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EDITOR'S NOTE

It has been an honour to edit the XXIII Volume of DUJOP, 2023 in which a melange of articles from different aspects of the social sciences have been discussed with immense academic thoroughness. The articles showcase theoretical rigour and are also based on arduous field visits to an array of socio-political and environmental locales. Some of the articles are also foregrounded in literature including novels and poems that have been used to study the shaping of ethnic identities and the formation of class consciousness. The essence of the articles is provided here as a brief overview of the contribution to scholarship that has emerged from the collection of articles published under this volume of DUJOP, 2023.

Prof. Sanjukta Banerji Bhattacharya in the article 'The Strategic Significance of the Indian Ocean for India's Security in the 21st Century: An Overview' discusses the significance of the Indian Ocean for the security and economic interests of India. The paper also analyses the challenges in the region including the presence of countries such as China and it examines the naval capabilities of India and India's ties with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean which are decisive for India's interests in the region.

Prof. Samir Kumar Das in the article Research Note: People, Populism, Democracy focuses on how different segments of people constitute a body and how people as a body materialize into a being and the effects therein. The paper elaborates on the populist construction of demos and dwells on populist and popular politics which are discussed with examples from the Northeast of India and West Bengal.

Dr.Padam Nepal in his article 'The 'Rong' Verses, Subverses And Subversions The Versical Art of Creation of Spaces of Remembering, Reconfiguration of Contested Spaces, and Resistance against Historical Erasures'

explores the construction of group identities through the discourse of collective memory, with special emphasis on poetic literature of the Lepcha Community in Darjeeling Hills who face assimilation threats under dominant identity-based movements in the region.

Dr Phulmoni Das and Robin Hazarika in the article 'Women's Effort to Resist against Patriarchy and Poverty: A Tale from Amrapari (We Can)' study the engagement of women in 'Ketha-making' (traditional embroidery) under Amrapari -a registered cooperative society situated in Barpeta district of Assam. The paper seeks to explore how Amrapari through the reinvention of Ketha helps women counter patriarchy and poverty by providing them with visibility, access to decision-making and financial security.

Hasmin Ahmed and Dr.Borun Dey in the article 'Internet Memes as Catalysts for Political Activism in China' argue that memes have emerged as ways for citizens to criticize the government in an otherwise heavily censored atmosphere. Internet activism of citizens of China is explored in the article to understand how they evade censorship and engage in shaping the political discourse.

Ankur Saikia in the article 'Locating Gender in between Oil Palm and Neo-Liberal Agriculture: Field Experiences from Kolasib, Mizoram' seeks to explore the consequences of the new policies in agriculture regarding palm oil plantations of Mizoram on the life and livelihood opportunities of women. Saikia argues that the current development mechanism does not take into consideration existing patterns of indigenous forms of cultivation and practices of life and asserts that gendered divisions that are unequalhave arisen due to palm oil cultivation.

Debahuti Das in the article 'Is Multi-culturalism a hindrance to National Unity? Exploring the dynamics of Multi-culturalism in the context of the Bodoland Movement in Assam' argues that the Bodoland movement underscored that to balance multiple identities and aspirations there is a need for inclusive policies. Das also highlights that multiple identities add greater nuances to national identity which in turn have ramifications for integration and national unity.

DhritiSonowal in the article 'Cultural Elites And Middle-Class Politics In Post-Independent Assam' highlights the impact that the elite cultural organizations

had in how the political discourse of Assam was shaped. Sonowal argues that exclusionary spaces were created by cultural elites that shape political discourses and the political trajectory of a region.The role of the Assam Association and the Axom Sahitya Sabha form the mainstay of the article.

Prodakshina Singha in the article 'The Tale of Coexistence of Humans and Gibbons in Barekuri: Understanding the Harmony, Challenges and Prospects' explores the impact of the Baghjantragedy and subsequent politics on the peaceful coexistence between humans and Hoolock Gibbons in Barekuri village. Singha argues that conservation measures that consider local ecological knowledge are required to ensure a balance between development and the environment.

Puja Dihingia in the article 'The Journey of the Indian State from Exclusionary to Inclusionary Forest Conservation Model with Special Reference to the Joint Forest Management Programme' argues that JFM has emerged as important for sustainable forestry, livelihood needs of forest dwellers and improving biodiversity. It is argued that participatory forest management is the need of the hour for governing such commons.

SatyadeepLahkar in the article'Labour Consciousness and Class Struggle in Colonial Assam: Some Reflections' on Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's novel Pratipad' seeks to underscore labour consciousness during the strike by the workers of the Digboi Oil Refinery in 1939 as portrayed in the novelPratipad, which also sheds light on the contemporary society of the time given the shifting local politics of the time.

Sun Gogoi in the article 'State Administration and Tribal Politics: Ethnic Assertions among the Moran community of Assam' explores the origins of the political and cultural consciousness among the Morans. Gogoi also attempts to explore the dynamics of the claims of indigeneitythat are asserted by the Morans.

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THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN FOR INDIA'S SECURITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: AN OVERVIEW

Sanjukta Banerji Bhattacharya

"Whoever controls the Indian Ocean controls Asia. The ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters"-this much-cited quotation has often been attributed to Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, but it is doubtful whether this is correct. Mahan, however, did write, "Whoever rules the waves rules the world", in his very impactful book, The Influence of Sea Power upon History(published in two volumes in 1890 and 1892), in which he argued that sea power was the key to military and economic expansion. Over a century has passed since the book was published and the world has changed in more ways than one with the introduction of air power, space power, digital technology, and Artificial Intelligence (AI), which work in tandem with ground forces, uniting strategies, adding to security but also the level of destruction. At the same time, the oceans remain the main lanes of communication for trade and commerce, with most heavy cargo including petroleum and natural gas being carried by ships, making 'ruling the waves' and securing ocean waters as important now as it was in the 1890s.Although Mahan was not the person who predicted that 'the destiny of the world' would be decided on the waters of the Indian Ocean (IOR) in the twenty-first century, the geostrategic significance of

the Indian Ocean Region and its neighbourhood is such that the United States (US) has coined the term 'Indo-Pacific' to cover an expanded region extending over both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which would imply that whoever controls the Indo-Pacific, controls most of the world.

While post-Renaissance and the invention of the compass, sea power became very important for European powers that had long coastlines like Spain and Portugal or were island nations like England, Indian states or mainland empires had never focused on sea power although ships and boats of different types existed from at least 5000 years back as testified by the magnificent port of Lothal on the Gujarat coast dating back to the Indus Valley civilization, which, given the magnitude and finesse of the port, speaks of a thriving trade across the Indian Ocean. Sorghum, pearl millet, finger millet, cowpea and hyacinth bean, all African crops, found their way to Gujarat around 4000 years back in the late Harappan period, while black pepper and sesame, which are native to India, arrived in Egypt around the same time (Boivin, Crowther, Pendergast and Fuller, 2014, pp 547-581). One may wonder why coastal kingdoms or powerful empires like that of Asoka or the Mughals never focused on building viable navies. The answer perhaps lies in the fact that till the advent of the Portuguese, although India had been invaded time and again throughout its history, armies had come across the difficult terrain of the Northwest over the Hindukush mountain ranges, or infiltrated across the jungles of the Northeast, but never over the Arabian Sea or the Bay of Bengal. The Europeans, on the other hand, had developed large ocean-going vessels capable of sailing over thousands of miles from the late 1400s and had further invented firearms that could be used in sea battles as well fired from the sea onto land sites, which were far superior to the canons owned by Indian rulers which were short range and could not hit ships that were offshore moving targets. The Europeans began to trickle in during the reign of the Great Mughals, who suffered from a kind of 'sea

blindness'. They had large outsized land armies but a navy that was worth little and no match against the steady inflow of Europeans who set up trading posts which developed into diwanis, and as Britannia began to rule the seas, they also began to rule most of the littoral states around the Indian Ocean.

Today, in a shifting kaleidoscope of power and power play, the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean can only be ignored at the cost of India's security. The present paper will first discuss why the Indian Ocean is important for India's security and economic interests; it will then analyse challenges and threats to the region including the presence of other major powers like China, and finally, it will examine India's naval capabilities and diplomatic and security relations with Indian Ocean littoral states in its bid to remain dominant in its region.

I

In the current geopolitical context, it may not be possible for any one country to control the entire expanse of the Indian Ocean the way that colonial powers like the Portuguese, French and British did during various stages of colonial history, but the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean region has magnified since those days, especially over the past couple of decades following the rise of China and its obvious intent to dominate not only its region but its wider neighbourhood, which includes the IOR and its choke points. In the years following Independence, India focused on nation-building and the immediate economic and security issues within its borders. As there was no dominant power in the region controlling the seas, the ocean was split into the continental sub-regions of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. The island nations also grouped themselves into these sub-regions, dividing the Indian Ocean primarily into the eastern Indian Ocean and the western Indian Ocean. But India now views the Indian Ocean as one

continuous region from Africa's eastern coast to Australia's western coast. In 2016, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) set up a new division, the Indian Ocean division, to look at the region as one theatre. Madagascar and Comoros which had not then been included in this division were added in 2019. While India's initiatives will be discussed later, it may be emphasized that the IOR is gradually gaining strategic space in political conversations in New Delhi.

Is the Indian Ocean becoming important because of India's threat perceptions, especially after the sea-borne terrorist attack on Mumbai in 2008? While this is one reason for added concern, it is important to explain the growing realization of the significance of the maritime domain. India is geographically located at the Ocean's centre, and has over 7,500 kilometres of coastline; it is the region's most populous country and in a sense, its geopolitical underpinning because it is located at the crossroads of international commerce and is the connecting point between the global trade of the North Atlantic and the Asia-Pacific. It has been reported that around 80 per cent of the world's maritime oil and 9.84 billion tons of cargo pass through the Indian Ocean region annually. In 2020, the Indian Ocean Rim reported $6.17 trillion in total trade (Baruah, Labh, Greely, 2023). The IOR is also critical for its movement of hydrocarbons and natural gas; about 65 per cent of the world's known oil reserves belong to 10 of the IOR littoral states. About 80 per cent of India's and China's oil imports move through the Indian Ocean, while for Japan, the figure is above 90 per cent (Weber, 2019). What makes it imperative to cite these figures here is that three of the world's most important choke points are in the Indian Ocean: (1) the Malacca strait between Malaysia, Singapore and the Indonesian island of Sumatra, which connects Southeast Asia and the western Pacific to the Indian Ocean; (2) the Strait of Hormuz, which is the only sea passage connecting the Persian Gulf to the wider Indian Ocean; (3) the Bab-el-Mandeb strait between Eritrea and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa and Yemen on the Arabian

Peninsula. There is also the Mozambique Channel between Madagascar and Mozambique, which is a key trading route for goods transiting the Cape of Good Hope to the Middle East and Asia. Choke points are narrow routes providing passage from one region to another and any country that controls a choke point can cut off access to other seas, causing immense sea traffic jams and huge commercial losses. Here, it is also imperative to mention the Sea Lanes/Lines of Communication (SLOCs), which are commercial trading routes in peacetime, also giving access to resources in distant places via ocean routes, but which pass through choke points and are vulnerable in times of both war and peace due to long-existing threats like piracy, and emerging ones like international terrorism in addition to disputes between states and other geopolitical problems, where the rules of a rule-based-order are flouted regularly.

The IOR is also gaining importance for its resources; this ocean is easier to explore than the depths of the Atlantic or the Pacific and modern techniques have yielded a wealth of natural resources in the Indian Ocean. Nodules containing nickel, cobalt and iron, and massive sulphide deposits of manganese, copper, iron, zinc, silver, and gold have been found in sizeable quantities on the sea bed. The Indian Ocean coastal sediments are important sources of titanium, zirconium, tin, zinc, and copper. Rare earth elements are also present although their extraction is not always commercially feasible. Further, Indian Ocean region economies accounted for 35.5 per cent of global iron production and 17.8 per cent of world gold production in 2017. Moreover, 40 per cent of the world's offshore oil production takes place in the Indian Ocean basin. The main energy resources present in the Indian Ocean are petroleum and gas hydrates.The Indian Ocean holds 16.8 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves and 27.9 per cent of proven natural gas reserves. Also important are thorium deposits in the placer sands off the Malabar

Coast which could be used for producing nuclear energy. Similarly, the placers of Thailand, Australia and the Indo-China region contain precious heavy metals that are critical for the electronics and semiconductor industries.India received exclusive rights to explore polymetallic nodules in the Central Indian Ocean basin in 1987. Since then, it has explored four million square miles and established two mine sites. In July 2011, China too, was awarded the right to explore a 10,000 km2 polymetallic sulphide ore deposit in the Indian Ocean.

Perhaps one of the most significant assets of the Indian Ocean today is its living assets: fish and marine animals. While global trends show a decrease in fish capture since 1996, the IOR has reported a continuous increase in fish capture since the 1950s and was responsible for 28 per cent of the world's fish catch in 2016. This has increased fish exports from IOR littorals; for instance, Indonesia and India accounted for around 4.5 per cent of global frozen fish exports in 2017. Aquaculture, that is, raising fish in captivity, has also increased in the IOR. Improvements in technology have made it possible to also have deep-sea aquaculture.The Indian Ocean possesses some of the few remaining underexploited fish stocks in the world; some analysts feel that it will come under enormous pressure in the future as the next frontier of the global fisheries market (Michel, Fuller & Dolan, 2012; 103-112).

In the past few decades, the IOR has gained geopolitical and economic importance as the volume of shipping, especially cargo ships, has increased, minerals are being explored and excavated, offshore oil is being extracted and fish capture and aquaculture have become thriving industries. Earlier, the Indian Ocean, unlike the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans that acted as barriers between states, was a peaceful connector of the East and west with no known important battles being fought on its waters. But in the emerging geostrategic structure, the very 'connector'

status of the Indian Ocean has opened it to many threats and challenges, not the least being the ambition of rising powers to control the seas, the SLOCs and the choke points to control Asia if not the Indo-Pacific.

II

Before discussing conventional security threats from state and non-state actors, it is imperative to first mention some serious non-conventional threats to the Ocean, because these may have serious implications for the well-being of the littoral states. A 2009 World Bank study on vulnerability to storm-surge disasters found that five out of 10 countries with the greatest percentage of coastal population at risk, five out of the 10 countries with the highest percentage of coastal GDP at risk, six of the 10 countries with the highest proportion of coastal urban areas, and 21 of the 50 most vulnerable major cities at risk lie around the Indian Ocean (Davis, Balls, 2022: p. 17). The environmental risks to the Ocean include habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, land and marine pollution, and overfishing, to mention a few. States throughout the region face numerous economic, social, political, cultural, and human vulnerabilities and are at risk. Apart from the depletion of mangroves, coastal reefs and wetlands, there are threats to marine life from destructive fishing practices, as well as billions of litres of sewage and industrial waste polluting the waters. Scientists have found that in parts of the Indian Ocean oxygen levels are declining, threatening fish stocks, and so-called 'dead zones' have been identified where there is not enough oxygen to sustain marine life. Further, there is the serious challenge of climate change. The Indian Ocean is the fastest warming ocean and the expected impacts include rising sea levels, increasing sea surface temperatures, acidification of waters, stronger tropical cyclones, and larger storm surges, and this in turn, could affect food security and the economy derived from marine life. It also makes the littoral states vulnerable to environmental

disasters like the tsunami of 2004 that killed around 228,000 people. What is required to meet these challenges is a governance mechanism with uniform regulations, standards and guidelines applicable to all nations which implies a coherent regional arrangement and enforcement mechanisms, something that is only cosmetic at present.

