sardars*, and the *chowkidars*.

The everyday life was central to my study, the motive was to consider the everyday communication activities and locate the mobile phone in that. I preferred observing the everyday life in the labour lines, where economic life is interlaced with the social life. I did not want to interrupt the working hours as the tea pluckers got paid more when they plucked more leaves. What then exactly constituted participant observation in my field study? In my case I stayed with the people I was studying, I lived with them. I participated in their everyday life by cooking and eating with them or by visiting the market. The embodied ethnography led me to observe and participate in the everyday life of people staying in the lines, their festivities. Even

when I stayed in the line, it was not easy to conduct interviews and discussions as both men and women used to go for work, women were mostly busy in tea garden work and domestic chores. The labourers come to their house after day long work. I was advised not to venture out after it gets dark. The school going and college going students were also not available during holidays as they go to the town to work as daily wage labourers. Besides, as most of the people did not converse much with people outside their lines or the garden, they were often left bemused with my queries and I had to ask in many ways. It was mostly during the winter season (December 2018 to February 2019), that I was able to conduct interviews and discussions, as there is not much work in the tea garden. On working days, I visited the Anganwadi centres and schools as the labour lines mostly becomes empty with only very young children and elderly people staying at home. The access to the households and the various events and functions taking place in the households and the lines provided me with deep insights which I would have missed had I not stayed there. The mobile phones while deemed very important for emergency situations mostly lie at the periphery of the daily lives. Every line is an entity in itself, after the family, it was line affiliation that matters.

The institutional nature of the field called for a sensitive approach in conducting ethnography, it influenced much of my research methods. I was immersed in the field for 8 months, continuously reflecting on the life inside and outside the plantation. While the community radio helped me in accessing the tea garden, later it was my engagement with the community that helped me in carrying out the study. The purpose of my research initially was to focus on the role of the mobile phones in the everyday life of the people staying in the plantations but as the research progressed and I delved deep into the literature and immersed more into the field, I noted one missing aspect of the plantations life in the available literature, the plantation labourers are often looked through the lens of backwardness and marginalisation, the everyday details remain missing from accounts. Most of the studies are either quantitative or collected from tea pluckers while they are at work in the tea garden, the access and the acceptance of the community makes my work go beyond their working life and attempts to bridge the gap between the working and social life. The homogenous construct gets destroyed when we look into the details.

ⁱ In 2014, a report titled “*The More Things Change: The World Bank, Tata and Enduring Abuses on India’s Tea Plantations*” was released by Columbia Law School’s Human Rights Institute. The report depicted the poor living conditions inside the tea plantations of Assam and West Bengal. The report can be accessed at

https://web.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/microsites/human-rights-institute/files/tea_report_final_draft-smallpdf.pdf

ⁱⁱ The name of the tea company, tea gardens has not been disclosed for ethical reasons. Even for the tea garden under study I am using pseudonym.

ⁱⁱⁱ Community radio is basically a radio station where local people participate and produce their own programmes. The radio caters to local information needs, address social issues.

^{iv} BCRC is the first non-commercial community radio station of the north-east India. It was set up as a part of the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES). Since 2009, the radio station caters to the information and communication needs of the people staying in the tea gardens, river islands and other villages and urban slums located nearby Dibrugarh. BCRC is located in Majjan Borsaikia village near Paltan Bazar, Dibrugarh.

^v For those who go to study and work outside, the garden time has become obsolete. However, for the tea garden labourers especially women it still holds importance and they adhere to that for their daily routine.

^{vi} The language has its origin in Chotanagpur plateau, it acts as a connecting link between the people belonging to various castes and tribes staying in the tea garden, who are originally from diverse background. As a Bhojpuri speaking person, I understand the language.

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Book Review: *Ceasefire City: Militarism, Capitalism, and Urbanism in Dimapur* (2020) by Dolly Kikon & Duncan McDuie-Ra

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--- Viliebeinu Medom

Throughout the years, the scholarly works and research in Nagaland have primarily focused on its rich culture and tribal affairs; studies about emerging urban spaces like Dimapur, the largest city in the Northeastern tribal state of Nagaland rarely exist. Taking into consideration the importance of contemplating urban spaces and identities in tribal areas, this pivotal work by Dolly Kikon and Duncan McDuie-Ra presents a contemporary approach to capture the essence of Dimapur as a ceasefire urban city. The book under review presents a series of ground-breaking ethnographic vignettes drawn from an 'off the map' evolving city of Dimapur. The book provides a window to comprehend the multiple perspectives of the city's residents and their relationship and experiences embedded within a myriad of overlapping identities and spaces.