There is also a strong security dimension to the threats facing the IOR, which includes piracy, smuggling and illegal trafficking. For India, which has a coastline of 7517 kilometres (including the coasts of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Lakshwadeep Islands), the security challenge came horribly to the fore during the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks which were perpetrated by terrorists arriving by sea. For a few decades after Independence, India looked inward since the state was a nation-in-being and much was needed to make it into the 'emerging' power that other states currently claim India to be. During the Cold War, the Ocean was a major theatre of competition between the Soviet Union and the United States, but this phase ended following the end of the Cold War. While the US presence continued through its presence in the military base of Diego Garcia, its focus was largely on the Persian Gulf leaving the Indian Ocean largely segmented with some powers having sway in specific areas. Because of history shaping geopolitics, the influence of great powers in the region remains complex. For instance, while the United States continues to maintain a military base on the island of Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago, the sovereignty of the island, an overseas territory of the United Kingdom (UK)which it leased from Port Louis during its independence, is disputed by Mauritius, with the UN General Assembly adopting a resolution in favour of Mauritius in 2019. And while India is a key partner of the US in the IOR today, it supports Mauritius on grounds of decolonization and non-alignment. Further, France has an important security role

in the western Indian Ocean; through its overseas region of Reunion, France is a member of the Indian Ocean Commission, the only forum that brings together the French-speaking islands of the region.

Both France and India however, never really filled the security gap left by America's limited engagement in the IOR following the end of the Cold War, and now over the past decade and a half, new competitors are slowly but surely, easing into the region. The Maritime Silk Road under Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provided a platform for China to collaborate on economic and military issues with the island states and littoral countries of the Indian Ocean. It set up its first overseas military facility in Djibouti in 2017, becoming the fourth player after the US, Japan and France to have a military base near one of the most important choke points on the Indian Ocean. It is also the only country that has diplomatic missions in all the six major island nations of the western and southern Indian Ocean: Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros, something that India, France, the UK or the US do not have. Russia too has entered the competition for power in the region: it has set up a new naval base in Sudan for twenty-five years, which will give it strategic access to the Red Sea and by extension to Bab-el-Mandeb, one of the key choke points in the Indian Ocean. Saudi Arabia and Turkey are also strengthening their economic and diplomatic ties with the islands of the Indian Ocean, which could lead to new power dynamics (Baruah, 2021).

However, it is China's increasing presence especially that of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) that is of major concern to India and its new partners in the region. Its footprints are also increasing in the IOR littoral states; it has invested in the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and developed Pakistan's Gwadar Port as a part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)' which

is of special concern to India because the so-called corridor runs through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK). It has financed the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, linking Malé to the island of Hulhumale and Hulhule, the first sea-crossing bridge for the Maldives which could play a vital role in the island nation's long-term economic development. The Maldives has also leased an uninhabited island, FeydhooFinolhu, to a Chinese enterprise for 50 years at a price of around $4 million with plans to develop infrastructure for tourism. Beijing recently hosted a China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation with the joint collaboration of the people's government of Yunan province and its chief foreign aid agency, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), pointing toward the institutionalization of Beijing's role in the IOR and its littoral areas (Tambi, 2023). On the African coast, huge Chinese investments have been madefor building railroads and infrastructure development. Here, it is necessary to mention China's 'string of pearls' strategy, a term first coined by Booz Allen, who predicted that China would boost its naval presence in the IOR through building infrastructures in friendly states, in a report entitled 'Energy Futures of Asia' (Ashraf, 2017: p. 169). The strategy focuses on increasing China's military, economic, political and diplomatic clout in the IOR; as mentioned earlier, China has invested in building and strengthening seaports in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives and Pakistan and has a naval presence in Djibouti. These 'pearls' are interlocked and strategically intertwined with each other, and there is no doubt that China is emerging as a sea power, strong enough to challenge India's desire for dominance in its neighbourhood, that is, the IOR.

III

Given the IOR's increasing geostrategic and geo-economic importance, the Indian Ocean has become even more critical for India's diplomatic, military,

and regional engagements. Historically, the Indian Ocean has been a crucial theatre of interest for New Delhi since it constitutes both India's immediate and extended neighbourhood and therefore, a secure and stable Indian Ocean is essential for New Delhi's security environment. However, even after the end of the Cold War and the withdrawal of US-Soviet competition in the Indian Ocean, India's engagement and understanding of the ocean and its importance remained fairly limited, perhaps due to 'strategic inertia' as one commentator has described it (Baruah D.M., 2022). It was the then US Secretary of State, Robert Gates, who suggested that India be the 'net security provider' in the IOR during his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2009. By this time the US was engaged in Afghanistan and the Middle East and wanted a responsible democratic country that was also a neighbourhood big power, and which had furthermore signed a nuclear deal with the US the previous year, to be in charge, rather than leaving the ocean to become segmented among antagonistic forces including pirates and terrorists. The phrase 'net security provider' was repeated in the 2010 US Quadrennial Defense Review Report, which argued that 'as its military capabilities grow, India will contribute to Asia as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond' (Mukherjee, 2014: p. 1), thus showcasing America's recognition of the ocean's importance as well as that of engaging India in securing its own interests in the IOR. The term 'net security provider' implies enhancing mutual security in the region by addressing common security concerns and encompasses activities on the part of the 'security provider' like capacity building,military diplomacy, military assistance and even direct deployment of military forces to stabilize a situation. With China's growing presence in the region, India too, has shown more interest in developing its naval as well as diplomatic capacities, but whether it is enough remains to be seen since its land borders have ever-present threats and the focus is more on its challenged northern and north-western and north-eastern frontiers.

However, as India liberalized in the 1990s and its economy became more interlinked with international trade and investment resulting in an economic growth spurt, there was growing realization of its extended neighbourhood. The Indian Ocean Rim Initiative (IORI) was launched during Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's tenure, which later mutated into the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), with a focus on sustainable development and regional economic cooperation. The IORA, with its headquarters in Mauritius, has identified six areas of cooperation, namely, maritime security, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk reduction, academic and scientific cooperation and tourism and cultural exchange. This agenda has helped to define India's parameters of its emerging 'Blue Economy' concept, which stretches far beyond a country's coastal economy to engulf fishery development, boat and shipbuilding, marine biotechnology, maritime renewable energy, deep sea mining, ocean disaster management, to mention a few. What it implies is coordinated sustainable development of the IOR, providing employment and livelihood to people across the littoral, which would promote India's diplomatic relations with the island and coastal states and provide conventional security through non-conventional means. India's growing acknowledgement of the centrality of the Indian Ocean to India's development and security can be gauged from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018 - "The Indian Ocean has shaped much of India's history. It now holds the key to our future. The ocean carries 90% of India's trade and our energy sources. It is also the lifeline of global commerce. The Indian Ocean connects regions of diverse cultures and different levels of peace and prosperity. It also now bears ships of major powers. Both raise concerns of stability and contest" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). He spoke of India's deeper economic and defence cooperation with states in the Indo-Pacific region (the concept of the Indo-Pacific coming more to the forefront than just the IOR), the Free Trade

Agreement with ASEAN and Thailand and the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements with Singapore, Japan and South Korea and various maritime exercises in collaboration with other countries like Malabar, Milan and RIMPAC (the last in the Pacific). Mentioning that today's challenges are multi-focal and cannot be handled by any country alone, the Prime Minister introduced the concept of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), which is a geo-economic construct that balances maritime security with economic development, implying that any maritime strategy and doctrine for the Indian Ocean must balance the security and developmental interests of all countries in the region (Baru, 2023: pp. 13-19). In policy circles, these issues add up to what has been called Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), which underlines an effective understanding of the maritime environment and what could affect its security, economy, and ecosystem.

The importance of conventional maritime security cannot be overemphasized in the IOR given China's naval presence and overtures to island states and littoral countries. One of the main objectives outlined in the Indian Navy's 2015 Maritime Security Strategy ('Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy') is shaping 'a favourable and positive maritime environment, for enhancing net security in India's areas of maritime interest'. Although the document does not specify whether it will be a 'net security provider' or how, it is the first time that a naval strategy report mentions the term 'Indo-Pacific', and further, confidently outlines its intent to be more proactive in the region, be it through the Joint Strategic Vision with the United States, Japan's inclusion in the Malabar exercises, new bilateral exercises with Japan, Indonesia, and Australia, or re-engaging with the island nations of the IOR and the South Pacific (ORF, 2015).

As part of its revamped strategy, India has modernized facilities in the Andaman Islands and at a base in Campbell Bay in the Nicobar Islands. In 2019, an infrastructure development plan worth Rs. 56.5 billion aimed at allowing additional warships, aircraft, troops, and drones to be stationed in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands was finalized. On January 24, 2019, the Indian Navy commissioned the new naval station INS Kohassa in the Bay of Bengal islands. Further, to involve other littorals and island states in ensuring security, India has recently undertaken infrastructure development projects with dual-use logistics facilities in Mauritius and Seychelles. In 2015, India and Mauritius signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to improve air and sea facilities at Agaléga Island (Mauritius), which it is currently upgrading. With Seychelles, India has agreed to develop infrastructure on Assumption Island. India has also helped Victoria with ocean mapping to protect Seychelles' exclusive economic zone and has donated aircraft and launched a radar project (Ghosh, 2020: pp. 146-150). India has signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the US, which would enable India to gain logistical support from the many US facilities located throughout the Indo-Pacific freeing it from setting up expensive logistical hardware and software all over the Indian Ocean. However, it has also bolstered its capacity-building efforts in the region; India has set up coastal radar systems and stations in collaboration with Maldives, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and Seychelles. India has also offered similar assistance to Myanmar and Bangladesh for better maritime domain awareness. India is also a part of several bilateral and multilateral military exercises in the Indian Ocean apart from patrolling it on its own.

India also seeks to maximize its maritime partnerships in the region through collaborations creating platforms and initiatives to address key challenges of the region. To face the challenges of increasingly frequent cyclones and other natural

disasters resulting from climate change, India in collaboration with countries like France and Australia has announced initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, International Solar Alliance, etc. In response to the long COVID-19 pandemic, India launched "Mission Sagar" sending emergency medicines, and food, along with medical assistance teams to its Indian Ocean neighbours - Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Comoros. The Indian Navy now has developed into an effective 'first responder' and is quick to respond to humanitarian emergencies in the IOR, offering Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). The Indian Navy has also been strengthening its capabilities and those of neighbouring states in data gathering and sharing. It set up the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in 2007, the first regional framework aimed at structuring information sharing on white shipping and addressing threats such as illegal fishing, drug smuggling and human trafficking (Baruah, 2022). India is also a part of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue initiative that aims to offer an integrated maritime domain awareness picture to its members so they can fully monitor the IOR. It is also a member of the Colombo Security Conclave, a grouping that intends to coordinate security cooperation and capacity building in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

For all this, the Indian Navy needs to build its capabilities and capacity. After a long hiatus, the largest increase in the defence budget went to the Navy in 2022, with an increase of 45 per cent for buying equipment. In 2021, the Indian Ministry of Defence announced that it would establish forty-two new coastal radar stations to strengthen coastal surveillance. In December 2022, the government approved a major National Maritime Domain Awareness (NMDA) project to create an integrated intelligence grid that can detect and respond to sea-based threats in

real-time. The Indian Navy's recent exercises demonstrate its improved capabilities. In March 2023, the Indian Navy completed a four-month-long Theatre Level Operational Readiness Exercise (TROPEX) in the Indian Ocean to practice coastal defence, amphibious actions, and weapons testing; this included around 70 naval ships, six submarines, and over 75 aircraft. In June 2023, the navy showcased a twin-carrier operation exercise in the Arabian Sea involving the integration of two aircraft carriers with a diverse fleet of ships, and submarines, and the coordinated deployment of over 35 aircraft. In March 2023, the Indian Navy tested ship-launched Brahmos supersonic missiles and carried out successful precision strikes. The Ministry of Defence has also signed an agreement with the US to acquire armed MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones to enhance India's intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities (Miller and Harris, 2023).

IV

Over the last five to ten years, India has used both bilateral and multilateral diplomatic approaches to extend its footprint in the IOR as a dominant player; further, with the growing awareness of the Indian Ocean as its enlarged security zone, it is strengthening the Indian Navy's capacity to perform within and outside its immediate seas in a multitude of tasks including rescue missions, disaster management, anti-piracy operations etc, apart from being battle-ready. But is this enough to make India the 'net security provider' in the IOR or the prevailing power in the Indian Ocean? Given China's ambitions in the Indian Ocean and the willingness of some littoral states and island nations to partner with China, firstly, because of its huge economic investments in the region and secondly, as an alternative to India, the US, or France to reduce security dependence on any one country, India needs to draw up long-term strategic plans for its maritime domain. While partnering with the US, Australia and Japan is a step forward, it must be

understood that neither Australia nor Japan has much of a presence in the Indian Ocean and America's focus is more on the Pacific than on the Indian Ocean. The US Department of Defense divides its Indian Ocean responsibilities under INDOPACOM, CENTCOM and AFRICOM, with India falling under INDOPACOM, which relates to the American concept of the Indo-Pacific region; thus there is little conversation between India and the US on the western part of the ocean which falls under AFRICOM. However, the western Indian Ocean is of vital interest to India, which now sees the entire Indian Ocean as one zone. While there are cooperative arrangements with France, especially about the western Indian Ocean, India needs to engage more with other countries interested in the region including the European Union (EU) as an entity which can aid in the sustainable development of the littoral states and island nations. The harsh reality is that security and prosperity for all in the region are imperative for India's own political and economic security. For this, a strong navy is essential but, given technological advancements, information gathering, quick response mechanisms, state-of-the-art hardware and software etc are essential to make India's maritime presence more effective. Further, to counter China's hard and soft diplomacy, India also needs to gear up its diplomatic engagement with its maritime neighbours, that is, focusing on its 'Neighbourhood First' policy not just on paper, but prioritising its neighbourhood on the ground. And since the ocean is vast and technologies have advanced beyond the capacity of any single country to be the sole 'security provider' in the Indian Ocean where high-level competitors have operated in the past and new ones are entering the fray in the present, more engagement and understandings withlike-minded partners are essential to maintain the law of the seas in the Indian Ocean.

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RESEARCH NOTE: PEOPLE, POPULISM, DEMOCRACY[1]

Samir Kumar Das

The Demos (People) in a Democracy

While much of what is written on democracy focuses on how the demos (the people) exercise their control over the State, this paper proposes to turn the focus on how the various segments of the people constitute themselves into a body and how people as a body comes into being and with what effects. Any democratic regime is also constantly haunted by the fear of what Spinoza would have called a "ferocious multitude" posing a threat to law and order. They 'must necessarily come together', Spinoza tells us, if they are 'to live together as securely and well as possible if they are to enjoy as a whole the rights which naturally belong to them as individuals' (1670). Their life should be no more conditioned by 'the force and desire of individuals that will be injurious to other fellowmen but by the power and will of the whole body'.Spinoza's project of overwhelming the fear from the "ferocious multitude" with 'terrorisation' by those who govern, Balibar tells us, has the potential of spiralling into a civil war: "Once th[e] fear has become reciprocal, and those who govern terrorised by latent power of the masses, seek to terrorise them in turn (or to manipulate them to terrorise their rivals), a causal chain of violent passions (hatred between classes, parties and religions), is set in motion which leads inevitably to civil war" (Balibar 1998:39).

[1] An earlier version of this research note was delivered as the keynote address to the international seminar on 'Democracy and Populist Discourse in India' organized by the Bengal Institute of Political Studies (BIPS) and Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC), Acharya Prafulla Chandra College, Kanchrapara, West Bengal, India on 10 September 2022. I am thankful to Biswanath Chakraborty and Raj Kumar Kothari for giving me the opportunity. However, I am alone responsible for the lapses, if there are any.

Unlike many of his contemporaries who took the 'people' for granted, Dr Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, was concerned with the problem of constituting 'We, the People of India'. On the one hand, he was strongly opposed to the idea that the 'We, the People of India' had its origins in the Indian nation. The people of India - especially the Hindus - historically riven into an incredibly wide variety of castes and communities - are inherently incapable of forming a homogeneous nation. On the other hand, he would have envisaged a body of people who would be bound together in terms of their adherence to themoral principles laid down in the Constitution. While 'terrorisation', according to Spinoza, is central to the constitution of the People, the people - for Dr Ambedkar - are founded on such moral principles as liberty, equality and justice as are laid down in our Constitution.

Populism thrives on the construction of the people that resembles neither of the two varieties.

Populist Construction of Demos

Ernesto Laclau's *The Populist Reason* (2007) is widely cited as the key reference text for developing an understanding of the populism of our time. Laclau refers to the two constitutive principles of 'difference' and 'equivalence' in this connection. While the People is constituted as a body necessarily 'different' from what is perceived as its other - more often than not another that is internal to itself, individual constituents within the body are always considered as 'equivalent' to each other. Let us try to illustrate the point with a reference to the contemporary Northeast.

Back in 2016, the apex Court asked the Government of Nagaland to hold elections in urban local bodies as per the 72nd and 73rd Amendments to the Constitution of India providing for 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in urban local bodies. While such women's organizations as the Naga Mothers' Association and Joint Committee for Women's Reservation were demanding the implementation of this provision, other Naga bodies like Naga Hoho, Eastern Naga Peoples' Organization (ENPO) and AoSenden were opposing it on the ground that the provision, if implemented, would violate Article 371 (a) (i) of the Constitution.

One may recollect that the Article declares that no law concerning religious and traditional practices legislated by Parliament shall apply to the State of Nagaland if it is not ratified by the State Legislative Assembly. According to them, the two Amendments would not come into force till the Nagaland Legislative Assembly ratifies them. Needless to say, the Assembly is yet to ratify it. The situation took a violent turn In February 2017 when two persons were killed in Kohima and large-scale violence broke out apparently to prevent the urban polls from being held in the state. The articulation of the Naga People, according to Naga Hoho and similar organizations, thrives on the constitutive absence of Naga women. In the words of Laclau: "...the outside is not simply one more, neutral element but an excluded one, something that the totality expels from itself to constitute itself (to give a political example: it is through the demonization of a section of the population that a society reaches a sense of its cohesion)."

If Naga women are absent in this articulation of the Naga community (nation or nationality), the very recent populist construction of Bengali People forces a constitutive expulsion ofbhadraloks. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's politics, as Nielson argues, underlines a gross depreciation of the hitherto dominant Bhadralok idiom of politics. Who is a bhadralok? Nielson argues:

> A bhadralok is the embodiment of a particular combination of cultural capital, manners and dress code. A quintessential bhadralok is educated, refined, eloquent and with a good knowledge of English. He is a high-caste Hindu, often a Brahmin, and has style, manners and dignity, although he will usually display a measure of modesty and moderation in public life. His uniform is the crisp white dhoti and kurta, and a genuine bhadralok will be well-versed in the world of arts, literature and poetry. Virtually all of West Bengal's chief ministers from B.C. Roy to Siddhartha Shankar Ray, Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya have conformed to this model of a bhadralok politician (Nielsen 2010:117)

Mamata Banerjee's marks a paradigm shift in the politics of West Bengal. As Nielson observes::

> In terms of political style and oration, Mamata Banerjee departs significantly from certain culturally informed ideas about how political leaders should comport themselves. Political leaders in Bengal have

> historically been recruited from the Bengali bhadralok, the respectable and educated middle class, and to this day the state assembly has a disproportionately high representation of legislators with a bhadralok background....(Nielson 2010:58).

Unlike Spinoza, multiculturalists like Brettschneider and others, consider recognition of societal multiplicity as the key principle of democracy. The more a society is sought to be tidied up, the greater the threat to democracy: "... [Multicultural politics] as a theory and practice is as much about acknowledging working from the multiplicity of our communitiesin national politics as it is about multiplicity within communities" (Brettschneider 2002:8-9).

Equivalence, according to Laclau, implies that "all other differences are equivalent to each other - equivalent in their common rejection of the excluded identity" (Laclau 2007: 70). In simple terms, the populist constructions must have the power to bring both the Naga and Bengali societies to realize that the exclusion of Naga women and the hitherto archetypal Bengali bhadraloks respectively is constitutive of the formation of their People. Let us cite an illustration from contemporary West Bengal politics.

Any story of contemporary politics in West Bengal politics must be told concerning the acquisition of land for industrialization in Singur. As the Left Front came to power under the leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) winning 235 seats in an Assembly of 194 seats in 2006, the Government issued a notification to that effect. Parallel to it, Krishi Jami Raksha Committee (or the Committee For the Protection of Agricultural Land or KJRC) was formed in Singur consisting of a rainbow alliance of leading personalities and organizations: litterateurs like Sankha Ghosh, Atin Bandyopadhyay, thespians like Kaushik Sen, Bibhas Chakraborty, BratyaBasu, organizations like MatanginiMahila Samiti, People's Conference of India, Party of Democratic Socialism, Janata Dal (United), Socialist Unity Centre, Bharatiya Janata Party, Jamiat Ulema e-Hind, Indian National Trade Union Congress and many others.

While the coalition's victory catapulted the Trinamool Congress (TMC)-led Government into power, it is to be noted that the electoral outcome of 2011

marginalized all other forces that were nevertheless an integral part of the peasant resistance in general and KJRC in particular and helped TMC and its partners appropriate and monopolize the oppositional space. The portents were clear even before the elections. As Banerjee observes:

> Mamata Banerjee quite predictably, harnessed the outburst of anti-LF popular anger in her marchtowards her next goal - the chief ministership of West Bengal. Through a clevercombination of platitudinous slogans and promises of instant nostrums and histrionics, she has managed to rally the different disgruntled segments of Bengali society - rangingfrom urban slum-dwellers long deprived of essential services tovillagers threatened with displacement by industrial projects. Her rise in West Bengal politics is asign of thebankruptcy of the traditional Bengali left, as well asthe politicalcul-de-sac that the intelligentsia are facing (Banerjee 2010:21).

The rainbow space of civil society activism that emerged in West Bengal in the wake of the Singur movement and other cases of peasant resistance was effectively controlled and monopolized gradually by the TMC splitting it almost down the middle along party lines (Das 2017: 29-45).

People of Affect

The People as a body, according to populist understanding, does not come into being in terms of their common adherence to reason. Laclau argues that the people as a body, as what he calls 'hegemonic totalization' requires 'a radical investment': "… the affective dimension plays a central role here" (Laclau2007:71). In other words, the constitution of People as a body is not the product of any rational argument. Members do not form the People as part of a contract they execute with any expectation of return; they become part of the People by their emotional attachment to it much in the same way as one becomes part of the family.

Thus it is not without reason that such family appellations as 'uncle'Laldenga, 'chacha' Nehru, 'amma' Jayalalitha, 'didi' Mamata Banerjee and so forth become profoundly relevant in Indian politics. The analogy between family

and State drawn by Jean Bodin can hardly be missed in this context. As he puts it: "… the well-ordered family is a true image of the commonwealth" (State} (Bodin 6). Pu. Laldenga (1927-1990) would be lovingly addressed by the Mizos as 'uncle'. The formal repertoire of State bureaucracy outside the Mizo society could barely understand the significance of this appellation. As I interviewed a very senior ex-rebel of the Mizo National Front, a party that Laldenga had founded - I came to know how he was seething in anger when he was not allowed to meet the 'uncle' - Laldenga- in Silchar (Assam) prison and on that very day he changed his original plan which was to join Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and decided to join rebel ranks. He was snubbed by the prison guards with the words: "All Mizos call him the uncle. We know the trick." His idea of the Mizo nation resembles a closely knit family under the leadership of an old uncle and if ever there is any issue of difference to be settled, it would have to be settled within the family. He told me how mothers would bring their delinquent children to Laldenga with the hope that the uncle would admonish them and make them fall in line. It is like saying that all this happens within the family.

Nielsen shows how the appellation 'didi' (elder sister) in Bengali attached to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee comes with a responsibility almost resembling that of the parents towards their children. She is hardly addressed by her name. She is the 'universal' didi:

> [A]n elder sister or didi is expected to show parental love towards her younger siblings and should act almost as a proxy mother. A proper didi will dress her younger siblings, feed them and wash their hands and faces, set up their toys and play with them. She will look after their well-being, support them, protect them and nourish them. It is not too far-fetched to argue that many of Mamata's supporters direct similar expectations towards her and that their consistent use of the term denotes a special kind of intimacy. They too expect her to stand by them in their hour of need and help them deal with the challenges they face (Nielsen 123-124).

Thus to cite an example, she goes on record saying that bandhs (strikes) are an anathema to West Bengal's work culture, although she called many of them while in Opposition during the Left Front rule. Instead, like a true didi she

likes to retain the right to declare unscheduled holidays. The AnandabazarPatrika, the largest circulating Bengali daily in India brought out several letters to the editor on 8 September 2022 most of which accused the chief minister of destroying the work culture of the state. Puja (autumn) holidays in celebration of the largest Bengali festival would usually stretch for five days while these were further stretched into 10 days at her instance. In the process, precious man days are lost. Isn't this to be called 'wasteful expenditure'? On her policy of providing subsidies (Rs.60,000 per club in 2022), Surajit Kundu from Uttarpara(Hooghly) asked if there was any 'rationality' (jouktikata) in giving subsidies to the Puja organizing clubs (AnandabazarPatrika 2022:5).In both instances, family appellations are invoked to trump up any rational argument.

Borrowing from Bodin, one may say that 'the government of all commonwealths, colleges, corporate bodies, or households whatsoever, rests on the right to command on one side the other members [by being a member of the family without offering any reason], and the obligation to obey on the other'(Bodin1955:9).

From Populist to Popular Politics

We have already seen how it becomes imperative on the part of the People to assert theirdifferences vis-a-vis the other - whether within or without. The same principle of difference also demands from the concerned People that they 'reject' all other differences and thus establish the principle of equivalence. Laclau also points to the incommensurability between the principle of difference and the principle of equivalence - a paradox that defines populist politics and therefore calls for populist resolution.

One way of resolving the paradox is to fall back on the same bourgeois, liberal-democratic institutions and their laws: (a) In the Naga instance, the matter involved a prolonged and continuing legal battle in the law courts of India - a country that was viewed by Angami ZapuPhizo (1904-1990), the father of Naga insurgency as 'an occupation State'. (b) Sometimes the entire paraphernalia of State institutions and laws is sought to be mimicked by these organizations claiming to lead their People. When I asked Abdul Ghani Lone (1932-2002), the slain leader

of the All-Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) - the same question and became interested in fathoming the representativeness of his leadership and his organization he claimed to enjoy, Lone avoided the question by merely saying that "we have our ways of communicating with the people" without elaborating on what he meant by 'our ways'. APHC subsequently instituted its own Election Commission and entrusted it with the responsibility of establishing its representativeness, an idea that was instantly shot down by Shri I. D. Swamy - then the Minister of State for Home Affairs - as "ridiculous". Whether in actuality or mimicry, populist politics revolves around bourgeois, liberal-democratic principles.

Achieving the equivalence or unity of the People was never the prime mover of popular politics for Gramsci. The equivalence, according to him, is not important unless it at the same time marks what he calls 'the assertion of the rationality of history'. The rise of popular politics is not indicated simply by the massive popular mobilization or for that matter by the mass base of the kind of politics that a leader leads, but by what he calls "a certain validity... in forcing the introduction of a new truth [that] has exceptional evidence and capacity for expansion" (Gramsci 1999: 774). If equivalence is marked by 'expansion' and encompassing the masses of people, such equivalence, according to Gramsci, has also to be backed by 'truth', that is to say, by the objective grounds of 'validity' and 'reason' something that the populist politics of effectdeliberately ignores.

If the leader is not ready to wait for history to unfold itself in keeping with the objective laws and also to 'grip the masses' while making her politics popular, populism consists of forcing unity on a body that is plagued by the incommensurability between the two principles of difference and equivalence. Since there is no 'determinable *apriori*' for the equivalence to emerge, it has to be supplied from outside. A populist leader is called upon to forge unity from outside whether by hollowing out the bourgeois-liberal institutions that mediate between the rulers and the ruled or by invoking family ties or any combination of them. The very act of forcing a unity therefore is perpetually contingent and momentary and therefore produces what we may call pure politics - a politics that refuses to be framed by reason, objectivity, ideology or scientific law. Populist politics can only be understood concerning an unmitigably contingent, perpetually unstable and

extremely momentary configuration of forces initiated by a populist leader. Populist politics always meets with uncertainty. Populist leaders are either replaced by other populist leaders or bring the country to a breaking point as happened in Argentina, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Very rarely does the end of populist politics inaugurate populardemocratic politics.

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THE '*RONG*' VERSES, SUBVERSES AND SUBVERSIONS : THE '*VERSICAL*' ART OF CREATION OF SPACES OF REMEMBERING, RECONFIGURATION OF CONTESTED SPACES, AND RESISTANCE AGAINST HISTORICAL ERASURES

Padam Nepal

ABSTRACT

Presupposing a possible triadic relationship between narrative, memory and identity with an understanding that narrative constitutes collective memory, and it, in turn, facilitates the constructions of collective identity, the present paper seeks to explore how the discourse of collective memory, as it is enacted through literature, shapes the formation/construction of identity by a group, with particular focus on the poetic literature of the Lepcha Community in Darjeeling Hills. The paper proposes that places, constructed spatially, have multiple meanings for their inhabitants, yet, space is not simply a geometric 'thing out there'. The sites of memory are the points where space and time meet memory. Memory is spatial and is created from places and images. A

place (locus) is easily memorized –a construction, a characteristic location. The identity between people, heritage, and territory is also brought about by the use of varied metaphors, and the effective expressions of narratives of nations. Loss of territory erases history, jeopardizes historical and cultural self-consciousness and renders identities invisible. The present paper, grounded on such theoretical underpinnings, while interrogating the methods and motives of remembering the past and revising how histories are recovered, explores how the Lepchas have endeavoured to reclaim memories, rewrite history, recreate, reframe and perform a collective identity for their nation, amidst threats of active construction of ignorance of their history and territory on the one hand, and of the threats of assimilation by dominant identity-based movements in the region on the other as tactical reversals to destabilize the (hegemonic?) mainstream discourse on history and identity in the region.

Keywords: Eastern Himalaya, Rong, Lepcha, Remembering, Spaces, Contestation, Erasures, Music

Introduction :

Today, folk and popular songs, as a part of the popular culture have become a dominant socio-cultural force and enjoy extraordinary influence all over the world. Popular culture in general affects peoples' imaginative pictures of the world, moulding perceptions of reality, including that of politics. Hence, it involves political socialization, that is, the acquisition of images and ideas about the political world and the role of individual citizens in it. Governments around the world have recognised the power of folk and popular music in moulding politics. As a response,

generally, authoritarian regimes attempt quite overtly to control popular culture and mass communication, banning, marginalizing, or attempting to undermine the popular and folk genres of expressions and communications that challenge the status quo: social, political and economic. Music, says Susanne Langer, symbolizes the dynamic forms of human feeling and articulates something that language cannot set forth. Ethnomusicologists like Merriam, suggest that music carries important functions such as communication, validation of social institutions and religious rituals, and the integration of society, providing a rallying point around which the members of society gather to engage in activities. This further explains the importance of the songs as a medium of communication and an effective tool for the ventilation of public opinion and in some contexts, of a community striving for a political space. Its role in political mobilization is revealed in the process of social redefinition, or the mobilizing and eventual legitimization of discontent which turns more dissatisfaction with the social order into a force for change is a crucial and relatively unstudied area. As Finlay (1980) has noted, if one examines just the lyrics of songs associated with social issues of a community, one can find many examples of diagnoses of what is wrong with the present order of things, proposed solutions to these wrongs, and rationales for participation in such mobilizations. In addition to this, a second important function of songs in endeavours for assertions of a community's claims and conditions is in the development of social solidarity among members and potential members (Gamson, 1975; Cashmore, 1979). The songs of social change attempt to *appeal to* and *reinforce* common values and social identities among potential and active members. The fact that music, and for that matter, song is not often taken seriously as a political activity often gives protest politics more license to reach a broad range of audiences. By musically appealing to the common values and traditional roots of a larger audience (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). In addition, there are symbolic aspects of the music of most protest publics that help to both define ideology and develop solidarity that is not contained strictly in the lyrics of the songs themselves. The musical forms chosen by the protest public usually involve elements drawn from the traditional music of the oppressed group. This function of emotionally charging the interests of group members is more effectively done via music, a non-rational medium than it is via

speeches, pamphlets, or other rational, language-based means. Thus, as Durkheim suggested in the context of religion, musical events can provide the sorts of emotional, euphoric, vitalizing, and integrative experiences that more rationalistic appeals cannot. Presupposing a possible triadic relationship between narrative, memory and identity with an understanding that narrative constitutes collective memory, and it, in turn, facilitates the constructions of collective identity, the present paper seeks to explore how the discourse of collective memory, as it is enacted through literature, shapes the formation/construction of identity by a group, with particular focus on the poetic literature of the Lepcha Community in Darjeeling Hills. The paper proposes that places, constructed spatially, have multiple meanings for their inhabitants, yet, space is not simply a geometric 'thing out there'. The sites of memory are the points where space and time meet memory. Memory is spatial and is created from places and images. A place (locus) is easily memorized –a construction, a characteristic location. The identity between people, heritage, and territory is also brought about by the use of varied metaphors, and the effective expressions of narratives of nations. Loss of territory erases history, jeopardizes historical and cultural self-consciousness and renders identities invisible. The present paper, grounded on such theoretical underpinnings, while interrogating the methods and motives of remembering the past and revising how histories are recovered, explores how the Lepchas have endeavoured to reclaim memories, rewrite history, recreate, reframe and perform a collective identity for their nation, amidst threats of active construction of ignorance of their history and territory on the one hand, and of the threats of assimilation by dominant identity-based movements in the region on the other as tactical reversals to destabilize the (hegemonic?) mainstream discourse on history and identity in the region.