The book's originality lies in several facets. First, by drawing together the outcome of interdisciplinary research and collaborative ethnography through the lens of urban sociology McDuie-Ra highlights the 'spatial dimensions' of Dimapur, while Kikon adopts an anthropological approach to focus on the 'lived experiences' of Dimapur's residents. The book's originality lies in its ethnographic data which moves beyond the traditional notions of research and incorporates 'purposeful mobility' to walk around the city and discover the lives of the people. It orients itself through the spatial orientations and the unexpected events that the authors came across. The unique focus on the contemporary 'visual culture' of Dimapur through photographs and pictorial representation presents a fascinating addition to the book. The book is organized into two major parts that focuses on 'Space' and 'Stories'. Dimapur is placed in a paradoxical position between tribal and migrant zones, constituting people from different communities all over India seeking refuge and opportunities in the city. The first chapter addresses Dimapur's urban crisis by opening with the 2015 public lynching incident that put Dimapur on the global map, perhaps for the first time through 'a staple of news coverage all over the world'. The ground-breaking news brought into limelight the central tensions of Dimapur's migrant population and internal tribal conflicts. The chapter also provides a critical outlook on how ordinary spaces and buildings represent more than what they stand for. Churches represent the power of different "communities (tribes), denominations, and the networks and circuits" of the city (p.56), structures like gates represent the customary authority of urban villages, memorials exemplify the constant political

conflicts in the city, and spatial exclusion of military zones highlights the ceasefire status of the city, all these spaces are woven together in unifying and establishing a sense of belonging to the city. The second chapter further navigates the city's internal politics and violent tensions. The chapter provides a critical outlook on how the public and private enterprises intend to create an urban landscape in Dimapur through various developments "in order to look more like a city, to put Dimapur 'on the map'..." (p. 90); the various structures and spaces in Dimapur illustrate the makeshift community infrastructures in the backdrop of showpiece state infrastructures that symbolize Dimapur as a city figure for the rest of India.

In the light of the city, the book argues that it is crucial to learn about the city through its residents and how they navigate their lives through the complex inter-phase of pursuing urban status with traditional identity. The second part of the book which consists of three chapters focuses on 'Stories'. These vividly recreate the stories and experiences of the residents of Dimapur. Nagas have always been 'musically inclined,' and music in Nagaland comes from a plethora of sources, from Christian musicians to rock bands and choirs from the various Naga insurgent groups which unravel different rhythms and meanings of life. Taking this into consideration, the third chapter highlights the stories behind the city's music that builds communities and creates bonds in this city and beyond; this chapter unravels the urban life and lived experiences of Dimapur as an Audible city "...through voices (vocal and conversations) and sound (mechanical and vibrations)" (p.117). The 'audibility' that the authors talk about in this chapter refers to hearing and being heard in militarized societies and ceasefire states like Nagaland. The struggles of contemporary musicians over the rigid notions of traditional music, and the sensory experience and connection of music to urbanism exemplify the notion of hearing and being heard. In continuation with the stories behind the urban city, the fourth chapter is fascinating as it connects the practises of tribal hunting with urban residents. The practice of traditional hunting in a presumably 'modern urban city' seems quite out of context. However, Dimapur is a city that is unique in its terms, and the residents and space being part of that uniqueness critically highlights the city's boundary and its hunting grounds through the "...political and cultural boundaries of the forest and the city in a frontier region" (p.149). The chapter further illustrates the complex intersections of tribal beliefs, masculinity, and customary laws in the backdrop of fragile networks with the state and the non-state authorities. The questions and emotions of living and dying in a ceasefire city also illustrate the process of place-making and the persistence of tribal identity even beyond life. The final chapter questions the true nature of the residents of Dimapur and how they look at their city as migrants. Interestingly, it takes into account the role of tribal groups and coffin makers in keeping community values alive and how such tribal groups and communities, despite internal differences come together during funeral rites and '...become examples of keeping ties and connections with one's kin groups' in a migrant city (p.185). The overcrowded burials in the city's cemeteries also signify that many residents identify the city as their home and their final resting place.

On all accounts the book strives to showcase why it is relevant to study an ‘off the map’ city like Dimapur. The book succeeds in highlighting the relevancy of Dimapur in all its glories and downfalls by capturing the experiences of the residents of the city and illustrating the spaces that manifest the ceasefire city. Through exceptional groundbreaking collaborative ethnography the book critically highlights how Dimapur as a ceasefire city is visibly broken, filled with unlikely identities and spaces yet uniquely coexisting and bonded together for what the ceasefire city offers. However, the perspectives of the non-local migrants in Dimapur who consider the city as their home and how they build and live in a tribal city dominated by tribes provide further room for research in the future. The authors brilliantly connect all the elements that make Dimapur stand out as a growing urban city. The book contributes indispensable knowledge and ethnographic insights for scholars and researchers engaged in ethnographic research on the similar dynamics of urban spaces, militarized ceasefire regions, capitalist transformations in the tribal zones of India and beyond.

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