Introducing the Lepcha Community of the Eastern Himalayas

The Lepchas are one of several tribes inhabiting the southern slopes of the Eastern Himalayas. An acknowledged fact is that the history and chronology of the Lepchas are obscure because all research and studies on the community are based on the selective use of oral history sources. Although scholars and historians like G. Gorer (1938), E. C. Dozey (1922), G. B. Mainwaring (1971), J.

C. White (1909), Christopher von Fürer-Haimendorf (1982), Ram Rahul (1970), Arthur Fonning (1987), K. P. Tamsang (1983) and others[1] point out that the Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Darjeeling and Sikkim, which the Lepchas fondly call the *Mayel Lyang* or the '*abode of the Gods*', the oral history of the Lepcha paints the picture of a huge Lepcha Mayel Lyang, stretching from Chumbi Valley in the North to Titalaya in the South, as far as Punakha (Bhutan) in the East to the Illam region (Nepal) to the West. Regarding the term '*Lepcha*', there are different versions. One version says that it was the Nepalis who called them *Lapches*, meaning '*vile speakers*'. Another version says that *Lapche* was a type of fish found in Nepal, which is believed to have the characteristics of being '*submissive*' like the Lepchas. But the Lepchas themselves prefer to be called *Rongs* or *Mutanchi Rongkup* meaning '*beloved sons of the mother of creation*'. Yet some believe that the word Lepcha comes from the word *Lep*, meaning '*a well of creation'* in *Mayel Kyong* (hidden eternal village). Legends have it that it is the door through which the first among the Lepchas, *Fudong Thing* (the first male) and *Nuzong Nyu* (the first female) were made to step down from paradise into this world. Lepchas regard the *Zaa Tshaong* (the family) as the most important, fundamental unit of social organization, where each member is related in kinship ties of blood and marriage. They have an elaborate clan (*moo*) system consisting of both matrilineal and patrilineal clans. However, according to K. P. Tamsang (1983), the Lepchas are divided into four sections politically and geographically. They are *Renjyongmoo*[1] (Lepchas of Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Siliguri/plains), *Illammoo*[2] (Lepchas of Illam, the Eastern District of Nepal), *Tamsangmoo*[3] (Lepchas of Kalimpong), and *Promoo*[4] (Lepchas of Western Bhutan). Originally, Lepchas were animists. However, there is some religious diversity among the Lepchas today — some follow Buddhism, some converted to Christianity, and some are still staunchly animist in their faith. In terms of Demography, in Sikkim, in the last four decades or so, the ratio of the Lepcha population to the total population of the state has remained more or less stagnant (between 7.3 per cent to 7.5 per cent). This small population of the Lepcha is scattered across the four districts of Sikkim. The north district of Sikkim, where the traditional sacred home

of the Lepchas is located, houses the maximum number of the Lepcha population. Yet they are only 37.47 per cent of the total population of the district. Demographically, Lepcha today are a minority even in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The minority status of the Lepchas has acted as a driving force for the community to re-assert their identity and existence through the revival of their culture and religion[1]. Hence, the Lepchas in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills today are vehemently opposed to any threat to their religion, culture and livelihood opportunities because of the apprehension that it may lead to the vanishing of a 'Vanishing Tribe'[2].

The '*Rong*' : Verses, Subverses And Subversions

Malkki (1990) shows how an identity between people and territory is created and naturalised through the visual device of the map, which represents the world of nations "as a discrete spatial partitioning of territory" with no "bleeding boundaries". The original Lepcha kingdom is said to have been composed of the entire present-day Sikkim, the Darjeeling District of West Bengal, the western part of Bhutan, and the eastern part of Nepal. In the North, it is said to have extended up to the Chumbi Valley in Tibet. To the west, it was bordered by the two rivers of Tambur and Arun (approximately up to the present-day Biratnagar area of Nepal), to the east it extended up to the area of Ha in present-day western Bhutan, inclusive of the strip of Duars, and the south, up to Titaliya in present-day Bangladesh. Human attachment to particular places requires an understanding of peoples' traditional knowledge, cultural practices, forms of communication, and conventions for imagining the past. That is, 'world-building', 'place-making', and 'constructing places' constitute basic tools of historical imagination through multiple acts of remembering, conjecture, and speculation. Gillian Rose argues, "One way in which identity is connected to a particular place is by feeling that you belong to that place. It is a place in which you feel comfortable, or at home because part of how you define yourself is symbolized by certain qualities of that place" (Rose 1995). Lepchas called their land '*Nye Mayel Renjyaong Lyang'* or '*Mayel*

Lyang' which means the '*Land of Hidden Paradise*' or '*Delightful Region or Abode*'. *Mayel Lyang*, a hidden paradise, "*a place where the largest tree is never cut down, strongest deer is never hunted, and wild orchids sprout aimlessly from the top of trees, making pink and purple bursts in the sky"*. It is normally said that one has to be fixed in space and in time if she desires to 'belong', and the Lepcha community claims to belong to this wide stretch of *Mayel Lyang*. Music has the strong capacity to evoke, embody and narrate the past. In the collective or individual history of minorities like the Lepcha community in Darjeeling Hills, there are often traumatic events, as these groups have suffered various forms of discrimination. Narration is a way to get some distance from the traumatic past without having to forget it. Narration in music can have a similar function. However, one major function of music in general and folk songs in particular is to act as mechanisms of remembrance and hence, to evoke the nostalgic memory of the past. A classical Lepcha folk song titled Takna Lyang (My Beautiful Takna Land) describes Mayel Lyang thus:

Takna Lyang/My Beautiful Takna Land

Pho yu pho kup song lyem lam lyang,
Ago anyit sa Takna lyang.
Aey… sna ban tho ley!
Ago anyit sa Takna lyang.

A place for birds to play and fly,
Takna is a happy and prosperous land
Hey.. sna ban tho ley!
Takna is a happy and prosperous land.

*(*Lyangsong Tamsang, 2008: 74-75*)*

Loss of territory erases history, jeopardizes historical and cultural self-consciousness and renders identities invisible. The Lepcha community has experienced a loss of territory. The loss has been affected by multiple factors. Yet, two of these factors require elucidation in the present context: the active construction of ignorance of Lepcha territory and history, and, the continuous threat of assimilation by a dominant identity-based movement. Amidst such threats, the Lepcha attempts at the **reclamation of the memory of the (Lost) Sacred Space becomes significant**. Lepchas' 'Sacred' spaces are closely related to their origin stories. According to the creation stories, the first and foremost primogenitors of the Lepchas were Fudongthing and Nuzong Nyu. They were created by God from the pure, virgin snows of Kingtsoomzaongboo Choo's pinnacle and sent them down to live, prosper and spread all over the fairyland of *Mayel Lyang*, which lies on the lap of Kingtsoomzaongboo Choo, that is Mount Kanchenjunga (Tamsang, 1983). Dzongu[1], the traditional *Fakram-Takram*[2], in the Northern District of Sikkim is located in the southern face of the Eastern Himalayas.

A certain nationalistic discourse always refers to a particular space as the homeland, ultimately striving to function as a mechanism of governing. Producing the national territory is bound up with constructing typical landscape and soundscape representations, but also with experiencing them in everyday practice.

The identity between people, heritage, and territory is also brought about by the use of botanical metaphors that '*suggest that each nation is a grand genealogical tree rooted in the soil that nourishes it*'. Of course, not many references to these botanical metaphors are found in Lepcha lore, yet it is substituted by geographical ones. The origin of the Rivers *Teesta* and *Rangeet* is associated with a mythical story of a couple finding two different routes of escaping their home to a far-off place to finally get married. The following two songs about Teesta and Rangit Rivers elucidate the case:

Mao- Mae Vom /Farewell to the Himalayas

Rangnyoo:
Aey le le num Rangeet
Sak ma daok, sak ma daok
Num sat she kao plong ka, sa ra ra…
Go amin
Ho aplong
Lem lungdo naong gat ma. Sa ra ra .. sa ra ra..
Ho meethook kasa sa
Kiduk chaom sukdum tyaol
Sak madaok num rangeet
Kani lem lung naong gat ma. Sa ra ra.. sa ara ra..
Rangeet
Rangnyoo Rangeet kanyi munlaom kat ngoon sa lyang
Punzaok arey namkao sa saknaon thaom kanyi sa.
Sa ra ra .. sa ra ra..
Ho kasa
Go ado sa
Sukdum lyang kanyi sa
Mithook mithook sung rey chaom shyo rangnyoo
Rangeet sa. Sa ra ra.. sa ra ra…

Rangnyoo, the female:
Oh! Rangeet, my love,
Please don't grieve and get upset.
On your strength, sa ra ra… sa ra ra…
Me below
You above
Let us go together with love, sa ra ra… sa ra ra ..
You are my eternal love,

A friend in need, in this world
Please don't grieve and get upset, Rangeet,
Let us go together with love. sa ra ra.. sa ra ra..
Rangeet, the male:
Rangnyoo, Rangeet,
You and I,
Our union at 'Panzaok',
A plce to remember by, sa ra ra… sa ara ra…
(Lyangsong Tamsang, 2008: 84-86)

The song a part of which is excerpted above is Mao-Mae Vom, a duet folk song written by Lapon Sonam Tshering Lepcha which speaks of the love between *Rangyoo* and *Rangeet* rivers who promise eternal love to each other as they bid farewell to the Himalayas and promise to meet each other at *Panzaok*. They hope that the story of their union will be told to posterity by *Fodaong*, *Tukryook* birds from the Himalayas carrying *Kursaong* and *Punten* flowers. This song carries with it a strong geographical metaphor associated with the two mighty rivers in the Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalayas, thereby establishing the community's rootedness in the place. This rootedness is further accentuated by the production of another song again about the two rivers, as an extension of the lore related to them thus:

Rangnyoo Rangeet/ Teesta And Rangeet
Avhaom phlaot chaom rik na dam rey jaong,
Kat aphing kat abop jaong,
'thi-sa- tha' bryang bun a ting chyoo naong

' Toot Pho', the bird,
'Paril bu' the serpent
United the two rivers at Panzaok.
Like combing a maiden's long, floeing hair into starnds,

In two colours, blue and nuddy grey
Embracing together they flow forever the plains of India
With a Lepcha name, 'thi-sa-tha'
(Lyangsong Tamsang, 2008: 92-93)

This is a song by Miss Hildamit Lepcha, who writes about the folklore of Teesta and Rangeet and their confluence at *Panzaok* which is called *Pesok* in the present day. The song describes how the rivers were united by *Toot Pho*, the bird and *Paril Bu*, the serpent at *Panzaok* where they embraced each other to flow together towards the plains of India with the Lepcha name *Thi-sa-tha.* The song's strong political message lies in its explication of the name Teesta as a corrupt Lepcha phrase *Thi-sa-tha*, thereby asserting the fact that the region associated with the river and their confluence and the stretch towards the plains is a land to which the Lepcha belong. Hence, folk songs have been effectively used as the memory of the past. Especially the songs like '*Kaongchhyen Kaonglo*' (The Lepcha Land); *Rum Lyaang Mo, Dzongoo Lyaang AArey* (Dzongu: The Lepchas Holy Land); *Ney Maayel Lyaangsaa Jaonkup Ryaamsyo Gong* (A Suitable Lepcha), among others are the songs that have been put to perform the identity of the community amidst perceived threats of assimilation.

The present section further interrogates the political uses of folk culture by strategically juxtaposing cases from different corners of the Lepcha world. Folk culture, however, it is defined, has long provided the symbolic repertoire through which claims of connection and continuity are made credible and emotionally potent. This section of the paper explores how particular cultural forms representing a particular "folk" are deployed within historically specific struggles for visibility, power, and economic advantage. They all, in other words, query the complex relationship between "folk culture" and politics. One such instance in the present study is the move towards emotional solidarity building of the community by resorting to issues of language, culture and customs. Songs can powerfully tie social protest to the traditional values and symbols of the group; they can project

a powerful emotional message that may be more effective in promoting solidarity than other rational' modes of communication; and above all music, in this emotional communication, can charge the interests of the group, elevating them to the intensity of moral rights. It is apparently for this reason that social movements and protest publics have historically utilized song as an important element in their host of repertoires of actions. In addition to this, a second important function of music in social movements is in the development of social solidarity among members and potential members (Gamson, 1975; Cashmore, 1979). Of several songs apt to be referred to in this context, *Aachulay* (Hail to the Himalayas) deserves special mention, a part of which is excerpted below:

Achuley…!
Ka mootanchi Rong Kup
Hun na ka aey yong
Rong vom theng mayun gong,
Rong alok lok makhan gong,
Mootanchi li shyong ka aey yong
Kam maryam na aey yong!
Achuley..!

My Lepcha brothers and sisters!
You being a Lepcha,
If you don't know how to sing a Lepcha song,
If you don't know how to dance a Lepcha dance,
I'm afraid, you are not worth calling yourself a Lepcha!
Hail to the Himalayas!

(Lyangsong Tamsang, 2008: 66-67)

This song, and more particularly, the verses cited above interrogate the Lepcha youth of whom circumstances have compelled them to a situation whereby they have remained oblivious to their native language, literature and culture—of their

Lepcha identity. Inherent in the song is a move towards forcefully indoctrinating youths to imbibe in them the spirit of being a Lepcha, embrace and learn Lepcha culture that would perform the function of a bonding mechanism in their pursuit of (re)creating, performing and delivering Lepcha Identity. Another song that attempts to inculcate in Lepcha youths a sense of solidarity and a sacred duty to work for Mayel Lyang (politically, Lepcha land in the present context) is Salvation, which is excerpted below:

Ka sa sakchin/ Salvation

Aey! Mayel lyang
Jachhaong dep kayoo jyoo bam ba la
Mak naon ba la dep
Chyakao nyirao mat ka amooo sa
Asaom mapal song tet
Amoo tundaok ka ho mak gong nye
Gun len la koo chhyen chen
Sakching ho na noon bi amoo sa
Taob kahat boo saong gyao chen.

If you die working for Mayel Lyang
You will be called a cultured person
Consider yourself fortunate
To find your ultimate salvation in Mayel lyang.

(Lyangsong Tamsang, 2008: 112-115)

Salvation/*ka sa sakchin* is a folksong by Norbu Tshering Lepcha. It is addressed to the utopian land of the Lepchas- *Mayel Lyang* which is described as a beautiful land crowned by the golden peaks of Kanchenjunga and whose beauty is enhanced more by the morning dew playing on the *Kursaong* and *Survo* flowers. Her flowing dress (*dum dem)* is the evergreen forest filled with luxuriant trees and mountains, hills and dales are her riches (*dum pim).* The rivers *Teesta* and *Rangeet* are her arms which guard her. She is the sacred land where Gods, Goddesses and angels

reside. *Poomju* is also situated in this holy land where one meets one's ancestors after death where one achieves Salvation. Thus, *Mayel Lyang* is the land of ultimate salvation. Although the song is apparently about the mythical and utopian land, it is interesting to note that it carries a political meaning and message. Mayel Lyang, along with its other equivalents like the Takna Land, for all intents and purposes is the Darjeeling Hills for the Lepcha community in the Hills today (say for instance the significance of *Mayel Lyang* in Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board); and hence, the political function of the song is to imbibe in the Lepcha youth a sense of responsibility to strive for the reclamation of the lost territory of the past, thereby being similar to the act of being a martyr in similar soundscape representatives of other (dominant) community in the region.

Social science researchers have begun to fruitfully use the work of Michel Foucault to analyze and problematize many practices and structures of the production of knowledge. For Foucault, resistance was inherent within relations of power, and resistance was itself predicated on the existence of a free subject. Resistance was not an isolated, quixotic event; rather, Foucault saw it as a means of self-transformation through the minimization of states of domination. As Ortner (1995) notes, resistance at one time was a fairly unambiguous concept, connoting an oppositional response to the exercise of domination, which itself was seen unproblematically as a fixed and institutionalized form of power. Foucauldian interpretations of less formalized, more pervasive and everyday forms of power and James Scott's work (1985 and 1990) on equally "everyday forms of resistance" have complicated the delineation of what is or is not resistance. In the present study, since we are involved in discussing the resistance against the erasure of territory and history of the smaller communities and cultures by more dominant ones, the Foucauldian framework may be fruitfully employed in the analysis of the present kind. However, we have slightly improvised the Foucauldian power-knowledge framework by adding yet another dimension: ignorance. Shanon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (2007) have discussed at length the concept of 'Ignorance' and its socio-cultural, political and epistemological implications. Ignorance, in common

parlance, is often thought of as a gap in knowledge. It is viewed as an epistemic oversight, seemingly accidental, or a consequence of the absence or scarcity of time and resources at the disposal of human beings to investigate and comprehend their world. Although Sullivan and Tuana (ibid.) agree that such ignorance may exist, they point out the possibility of other varieties of ignorance: actively produced lack of knowledge or unlearning for purposes of domination and exploitation. Such forms of ignorance may take different forms, viz. the centre refusing to allow the margins to know, or, the centre's ignorance, that is, deliberate constructions of its ignorance of injustice, cruelty and suffering meted out to the margins. In the case of the Lepcha Community in West Bengal, it is the active production of both these varieties of ignorance by the centre for the appropriation of a territory through the active process of the creation and dissemination of the 'knowledge' about the existence of the Lepcha in the Hills of Darjeeling and 'creation and dissemination' of 'ignorance' of their territory and history from the foothills to the Titalaya in the plains. This part of the *Mayel Lyang* that disappeared has no history; it has always been elusive, having neither any mythological nor historical reference to its disappearance from Lepcha control.

This creation of active ignorance is perpetuated through songs that speak of the Lepcha land in the Darjeeling Hills, grossly in connivance with the Lepcha oral history. See, for instance, the song, Takna Lyang:

Takna Lyang/ My Beautiful " Takna" land

Lee damphoo long klyaok ka chaok ngan lyang,
Sam lavo kacher myen Rum Fat Lyang
Aey.. sna ban tho ley!
Sam lavo kacher myen Rum Fat lyang.
Pho yu pho kup song lyem lam lyang,
Ago anyit sa Takna lyang.
Aey… sna ban tho ley!
Ago anyit sa Takna lyang.

A warm flat land, my beautiful Takna land,
A sanctutary of traditional Lecha houses
Built on flat stone slabs.
In the month of 'Sam Lavo', April
'Kacher', wheat, abound,
Takna is a blessed land,
Aey.. sna ban tho ley!
Takna is a blessed land.

(Lyangsong Tamsang, 2008: 74-75)

The Beautiful *Takna* Land/*Takna Lyang* is a song which praises the beautiful and blessed *Takna* Land. The Lepcha culture, customs and traditions are described as *Puntyen,* a creeper winding its way through the thick forest and living in harmony among the evergreen trees and the New Year festival is compared to a beautifully decorated *Poyaong,* a bamboo straw which is a source of joy and delight. This land is a sanctuary of traditional Lepcha houses built in April (*Sam lavo)* when wheat (*Kacher*) is plentiful. Here, Takna Lyang is Lepcha homeland. However, it needs to be noted here that amidst changes and transformations that effected the folk songs, there still have been gaps in the songs designed to communicate a specific message to the community. For instance, the Takna Lyang is still a fictitious, imaginative and mythical 'flat land' that has no connection whatsoever with the topographical characteristics of Darjeeling Hills. Secondly, to attract Western readers, additions like refereeing to the month of 'April' have been inserted into the folk songs, taking away its folkness altogether.

Political manoeuvring has remained a central act in the transformation of oral folk literature to written folk literature among the Lepcha community of Darjeeling. Even the researched analysis of insider scholars has been met with scathing criticisms while trying to subvert history. For instance, the song below is a response to Arthur Fonning's Lepcha: My Vanishing Tribe, which appears in Tamsang's work (2008) as an old Lepcha folk song.

Too na lee wang go fat det myaong Rong Kup?/ Who says the Lepchas are vanishing?

Nuzaongnyoo sa ache akup, Fadongthing sa kasok ban kup,
Eetboo Rum sa kurvong na
Too na lee wang go fat det myaong Rong Kup?
Dam pla Rong Kup ho, lee lee na
Tukbam moong tyang soo phalli na
Too na lee wang go fat det myaong Rong Kup?

The beloved children of Nuzaongnyoo,
The able and gifted children of Fadongthing,
Originated from the laps of creator
Who says the Lepchas are vanishing?
'Quick, you Lepchas, come out from your houses;
Black clouds are gathering on four sides'
Who says the Lepchas are vanishing?

(Lyangsong Tamsang, 2008: 88-89)

Amoo Ring rem phyaok lao cha ka

Amoo Ring rem phyaok lao cha ka
Mootanchi Rong Kup song
Phat la naon boo ka might rem
Lao tar ka suk dum lyang ka

Gek na ti hryen moo kurbaong ka
Thaong na nyin rey amoo sa
Rong Kup gum Mootanchi lyang sa
Ache akup amoo sa

Hryaop makaon ka aka amoo don
Chyakao mat lung do bam ka

Amoo ring rey noorpoo atim
Kaom jyer gichyao len la
Chur arey ka kayum thyak bam
Rong Kup sukdum lyang ka
Jarthap ajak jook na bam ka
Ka migit ajoom tho ka

Amoo ring dom myamet chyoboo
Rong Kup sa tukmoo gum
Amoo ring naongtao mamat boo
Mootanchi sa punjyum gum
Mayel lyang sa kingtsoom Choo jong
Amoo ring ajoom tho ka.

Salute to Mother Tongue
Let us salute our mother tongue,
Beloved Children of Mother Nature and God
Stop; halt the Lepcha language from vanishing
Keep the Lepcha identities going

We are born and grown
Sucking the mother's milk
We are the Lepchas of this land
The Beloved Children of Mother Nature and God
Let us not make our mother cry
Let us serve her well

Our mother tongue is most precious
Far more than gold and silver
The Lepchas are identified in the world
Through their language
Therefore, preserve and maintain it
To keep the Lepchas immortal

Those who insult and suppress the Mother Tongue
Are cheats and stealers
Those Lepchas who care and protect not
The Lepcha Mother Tongue
Are the foes and adversaries
Like Mt Kanchenjunga of Mayel Lyang
Let us be strong and powerful
To keep the Lepcha Mother Tongue alive and well

As revealed, the bulk of the repertoire considered "folksong" in Lepcha is young. This is because there is an unscrupulous insertion of verses and new additions thicky available in what is referred to as classical and old folk songs. Oral traditions do not become nationally significant and symbolic merely by existing somewhere, but through their transformation (Anttonen 2005: 88). Therefore many new songs and arrangements of folk songs have been created, with ramifications moving beyond the obvious, and impinging on the politics of belonging in the region.

Concluding Observations:

In interrogating the methods and motives of remembering the past and in revising how histories are attempted to be recovered by the community, and the nature of the responses of the state towards such attempts, a few interesting findings are revealed. First, the efforts of the ILTA in this direction seem to have yielded some positive results in terms of the development of Lepcha political consciousness over time and the resultant increase in political participation. Secondly,

the community, although not succeeding in its attempt to get recognition of a PTG status, succeeded in getting a political space in terms of the establishment of the *Mayel Lyang* Lepcha Development Board (LDC). However, these achievements of the ILTA should not blind us to at least a few issues that further problematize the concept and construction of a nation. For instance, in the present study, the Lepcha's attempt to 'imagine' a homogeneous nation is jeopardised by at least two things:

First, the Locational Geopolitics[11], and Second, as a consequence of the first, the Selective Motives of Remembering the past by the community divided in time and space. Further, the emergent fissures between the ILTA (Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association) and the AILA (All India Lepcha Association) speak of a deeper difference in terms of clan and geo-historical differences between the *Renjyongmoo* (Lepchas of Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Siliguri/plains), *and Tamsangmoo* (Lepchas of Kalimpong). Whereas the ILTA favoured the LDC outside the purview of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), the AILA expressed (and is still expressing) the desire to constitute the LDC directly under the GTA[12] . Although the state response in the form of LDC independent of GTA control would in the short-run appear as a significant move towards the solution of the Hill crisis through political manoeuvring, yet, this difference amongst the members of the Lepcha community signals a possible forthcoming communal tension in the region amongst various ethnic communities, accentuating the Hill crisis.

Furthermore, this region reveals hierarchies of emergent nations, unlike what Prasenjit Biswas projects as Nation From Below and Nation from Above. The Diadic Model fails in the region. For instance, at the lowest rung of the hierarchy is what I call the Emergent Lepcha micronation; higher up we could see Gorkha mesonation; and still higher up, the Bengali macronation. This implies that the Identities are no longer either "native" or "metropolitan." Rewriting the past and reinventing history has "recast the relationships between places, people, identities,

and discourses in new and discontinuous ways, always bearing the imprint of an unsettling and unsettled multiculturalism."

Hence, continuous politicking by the community in tandem with the cultural and historical choice of centres of power, through myriad means including manipulation, transformation and addition to the folk culture when it is reproduced in print media, like, for instance, in all classical, old and recent folk songs, the message that would arouse Lepcha nationalist sentiment, has not been received unequivocally by all sections of the Lepcha community. The deep-rooted experience of history is the common factor dividing the community into clan-based differences. Whereas the cultural modes of subversion of dominant history are dominant among members of one clan that have succeeded in terms of delivering Lepcha identity via the Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board, the process itself has implied the subversion of the lived history of another clan that shares its history with the dominant Gorkha community. Hence, what appears as Lepcha Folk Culture disseminated through ILTA is but a culture of one clan and remains far from being generalized as Lepcha Culture and Cultural History. Hence, it needs to be noted here that considering the jan-jatis and their studies requires a vigilant analysis and ample caution of smaller social formations within the groups which impinge not only on their social structure and power configurations but also in their manifestations vis-à-vis the dominant communities in the peripheries of the tribal and indigenous world.

Notes :

[1] Versical connotes expressions through verses, as in poetry, songs, etc.

[2] The most prominent of historians and social scientists who have worked on the Lepcha community and its society, economy and polity include, among others, E. C. Dozey, *A Concise History of Darjeeling District since 1835 with a Complete Itinerary of Tours in Sikkim and the District* (Calcutta: Art Press, 1922); Arthur Fonning, *Lepcha: My Vanishing Tribe* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1987); G. Gorer, *Himalayan Village: An Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim* (London: Thomas, Nelson & Sons, 1938); Christopher von Fürer-Haimendorf, *Tribes of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) (Indian Reprint:

Oxford India Paperbacks, 1982); J. D. Hooker, *The Himalayan Journal* (London: n.p., 1854); G. B. Mainwaring, *A Grammar of the Lepcha Language* (New Delhi: Manjushree Publishing House, 1971), Ram Rahul, *The Himalayan Borderland* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1970); H. H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891); D. T. Tamlong, *The Mayel Lyang and the Lepchas (About Sikkim and Darjeeling)* (Darjeeling: Mani Printing House, 2008); K. P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality About the Lepchas*, (Hong Kong: Luen Sun Offset Printing Co. Ltd, 1983); and J. C. White, *Sikkim & Bhutan: 21 Years on the North East Frontier (1887–1908)* (London: n.p., 1909).

[3] The *Renjyongmoo* Lepchas are the Lepchas of Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kureong and Siliguri. Tamsang (1983) argues that the inclusion of these three categories of Lepchas into one *moo* owes to the fact that this geographical area was once a part and parcel of Sikkim until 31 January 1835, when these territories were annexed to British India. *Renjyong* here means Sikkim and *moo* as a suffix means '*belong to*', hence referring to Lepchas of Sikkim.

[4] Illam is a district in eastern Nepal. Lepchas who are inhabitants of the Illam region in east Nepal are called *Illammoo* Lepchas in Lepcha terminology.

[5] Tamsang (1983) points out that Kalimpong was once an independent state ruled by a Lepcha king named Gaeboo Achok Pano. King Gaeboo Achok Pano and his forefathers, according to Tamsang, belonged to the Lepcha Clan called Tamsang, and they were also called Tamsang Pano by the Lepchas. Hence, owing to their history of being ruled by Tamsangs, they are called Tamsangmoo. He says further that this kingdom came to an end with Gaeboo Achok Pano being killed at Daling Fort, after which it became a part of Bhutan and, eventually Kalimpong became a part of British India in 1865 when Bhutan was defeated at Daling by the British under the command of Brigadier General Dunsford CB (see Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, p. 44 for details).

[6] *Pro* in Lepcha refers to the country of Bhutan. According to Tamsang, after the Daling War, the Lepchas in the Terai region were uprooted by British tea planters who moved eastward and settled in a place called the Lepchas as Zaongsaw in the western part of Bhutan. This group of Lepchas in western Bhutan are called Promo Lepchas.

[7] Culture is created and developed on the collective experiences of a set of people in a particular environment. It then becomes a set of values, norms, behaviours and institutions possessed by a group of people in sustained social interaction, that have been derived historically and experientially as mechanisms that allow a group to maximize benefits to the group in that particular context. Culture can therefore be illuminated by focusing especially on areas such as religion, language, the imaginative, visual and performing

arts, music, patterns of eating, and images such as dress and conceptions of beauty. Each of these areas provides clues into the set of norms, beliefs and values that form culture. Hence, a potential exists for a situation where two or more cultures may meet in the same space, as is the case of the dominant Gorkha cultural practices and the minority Lepcha culture in Darjeeling Hills. Over time, this has led to the Lepchas practising extract behaviours of the dominant cultural group, thereby producing diffuse cultural identities. The ILTA stresses falling back to traditional Lepcha religious and cultural practices so that the community can identify and project itself as a unique minority community in terms of its religious and cultural practices. The ILTA has called upon the Lepchas to preserve, conserve and maintain their cultural heritage and language and to protect their lands around which their culture and identity are linked and interwoven. For the re-assertion of their distinct identity by way of reviving the 'dying' culture, the Lepchas have also established the Lepcha Culture Centre; and formed '*shezums*' (Lepcha associations) in every village, the membership of which is mandatory for every Lepcha person.

[8] Lepchas have been referred to as a Vanishing Tribe by an authoritative Lepcha 'insider' author Arthur Fonning Lepcha in *Lepchas: My Vanishing Tribe*. Christian by faith, Fonning's labelling of the Lepcha as a Vanishing Tribe not only poses the question of the identity crisis of the community vis-à-vis the other Hill communities but also relates the history of the Lepcha tribe to the concept of the 'Lost Tribe in the Christian religious literature.

[9] Ren Lyangsong Tamsang of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association based at Kalimpong, in his letter addressed to Shri Pawan Kumar Chamling, the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Sikkim, clarifies the meaning of Dzongu. According to Tamsang, the current usage of 'Dzongu' is a mispronunciation of the correct '*Dzongbu*, which means the land of plenty, of abundance, of prosperity. Explanations on Dzongu-the Mayel Lyang could also be obtained from D. T. Tamlong, *The Mayel Lyang and the Lepchas* (About Sikkim and Darjeeling) (Darjeeling: Mani Printing House, 2008).

[10] The concept has been explained by Dulal Chandra Roy, "Demographic Profile of the Lepchas in the World: A Case of India, Nepal and Bhutan", *Aachulay-A Quarterly Bilingual News Magazine*, (Kalimpong: ILTA, 2007) Vol. 12, No. 1, April thus: Dzongu was originally called *Faokram-Takram* by the Lepchas. *Faokram* in Lepcha means a ladder and *Takram* refers to a standing tree which is cut at different places to act as a ladder so that the climber can climb up. The physical-topographical structure of Dzongu is said to look like a staircase. However, according to Tamsang in his letter addressed to the Chief Minister of Sikkim, the meaning of *Faokram Takram* is the "Source of Lepchas' Origin and Life'.

[11] The ILTA attempted to mobilize the different Lepcha groups in the process of the construction and reconstruction of a homogeneous imagined Lepcha nation out of the Lepcha population divided in terms of religion, clan categories, and geographical location. However, the collective imagination of a nation, to the extent that it represents the aggregate collective identity of its diverse components, is itself a composition of individual imaginations; and the geographical imagination of a nation in a state may often contrast with the geographical positioning of the state in which the imagination of a nation occurs, and its strategic and security implications. The ILTA tried to bring together the Lepchas spread over the length and breadth of the Eastern Himalayas, including the Lepchas in Sikkim, Bhutan and eastern Nepal. On the one hand, the state of Sikkim enjoys special status within the Indian federal structure, and the Sikkimese Lepchas, enjoying political patronage of the state of Sikkim, bound by their imagination of being a privileged category both within Sikkim and outside it, would restrict themselves from actively involved in the campaign for recognition of the community as PTG, the reclamation of their lost territory and identity by their brethren in the kin state of West Bengal. On the other hand, the creation of refugees by Bhutan and the experience of an ultra-left movement in Nepal, both having security implications for the Indian state, imply that a campaign to unite across geographies would impinge on the security concerns of the state. The geopolitical positioning of the Indian state and its security and strategic concerns contradicts the interest of the Lepcha community to forge an imagined nation (Nepal, 2013), compelling the elites and leadership of the Lepchas to abandon such strategy and settle with something lesser in the form of a non-territorial development board.

[12] This fissure represents the difference between the *Renjyongmoo* who share a longer period of shared history with other Gorkha communities vis-à-vis- the *Tamsangmoo* (Lepchas of Kalimpong), the territory which for a considerably longer period remained with Bhutan and hence, has a slightly different historical experience.

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INTERNET MEMES AS CATALYSTS FOR POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Internet memes have become a significant part of today's culture, often combining humour and satire to criticize political, social, or cultural issues. In the context of China, where the government heavily censors online content, memes have emerged as a tool for citizens to engage in criticism and activism while avoiding government surveillance. This paper aims to understand how internet users in China engage in political criticism and activism through memes in the face of strict government censorship. The study is based on existing literature, online sources, and examples of specific memes related to Chinaand found that internet memes, such as the "Grass Mud Horse" and memes related to activist figures like Ai Weiwei and Chen Guangcheng, have been used as tools for political criticism and activism in China. Memes have enabled Chinese citizens to express dissent, evade censorship, and engage in political discourse in creative and impactful ways.

Keywords: activism, authoritarian, censorship, China, meme.

Information and communication technologies have changed the way individuals connect and interact with each other. New modes and mediums are adopted to express thoughts and opinions, and it is done not only through textual writings but also through other audio-visual content. One such popular tool for digital communication is memes which have gained a significant position in new media platforms. Davison (2012, p.122) definesan internet meme as 'a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission'.It is a combination of text and/or images that can be expressed in various formats. (Börzei, 2013) memes can attract individual attention with humorous phrases and funny pictures and have become a significant part of today's culture as a powerful and 'self-expressive medium' (Raj A, 2021, p. 30). Kulkarni (2017, p.14) states that humour and satire are the main part of a meme and humour has been used to criticize oppression since the rise of media and dates back to the time of anti-Nazi comics.Althoughmemes are often regarded as jokes or ineffectual content they are created about some event or issue that has an intense meaning(Gal, 2018). It is used as a tool to criticize and comment on the exploitations and repressions in society.

Memes have become an important part of the political discourse as they can attract both active and passive participants to take part in political discussions on new media platforms(Raj A, 2021).Shifman (2014, p. 122-123) in the book, 'Memes in Digital Culture' highlighted three functions of memes in politics, political advocacy, grassroots action and mode of public expression.It is often assumed that memes are used with a humorous motive but they include social, political or cultural issues and are mostly, directed at a government or organization when used for critical purposes. According to Wiggins (2019, p.59), memes offer a way to discuss how politics function when discussions and criticism are viewed as "unfavourable" by the ruling party or administration. Such cases can be mentioned from countries like China, and Russia.

In 2018 the Communist Party of China announced that it wanted to remove the presidential term limits of President Xi Jinping which resulted in the circulation of Winnie the Pooh memes on social media that compared the cartoon character with Jinping as a symbol of criticism (Clark, 2018). This led to banned

of the Hollywood movie, Christopher Robin which featured Winnie the Pooh and also led to the arrest of numerous social media users, such as a student who tweeted about Winnie the Pooh'scharacter resemblance with President Xi Jinping while studying in the United States. The student was jailed for six months upon his arrival in China (Radio Free Asia, 2020).

In Russia, a woman was charged with extremism and placed under arrest in 2018 after she posted memes with religious themes. Another user was charged with extremism due to memes ridiculing priests and the Russian Orthodox Church's Patriarch Kirill. A human rights expert committee reports that approximately 5,000 people have been detained for disseminating "extremist" content online (Germ, 2018).

A global human rights organization called Agora reports that 411 criminal cases against internet users were filed in Russia in 2017. Because the official definition of "extremism" is so broad police can add almost anything within its ambit(BBC, 2018). It led to several other memes that questioned the Russian authorities.An image from the Japanese anime TV show "The Brave Fighter of Sun Fighbird" shows a humanoid character asking, "Is this a pigeon?" in a scene where the character misidentifies a butterfly as one. This scene was modified and a meme was created where the butterfly is represented as a 'meme' and the man asked, 'Is this a criminal charge?'

Memes are also used as a weapon against the opponents of the political parties. In recent years, it has been observed that after any political issue, event or debate memes are circulated to target the opponents mostly during elections. Ross and Rivers (2017) in their study of the 2016 US Presidential campaign involving Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton found that meme producers disseminated their creations not only in an attempt to influence others but also to delegitimize the opponent to gain political advantage. They conclude from their study that intoday's digital environment, anyone with a rudimentary understanding of the technologies needed for online involvement can voice their opinions on any topic that they were previously unable to.

They are useful tools for educating people about current events and societal challenges. Memes are an effective instrument for activists in social movements as it allows the activists to target opponents in ways that evade official surveillance. It is preferable to verbal and written criticism due to its ability to transcend the control of the state. In the era of Web 2.0, memes act as a vital tool for activism in the online space. According to the '2014 Cone Communications Digital Activism Study' conducted in the United States, getting the opportunity to like or follow someone online beforehand made nearly 64 percent of Americans more likely to take the initiative in areas that were important to them and there is also a positive response to the question, 'Are memes an effective form of media activism?'.

Memes are thus an effective way to make humorous and parodic comments about politics and humour is frequently a useful tool for criticising the mistakes and hypocrisies of those in positions of authority. However, not all nations welcome political humour and some take it very seriously that may result in severe repercussions such as the example of Winnie the Pooh meme in China, the arrest of activists that create and disseminate digital humour in Azerbaijan, the ban on the use of high-profile figures in memes in Russia (Rothrock, 2015).But despite the restrictions, online users manage to use a variety of strategies to get their voices heard. This paper intends to analyse the use of memes as a tool of criticism and activism against the authorities in the context of the People's Republic of China.

PublicParticipation and Meme

Political humour is an important part of a society's political discourse as it can attract the public to take part in everyday politics (Peifer, 2012; Baum, 2003).The technological development along with a plethora of social networking sites has resulted in the creation and dissemination of content easily and quickly. Political humour can be strong and significant especially for activists for a variety of reasons such as a tool for recruitment by attracting attention and can also help in building solidarity. Memes as humorous contentcan result in challenges to the state authorities. Ferrari (2018) argued that in nations with low levels of political participation, memes could be one of the many informal modes available for the

common people to get involved in politics. Chovanec (2023, p.310) mentioned two types of 'humorous participation'–Active participation involves more participatory engagement such as memes. Although the creators of the memes do not ask for any reaction from the public it may result in some form of positive response such as a like, upvote comment or sharing of other similar humorous content and this may result in some form of interaction, not necessarily political (Chovanec, 2023, p. 311).While in passive participation, the public is only a receiver of humorous content and does not interact but their appreciation such as laughter at the criticisms through humour makes it valid and plausible.

Regardingthe effects of humorous shows on public participation in politics, Cao and Brewer (2008, p.91) opined that humorous content such as political comedy shows can have a positive impact on political involvement as it can promote building an 'imagined community' (p. 91) and also facilitate in 'attending a campaign event and joining an organization' (Cao and Brewer, 2008, p. 96).The nature of memes to spread rapidly helps online users especially activists to utilise it as a tool for spreading awareness on any societal issue. It results in users interacting with others or enquiring about the details of the ongoing issues that they otherwise may not consider useful. The exposure to memes may also result in immediate reaction by the users. Memes, therefore, can be regarded as an informal source of information to others on societal issues memes related to any protest can inform the online users about that matter and can result in mobilization and engagement. Moreno-Almeida (2021) states that the functions of the online meme pages can be called 'nonmovements' (Bayat, 2010, p. 14) i.e., 'collective actions of non-collective actors.'

The use of social media to resist can be regarded as a first step into activism for people living in authoritarian regimes. The growth of online creative dissent contributes to the strengthening of the resistance movement by increasing public awareness and adds to the hegemonic discourse with additional information and analysis that may be excluded from the state-controlled media (Denisova, 2016, p.83). Memes are used as a tool 'to shape meaningful ideas in an entertaining format'. The online users utilize the memes as "mind bombs"[i] to escape state surveillance and censorship, oppose propaganda and expose the

malpractices of the authorities. However,infrastructural changes like algorithm modifications, restrictions on internet service providers, and the implementation of tracking and surveillance systems can all reduce the potency of memes and the internet as a whole as a tool for activists to gain social influence (Mina, 2019). But the online users find other techniques to escape from the control and supervision of the authorities.

In contemporary China, new media has grown to be a significant and revolutionary force. China's legal system, politics, foreign policy and civil society have all changed as a result of new media. Cyberspace has almost completely taken over every aspect of public life. The growth of civil society and citizen engagement through the Internet has been one of the key components of China's information revolution. The internet helped a nascent civil society through improved civic organization, public debate and communication, while civil society provided the necessary social foundation. However, in response to the emergence of online protests, state authorities implemented internet censorship measures.In the last decade, the online public participation spaces for citizen activism have grown in many ways but they have also narrowed in other ways. While the state found methods to suppress internet users, activists also discovered techniques to demonstrate their discontent by dodging state monitoring.

The following section discusses how Chinese internet users have used memes to criticize and act politically while avoiding government surveillance.

Memeand Citizen Engagementin China

Chinese authorities maintain people's ignorance and ensure that they only hear one point of view—often from state media—by suppressing public expression. China's Golden Shield Project, also called as 'Great Firewall of China' was created to protect the public from the influence of false information originating from sources outside of China by filtering and censoring it.It gave the government enormous discretion in blocking certain types of content from the internet while allowing other types of content to be accessed. The users got habituated to the situation that certain sites being inaccessible or content being removed that was deemed inappropriate like the most widely used social media

websites and apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, X (formerly called Twitter)are blocked in the country. The Chinese government aims to enable the Internet to flourish for business and entertainment while restricting its use for political organising or expression. It does this by ensuring legislative and technical control over all servers situated within its borders and by closely monitoring the data pipelines that allow information to enter and exit the nation.Every Chinese social media platform uses a keyword-search algorithm of some kind to filter terms the government considers sensitive. Moreover, prominent platforms such as Sina Weibo are said to employ thousands of human censors who monitor all content and fill in the gaps left by the algorithms (Mina, 2019, p. 44). Furthermore, the government pays individuals with expertise and skill to promote pro-government narratives on social media generally referred to as 'Fifty Cents Party' because of the rumours that they receive fifty cents in Chinese money for every comment they make.In the event an individual crosses a certain point, their entire account may be frozen or their messages may be removed. Serious infractions may result in the complete deletion of an account or, in more severe situations, an unpleasant police visit, also referred to as "*hecha*" or drinking tea(Mina, 2014).

The question of how the general public engaged in activism and criticism of the Chinese government emerges in this scenario.

The explanation of the internet meme known as "Grass Mud Horse" helps to make this clear. The Grass Mud Horse is a Chinese Internet meme based on a pun that has been utilised by Internet users in the nation as a political parody of a peaceful society since the beginning of 2009.Internet users in China have created a mythology about Grass Mud Horse known as the '*CÎonímÎ*' in the Mandarian language which battles the "River Crab" and lives in the Gobi Desert. Mina (2019) states that Mandarin is a tonal language with few phonemes and puns, especially those that alter meaning through tone are quite common. Therefore, *CÎonímÎ*signifies 'mud grass horse' written in a single set of characters and tones but when written using somewhat different characters (*Càon-mā*) and spoken in a slightly different tone changing its meaning to phrases that disparage women as does the Gobi Desert whenpronounced as '*MÎlèGebi*'.[ii] The River Crab also known as '*Héxiè*' sounds similar to 'harmony' in Mandarin, a reference

to the Communist Party of China's designation of the censored internet as the 'harmonised internet' (Miltner, 2018, p. 417).This was a reaction to their government's drive to remove any pornographic or other content that contained 'vulgar and unhealthy information' (Lagerkvist, 2008, p. 123) that was thought to be detrimental to the youth of the nation from the Internet. In China, campaigns are frequently launched against online pornography; however, the Chinese government uses these campaigns mainly to suppress dissenting political viewpoints.

The unlawful disappearance of Ai Weiwei in 2011 was another instance of memes being used as a tool for activism.He was taken into custody and confined for 81 daysduring a security check at the airport. The term "Ai Weiwei" was banned by the government, and anyone who typed it disappeared because of this, people on the internet tend to use different versions of the term, such as "Ai Weilai" which means "Love the future" and "Tiger Cub Ai" which in Chinese means "Bearded Ai" and refers to Ai Weiwei's facial features. This made it less difficult for users to avoid both human censors and keyword search algorithms (Mina, 2019, p. 09).Additionally, users on the internet are using pictures of sunflower seeds, a hidden connection to his installation at Tate Modern, which consisted of a field of a hundred million porcelain sunflower seeds. Thus, even though the activists are unable to directly use the term "Ai Weiwei" they effectively protest using other forms of expression.

Another instance of meme being used as a tool for protest was the 2006 arrest of blind lawyer and human rights activist Chen Guangcheng, who was already well-known in activist circles.While the internet was still in its infancy when he was imprisoned, Chinese social media platforms such as Sina Weibo and WeChat had already gained popularity in the nation by the time he was released.Any online reference to Chen or words associated with him was blocked by the government. As people encountered outright censorship when they attempted to discuss extremely sensitive subjects in China, therefore they used memes that indirectly contributed to the continuation of stories about him and his public persona and were also able to attract attention from around the world as they told fascinating and even humorous stories in a visually interesting manner.

Online users were invited to participate in an online campaign in October 2011 by Crazy Crab, an anonymous Chinese comic artist, by sending photos of themselves sporting sunglasses for him to upload to a central website. The meme quickly made its way from mainland China to others living abroad and even moved from cyberspace to the streets. Hashtags like #FreeCGC and #CGC brought activists together. They coined expressions such as "yaoguangyaocheng," which translates to "I seek light, I seek truth" and refers to the two characters in Chen's given name (Mina, 2014, p. 365). However, due to its increasing popularity, the hashtag #FreeCGC was also censored. Since Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) and its replicators are widely recognised eateries in China, the activists used stickers that said "Free CGC" and featured a picture of Chen designed to resemble the Colonel from KFC to escape the government censors. As each meme grew and was removed, a new one appeared, suggesting that the creativity and memes surrounding Chen were part of an intentional strategy to avoid the active censorship of his name and likeness. Further, memes and related funny content made the conversation participatory thus allowing anyone to join in and add to the lively exchange of ideas.

Mina (2019) opined that the level of censorship is vast in China and employs thousands of people operating continuously with advanced algorithms and it is rarely beneficial to spread a simple activist message in this setting. The online users thus rather than addressing the difficulties caused by internet censorship directly, utilize memes such as the grass mud horse to show their dissatisfaction with the regime because even a trained human censor cannot easily determine if an image is 'politically subversive' (Mina, 2019, p. 45) or just an ordinary photo of an animal. The clever use of vocabulary along with coded language helps images and puns escape both human and machine censors in China. The main motive behind censorship is to generate a sense of 'fear and uncertainty' (Mina, 2019, p. 46) among the masses so that they refrain from indulging in any anti-regime activity. But memes, with their satirical power help to create the feeling of 'we' by relating one's condition to that of others and breaking 'the silence of self-censorship' (Mina, 2019, p. 46) through participation and engagement.

Meng (2011, p. 40) states in the context of China that the relationship between 'author and reader' or 'storyteller and audience' has been changed and in the digital media, it has resulted in a more flexible and changeable environment. This holds important implications for people who live in an environment where only state-sponsored media can be consumed as they now can challenge the government discourse through internet memes, blogs and other creative social media content (Mina, 2014, p. 370). Thus, the digital space provides a platform for individuals and communities to express on the issues that matter most to them, especially those living under strict control and supervision like in China.

Conclusions

New media platforms create opportunities for civic engagement and collaborative action in an authoritarian regime like China, where offline activism is difficult, dangerous, and strictly regulated. The ability of Chinese citizens to use images and videos to record social issues and expose abuses and violations of power has been strengthened by new technologies. They create and post funny images on the internet as acts of resistance. Even though the memes are removed from the new media platforms quickly, people can repost them as an inexpensive way to express their resistance and show support for a cause. However, this type of activism is often considered clicktivism, but in the case of China, from the mentioned cases of Ai Weiwei and Cheng Guangcheng, it can be well concluded that it is one of the most effective ways for the masses to voice their opinions and show support by evading the regime's surveillance and control.

Notes :

[i] Mind-bomb is defined as using images to raise awareness and alter people's perceptions of reality. It is a strategy adopted by former Greenpeace director, Robert Hunter.

[ii] See Mina, X. A. (2014). Batman, Pandaman and the Blind Man: A Case Study in Social Change Memes and Internet Censorship in China, 13 (3), doi: https://doi.org/10.1177 1470412914546576.

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LOCATING GENDER IN BETWEEN PALM OIL AND NEO-LIBERAL AGRICULTURE : EXPERIENCES FROM KOLASIB, MIZORAM

Ankur Saikia

ABSTRACT

Life, livelihood and culture in a geographical space are closely dependent or rather formed under the pattern of production practised in that space. In the hilly terrains of Mizoram, a shifting form of agriculture is a dominant way of livelihood which the present modernist discourses of the State and Development label as a 'Disorderly form of Agriculture'. On environmental & developmental grounds, the Neo-liberal State mechanism engineered several invasions and modifications to the agricultural practices of the Mizo Hills promising better and sustainable livelihood opportunities. The recently emerged Palm Oil landscape of the Mizo Hills is an extension of such invasion of the State and market institutions into the local agricultural practices. The present study will attempt to uncover the changing gender relations in Mizo society in the context of the Neo-liberal State, Market institutions & the Oil Palm plantation of Mizoram.

Keywords: State, Agriculture, Development, Gender, Mizoram.

Introduction

Shifting cultivation locally known as *jhum* is exceptionally complex yet very crucial for people's livelihood and remains the base of the 'Social Capital' of the Hill communities of north-east India. However, the sustainability of *jhum* is increasingly in question for its detrimental effects on Hill ecology. `Hence, the search for a sustainable alternative to*jhum* is an urgent call of the time. At the same time, it is expected that the alternative for *jhum* to be not only environmentally sustainable but also by people's unique needs and with the positive elements of their previous way of life. In the northeastern State of Mizoram, to date, Jhum or shifting form of agriculture is one of the dominant modes of production. However, the State Governmentof Mizoram iscurrently implementing policies to eradicate the practice of jhum and expand industrial forms of agriculture in the State. Under such efforts, cash crops like Jatropha, Rubber & Oil Palm have been introduced among the farmers of the State under the New Land Use Policy (NLUP). However, the current developments in the Mizoram State indicate several intended and unintended outcomes due to such agricultural transformations.The rapid privatization of land due to the introduction of Cash Crops like Oil Palm has sparked the processes of class formation and unequal gendered divisions within the Mizo society. In the jhum-based agricultural societies of northeast India, the existence of a gendered division of work was almost negligible in the past.Menand women both play almost equal rolesin the productive activities inside the household and the jhum fields. However, the rapid expansion of industrial agriculture such as Palm oil is changing the gender dynamics within the Mizo society. Further, the rapid privatization also sparked the process of unequal land distribution not just between rich & poor but also between men & women. In such context, the present article will attempt to analyze the new emerging gender dynamics in Mizo society after the arrival of 'Neo-liberal agriculture'.

The Objectives of the Paper include ananalysis of the consequences of the new Agricultural policies of Mizoram on the life & livelihood opportunities of

women and an examination of the effects of Palm Oil plantations on Gender relations within Mizo society. The methodology of the present study is analytical. The data used in the paper are collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were collected from field visits to the Kolasib District of Mizoram in January 2023. The secondary data were collected from books, journals and newspapers. The collected data are analyzed qualitatively.

The Arrival of Neo-Liberal Agriculture in Mizo Hills

The concept of 'Neo-liberal Agriculture' is one of the latest inventions of Capitalism that attempts to mould and manipulate people's agricultural habits and practices in a way to smooth the functioning of surplus extraction. In the public domain, neo-liberal agriculture is always portrayed as eco-friendly and therefore, must be implemented for the sake of global ecological catastrophe. Neo-liberal agriculture in the Hills of North-East India is dominantly pushed forward by the agencies of the State with an aggressively active contribution of the elites of the respective communities. In the Mizo Hills, the transition from shifting cultivation to industrial agricultural plantation started long back. But, it has become more and more influential in recent days.

The newly introduced cash crops like Palm Oil exposed the previous *jhum* cultivators to the precariousness of the Market; thereby, people are dispossessed of the security and sovereignty of food as people's agricultural choices are limitedto the wills of State and Market. In the Mizo Hills, the legalization of individual land-holding along with the spread of cash crop cultivation led the way for the transformation of the *jhum-dominated* agricultural landscape. Previously, several *Jhum*hot spots were bought under the authority of the State by cutting people's access. In 1955, the Agricultural Land Act of Mizo Hills legalized private land-holding. Thereby, the State put forward the crucial one step towards a pro-capitalist society to systematically erase community spaces of forests and rivers; which are otherwise impossible to accumulate with the community tags. Underneath this legal framework, huge areas of previous *jhum* plots or forests were transformed

into individual land holdings of the many elite families. A sizable amount of land was also leased by the State Government through Memorandums of Understanding in 2006 with industrial houses in western India. Food processing companies such as Godrej Agrovet, Ruchi Soya and 3F Oil PalmAgroTech are actively participating in promoting the plantation of cash crops like Oil Palm and rubber. These plantation crops are mostly centred around the Kolasib and Mamit districts of Mizoram. Even the Kolasib district was declared as the Oil Palm District of Mizoram in 2014 (Mridula Chari; 2014). However, the consequences of such agricultural policies are still under consideration or rather a confusion as the transformation of agricultural practices in the Mizo Hills exposed both the fragile ecology and pro-egalitarian socio-cultural life of these communities into the precariousness of several economic and political authorities.

The Dilemmas of New Land Use Policy

More recently, the New Land Use Policy (NLUP) was introduced in the State of Mizoram which plays a crucial role in transforming the *jhum* dominated agricultural landscape. The NLUP with its mottos *"For better Mizoram"&"Green Mizoram"* provided monetary assistance to shifting cultivators to fix their livelihood other than *jhum*. Under this policy, crops like oil palm, and rubber are advertised by State authorities as superior, profitable and ecologically sustainable than *jhum*. In reality, agricultural policies in the Hills of North-East India necessarily demonize *jhum* environmentally & economically which James Scott argues is a political strategy of the State to undermine *jhum* as it escapes State control and produces rare or no economic outputs to the GDP of the State (James C. Scott, 2009). Hence, the State is promoting Palm Oil plantations in Mizoram where fostering agricultural production is the prime aim to provide raw materials for industrial houses of Western India located far from Mizoram. Yet, the Neo-liberal State provides layers and layers of statistics justifying these projects as success.The New Land Use Policy (NLUP) is the most important cornerstone in the agricultural transformation of Mizoram. From the late 80s and early 90s, the

Congress-led State Government of Mizoram tried to implement similar policies to reform the land use pattern. However, the present NLUP in Mizoram was implemented in 2011. In the act, it was clearly stated that the NLUP aimed to wean away the *jhum* cultivators of Mizo Hills from *jhum* and thereby settle them in an economically and ecologically sustainable form of cultivation. The present NLUP was implemented with a budget of 2800 crores where 1.30 lakh families were selected. Each of the selected families was paid approximately 1 lakh Rupees in instalments for adopting an alternative form of agriculture or livelihood (Gurvinder Singh, 2018). These alternative livelihoods were mainly the cultivation of cash crops,especiallyoil palm and rubber. According to the government-provided data-the number of *jhum-practicing* families has decreased from 68,433 during 2010-11 to 48,417 in 2015-16. In the same period, areas under *jhum* cultivation also decreased from 40,792 hectares to 19,851 hectares. The issues of ecological conservation were also merged into this agricultural program to have a smooth implementation.

Though the NLUP sounds to have a strong argument for transforming the life of the Hill communities; yet, the programhas several difficulties in implementation. Corruption of government officials along with beneficiaries' uneconomic use of funds resulted in diversion from the actual goals and objectives of the program. Lalkhama, a retired IAS officer and former State Chief Secretary argue that "*the Project was envisaged to help farmers and save the environment and everything looked so good on the papers but the implementation has been unsatisfactory. The farmers would certainly switch off from jhum if the funds were given on time. There has been a gross misuse of funds as people used money to buy vehicles and other items. In some cases, beneficiaries were paid based on their political affiliations and lack of market made the farmers unenthusiastic towards it*." It was broadly visible that the opportunities provided under NLUP were not gender-neutral. Most of the funds under NLUP were allocated through the male Head of the families. Thus, the male members got the upper hand in the use of allocated funds. Further, the newly emerged Palm

Oil & rubber plantations under NLUP in Mizoram are individual-centric centric than communitarian. These had led to a process of class formation within the previously flat social pyramid of Mizo society. There lie several examples in the entire North-East India where previous communitarian spaces like *jhum* plots, community forests and rivers are being transformed into individual properties of the handful of political and economic elites of the respective communities. Thereby, the larger section of the community who were crucially dependent on these resources is systematically dispossessed.

Locating Gender in Between Neo-Liberal Agriculture & Palm Oil

There is no confusion that the NLUP along with the other agricultural transformations in the Mizo Hills changed the lives of a large number of people be it positively or negatively is a different matter of consideration. Though the statistical data provided by the government sources enormously portray a positive view; yet within these positive statistical data lies distorted realities of gender discrimination and subjugation unexposed & unquestioned.

In the field visit to the Kolasib district of Mizoram, it was noticed that from all the Palm Oil farmers interviewed Lalnunziri (name changed) stands alone as the only female Palm Oil farmer in the whole district. Lalnunziri, a mother of two &wife of a Government employee handles herfarm nearKolasib town with 400 Palm Oil plants. She anticipated that she lonely make all the decisions in the handling of her Palm oil fields. She regularly transports the fresh fruit branches (FFBs) to the collecting centres using wage labourers.Lalnunziri also expressed her uneasiness/awkwardness as a single lady Palm Oil farmer in the District. She has to attend all the agricultural training sessions & meetings all alone in a men-dominated gathering. However, she satisfactorily expressed her happiness about her farm- "*Oil Plam is very good*". She continued-"*Oil palm is better than jhum cultivation. Previously, they had to cut parts of bamboo forests every year which is not good for the environment*". Lalnunziriproduces 20-30 quintals of Fresh fruit branches every month with twenty to thirty thousand profits per month. Unlike, Lalnunziri many women seem unhappy with all the changes brought by Palm Oil and the neo-liberal agricultural mechanism. Purobi Bose in her article

'*No Country for Women: The Dark Side of Palm Oil Production in Mizoram*' provides us with the dark side of palm oil plantations in the region. The article shows how palm oil is becoming a men's business in the State where women have no say (Purobi Bose; 2018).Previously in *jhum* or shifting cultivation, women are equal partners of men in the entire agricultural activities. Women took part in the decision-making process of what to produce in jhum, and when to collect the produce from the jhum fields. In the neo-liberal agricultural landscape, palm oil plantations provide nothing to women. The women's space of action as well as their decision-making capabilities is further declined. Mizo women are becoming limited within the household activities. The condition that emerged under the neo-liberalagricultural landscape is easily understandable in the narrative of a Mizo woman as mentioned in Purobi Bose's article- "*The plantation agriculture is squeezing blood both from my land and from my body*" (Purobi Bose; 2018). After Palm Oil, the traditional farming systems along with all the social norms & values associated with it are disrupted permanently. Land tenure within Palm oil plantations is often solidified and handed over to exclusively the heads of the household. Thereby, women's access to land & other natural resources is certainly limited.

Further, the diversity of crops in the newer agricultural practices of Palm oil plantations in Mizoram is limited to two or three crops. Mostemphasis is given to the cultivation of cash crops to be sold in the market to contribute to the economy of the State. Thus, the new agricultural landscapes of Palm oil plantations dispossess the communities from their crucially important self-sufficient form of economic production. They become more and more vulnerable to the demand & supply chains of the Markets. The food security & food sovereignty of the communities are also in question.The people's cultural food habits are on the edge of extinction as they are increasingly unable to continue the cultivation of their indigenous crops. The loss of self-sustainability directly affects women. It increases women's household work burdens. With the loss of jhum fields, women have to spend more time & energy collecting household diets.

Conclusions :

The communities of Mizo Hills live in a distinct mode of life that severely contradicts with modern discourse of development. Unlike the densely populated urban industrial centres, the lives of the Hills run on villages with agriculture as the popular strategy of sustenance. However, the present development mechanism that is essentially based on the discourses of modernity and capitalism negates such a way of life and cultivation as both anti-environmental and anti-developmental. The development discourse in Mizoram completely ignores the people's dependency factor on the practice of indigenous forms of cultivation. Such kind of disconnection between indigenous practices of life and the development strategy is contributing to dispossessions be it culture or positive gender identities.The largely accepted 'strong & egalitarian gender relations of the Hill societies' are increasingly in danger with the interventions from neo-liberal agricultural mechanisms in Mizoram. Hence, Monirul Hussain argues that the present development model is not based on people's aspirations and has both its beneficiaries and victims (Monirul Hussain; 2008). The mode of development followed in Mizoram is so exclusionary that it tends to fulfil only some specific human necessities of specific sections of society. Whereas, the larger sections of the community's sustainable life are being washed away through transforming them into objects neo-liberal development model.

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IS MULTICULTURALISM A HINDRANCE TO NATIONAL UNITY? EXPLORING THE DYNAMICS OF MULTI-CULTURALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF BODOLAND MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

Debahuti Das

ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism is a fundamental idea that emphasizes the acknowledgement and acceptance of cultural variety in modern communities. It is based on the historical cohabitation of many civilizations. This is especially important when discussing national, ethnic, and religious differences in the context of cultural diversity—a subject that is very important in India. The Dravidian, Naga, and Assamese ethnic movements in India highlight the need to identify and integrate minority communities based on their racial, national, or religious identities. These movements have had a huge impact on Indian politics and cultural expressions, leaving a lasting impression on the country's socio-political landscape. Multiculturalism, which has a long history in India, essentially fosters understanding and tolerance among various communities. India's diverse mosaic of cultures bears witness to its rich and complicated past, as ethnic movements continue

to influence the country's socio-political environment. The Bodoland movement highlights the need for inclusive policies to balance multiple identities and aspirations while maintaining national unity and provides a striking example of the complexities and challenges faced by diversity in the modern world.

Keywords: Bodoland, Cultural Diversity, Cultural Preservation, Ethnic Movements, Inclusive Policies, Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism: Introduction and historical roots

The concept of multiculturalism, both in society and politics, has a long history that spans numerous cultures and eras. Its fundamental idea is that cultural variety within a society should be acknowledged and accepted.The Roman Empire, which included a wide range of cultures and religions and permitted them to coexist under a single governmental body, is one of the earliest examples of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism's historical origins can be traced to the interactions, exchanges, and coexistence of many civilizations throughout human history. This concept has evolved and is an important feature of modern communities, encouraging tolerance and understanding among diverse communities.

The concept of multiculturalism in current political discourse and political philosophy reflects a debate about how to recognize and respond to the issues associated with ethnic, national, and religious distinctions in cultural diversity. The term 'multicultural' is frequently used to characterize the fact of diversity in a society, but the focus of what follows is on multiculturalism as a normative ideal in the context of Western liberal democratic cultures. While the phrase has developed to embrace a wide range of normative claims and aspirations, it is fair to say that proponents of multiculturalism have a common ground in rejecting the ideas of the 'melting pot' in which people of minority groups are supposed to assimilate into the majority culture.Rather, they have separate group identities and customs. In the case of immigrants, proponents underline that multiculturalism is compatible

with, rather than opposing to, the integration of immigrants into society; multiculturalism policies provide immigrants with more equitable terms of integration (Song, 2020).

During the 15th and 16th centuries, the Age of Exploration expanded interactions between diverse civilizations and the interchange of ideas, foods, and traditions. In more recent history, the European Enlightenment developed the idea of tolerance and respect for other views and civilizations. Multiculturalism as a modern political policy emerged in the mid-twentieth century. Countries such as Canada and Australia adopted official multiculturalism policies in the 1970s intending to protect and celebrate their various people's cultural identities. Multiculturalism is now a part of a larger political movement to include marginalized groups such as African Americans, women, LGBTQ persons, and people with disabilities (Glazer, 1997). However, the more specific focus of contemporary multiculturalism theories is the recognition and integration of minority groups defined largely by race, nationality, and religion.Immigrants who are ethnic and religious minorities.Minoritynations and indigenous peoples are the primary concerns of contemporary multiculturalism (Song, 2020).

Tracing to Indian context, the historical origins of multiculturalism in India may be traced back thousands of years. The coexistence of different religions, languages, and traditions is a feature of India's rich and complex past. Various civilizations, including the Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, and Dravidian, coexisted in ancient India. Tolerance of many faiths and civilizations was shown by the Maurya and Gupta dynasties, as well as the Mughal dynasties. This multicultural history created the groundwork for the secular values contained in the Indian Constitution after independence in 1947, which celebrates and protects religious and cultural diversity.As a South Asian country, India has a rich and diversified socio-cultural shade that has resulted in a multicultural federal structure. This complex culture has formed over the ages as a result of the confluence of diverse cultural elements introduced by conquerors such as Aryans, Sakas, Huns, Pathans, Mughals, and Europeans. This hybrid culture is frequently referred to as 'unity in diversity' or 'vegetables in a salad bowl'. Multiculturalism is profoundly ingrained in Indian

history and civilization, with Jawaharlal Nehru observing that India is a unique melting pot of various races with deep-seated racial memory in his *The Discovery of India* ('Roots of multiculturalism in India').

A historical examination of India's culture and civilization reveals that its roots are extremely diversified, the many linguistic, religious, and ethnic groups have their history and tradition, which is completely embedded in the Indian subcontinent. Indian democracy has demonstrated that multiculturalism as a policy works and has achieved widespread acceptance in India as a principle ('Roots of multiculturalism in India'). It has a linguistic richness with over 1,600 languages spoken and also religious diversity. India's diversified cultural environment demonstrates the coexistence of numerous languages, faiths, traditions, and artistic forms. This diversity has defined India's identity, encouraging tolerance, understanding, and a deep appreciation for the many civilizations that exist inside its borders. Also, the Indian Constitution ensures essential rights and liberties to all citizens, regardless of origin, while also fostering equality and secularism.

Ethnic Movements in India

The term 'ethnicity' does not refer to a uniform phenomenon, it has a continuing ambiguity; what constitutes ethnically determined social behaviour is not specified beforehand, as Max Weber pointed out at the time. The majority of ethnicity researchers agree that the idea refers to group formation, the formation of cultural and social groups, boundaries between 'us' and 'the others', identification, a sense of belonging, symbolic community, and so on. However, there are still disagreements concerning the role. Culture and social structure demonstrate the diversity of interpretation and expression in the field of ethnic phenomena (Ålund, 1999).

In India, ethnic movements are collective acts taken by diverse ethnic and cultural groups to safeguard and promote their distinct identities, rights, and interests. These movements have had a profound impact on the socio-political landscape of India. Several noteworthy ethnic movements have occurred throughout the country's history, each driven by its own set of grievances and goals. India is a

noisy democracy. It has been involved in several political clashes over the years. Conflicts over class, caste, political parties, language, religion, and regions frame India's political landscape. India has seen a number of them, particularly by communities that identify their regional difference based on language or religion. Three of the most important of these movements, namely those led by Tamils, Sikhs, and Muslims from Kashmir (Kohli, 1997). The Kashmir dispute is a worth mentioning big ethnic movement. The conflict over Jammu and Kashmir has raged for decades, with both India and Pakistan asserting their rights. This ethnic movement is profoundly based on religious and cultural divides, with the Kashmir Valley's largely Muslim inhabitants wanting self-determination and autonomy.Again, the Dravidian movement has had an impact in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. This socio-political movement, led by individuals such as Periyar and Annadurai, aims to promote the rights and cultural identity of the Dravidian people, who speak Dravidian languages. This movement had a significant influence on Tamil Nadu's politics and cultural expression.Various Adivasi movements have emerged in the tribal regions of central and eastern India to address issues such as land rights, displacement due to development projects, and cultural preservation. These movements, generally led by organizations such as the Adivasi Adhikar Manch and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, seek to preserve the rights of indigenous peoples.

When it comes to ethnicity and conflicts, Northeast India is a noteworthy region, The Naga insurgency in Northeastern India is one prominent example. The Naga people, who live primarily in Nagaland, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh, have long sought more autonomy and possibly independence. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) has been a prominent actor in this campaign, negotiating Naga rights with the Indian government. Another notable ethnic movement is the Assam Accord. It arose as a result of conflicts between the Assamese and the inflow of Bengali-speaking immigrants. The Accord, signed in 1985, attempted to resolve the Assamese people's concerns by defining citizenship qualifications and preserving their linguistic and cultural rights.

Finally, ethnic movements in India are numerous and complex, each influenced by unique historical, cultural, and political circumstances. They reflect

the constant attempt to strike a balance between the demands of various ethnic and cultural groups and the greater goals of national unity and social cohesion. These movements influenced Indian politics and continue to alter the country's socio-cultural landscape.Today, ethnicity is a powerful tool not just for mobilization, but also for defending one's political authority, territory, and natural and material resources. India, and especially Northeast India, is a land of many ethnic and tribal groupings. It has been described as a cultural patchwork. Tribal cultures, linguistics, and ethnic identities are all diverse. This extremely sensitive area has been subjected to a great deal of scrutiny. This is due to the ethnicity and fanaticism that are prevalent in this region. Insurgency is intensifying, and the numerous ethnic groups who live here are grappling with identity issues.It is critical to emphasize here that to lessen ethnic conflict, efforts should be taken to bring constructive peace that is long-lasting and beneficial (Saikia, 2018).

Ethnic Diversity in Assam

Assam, India's Northeastern state, is a melting pot of ethnic variety, with a diverse range of groups and languages, cultures, and history. This diversity has sometimes resulted in ethnic movements seeking to address diverse complaints and preserve the rights of various ethnicities.In recent years, several ethnic movements have emerged in Assam. Among these are the movements of the Bodo, Karbi, Tiwa, Mishing, Deori, and Sonowalkacharis. These movement's socio-cultural and political foundations are linked to several common phenomena. Several more ethnic movements in the state are at various stages of growth (Saikia, 2018).

One of the most important ethnic movements in Assam is the Assam Movement (1979-1985), often known as the Assam Agitation. It was predominantly spearheaded by the Assamese-speaking population, who was concerned over large-scale Bengali-speaking immigration, which they saw as a danger to their language and culture. This campaign culminated in the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, which defined citizenship criteria and sought to protect the language and cultural rights of the people of Assam.

Aside from the Assamese, the state is home to a number of indigenous communities, including the Bodo, Karbi, and Mising tribes. These groups have formed their movements, such as the Bodo Movement, which advocates for an autonomous Bodoland territory, and the Karbi Movement, which advocates for more autonomy.

Tea tribes of Assam, a disenfranchised group of labourers, have also fought for their rights. The Tea Tribe Movement tries to address this community's socioeconomic issues.

The Bodoland Movement is undoubtedly another prominent ethnic movement in Assam. The indigenous Bodo people have long desired greater autonomy and recognition of their separate identity inside Assam. The movement, led by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU), seeks to create a separate Bodoland territory. The Bodoland Movement exemplifies the larger fight of Assamese indigenous communities to secure their rights and cultural heritage. It highlights the complex and dynamic character of Assam's ethnic variety, as well as the need for discussion and negotiation in resolving past grievances and fostering harmony among the state's diverse population.

Ethnic conflicts are better viewed as power struggles. Ethnic conflicts are thus a subset of the larger collection of political conflicts that dot the political landscape of developing-country democracies and include conflicts along class, caste, or party lines. While it is easy to distinguish ethnic conflicts from other types of political conflicts, what ethnic conflicts have in common with other mobilized groups is that mobilized ethnic groups, like other mobilized groups, seek greater power and control, either as an end in itself or as a means to secure a society's other valued resources (Kohli, 1997).

Bodoland Movement: An Overview

The Bodoland movement is a notable ethnic and political movement in Assam, India. It largely represents the Bodo people, an indigenous ethnic group indigenous to the region. The primary demand of the movement has been the

establishment of a separate territory known as Bodoland, with more political autonomy and recognition of their distinct cultural and linguistic identity.The Bodo movement sprang from historical complaints around land rights, socio-economic inequities, and concerns about the preservation of their language and culture.

The background of Bodo movement was prepared during the colonial period with the systematic immigration that was allowed by the Britishers and which had continued even after independence. In the early part of the 20th century, the Britishers undertookthe development and cultivation of wastelands and officially encouraged the immigration of landless peasants from the densely populated bordering districts of Bengal to the sparsely populated districts of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The colonial administration also imported a large number of working hands to work in the tea plantation, road construction, oil fields and coal mines. This process of the immigration scheme opened a new floodgate for the immigration of landless peasants from East Bengal (Now Bangladesh) to Assam and at least 90% of the immigrants were Muslims. During the period 1911 to 1931, Muslim peasants formed a significant portion of the population in all the Brahmaputra valley districts. In the post-independence period, the flow of a massive number of immigrants assumed a menacing land problem, particularly for the Bodo population (Choudhury, 2015).

As per the census report of 1991, Assam has witnessed the highest growth of voters which is at 13.38% as against the national average of 2.1%.The main reason for the sharp increase in voters is no doubt due to the immigration of Muslim settlers from the neighbouring country Bangladesh. The main point to be noted is that the rate of increase is much more alarming in the Bodo-dominated areas. Thus, the huge influx of migrants had shaken the fabric of the tribal economy, culture and society. The growing migrant population appeared to be a serious threat to their survival and development as a tribal entity (Choudhury, 2015).

The Bodo political movement originated from a need for linguistic rights in Assam, evolving to encompass demands for a distinct script (Nagari script adopted in 1975) and the creation of Bodoland. The push for a separate state was rooted in the desire to safeguard their identity, with leaders arguing for political and

democratic resolution. The proposed state covered a significant part of the Assam valley.In 1967, the Bodo middle class was beginning to voice its desires and the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) took up the cause of Bodo political autonomy. The request was well received and was in line with the All Bodo Students Union's (ABSU) desire for a distinct Bodo state. However, the PTCA softened its position and lost support from regular Bodos as a result of internal strife and affiliations with the Assam government. There was a rift inside the group after the 1979 leadership transition, which Bodos saw as a betrayal of their real political goals.Founded in 1967, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) became a unified voice for Bodo demands, calling for the creation of an independent state called Bodoland. When Assamese Chauvinism opposed ABSU's aggressive pursuit of this cause in 1987, Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma led the organization. Together with ABSU, the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) organized a significant demonstration in 1987 under the banner 'Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty'. The Bodo Security Force (BSF) was founded in 1986 to achieve autonomous Bodoland via violent confrontation. But ABSU disassociated itself, advocating for a separate state within India. In 1993, representatives of ABSU and BPAC signed the Bodoland Accord, which created the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) in Assam. Although there was a decrease in hostilities, factional violence continued among Bodo groups, made worse by militant forces desiring complete independence rejecting the pact.Following the establishment of cease-fires with organizations such as the Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF), the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was formed in 2003 to oversee a specific region of Assam. ABSU and other groups claim that Bodo's concerns are still neglected despite constitutional revisions, pointing to an ongoing struggle for autonomy and development in Assam.

The signing of the Bodo Accord in January 2020 was an important milestone for the movement. It is an extension of the existing agreement of 2003, an attempt to strengthen the Bodo Territorial Region's legislative, administrative, and financial status. The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), a new administrative subdivision within Assam, was established as a result of this agreement.The BTR was given increased legislative rights and control over specific subjects, allowing the Bodo people to exercise some degree of self-government.The Bodoland movement

exemplifies the complexity of ethnic diversity in Assam and the surrounding region. It shows the significance of addressing historical grievances, acknowledging the indigenous population's rights and aspirations, and creating peaceful cohabitation within the framework of the Indian nation.

Multiculturalism and its Challenges to National Unity in the Context of the Bodoland Movement

Understanding cultural differences is only one aspect of multiculturalism; another is tackling the problems these differences cause in society. A country must use politics and governance to address these issues to prosper; it cannot take an overly liberal or hands-off stance. To foster mutual respect and a feeling of common identity, diverse communities need active state administration. This duty is shared by the majority as well as by immigrant or minority groups. Multiculturalism encompasses the complex concerns of religious and cultural diversity and how we handle these opportunities and challenges. It is a concern for society as a whole. Some of the characteristics and challenges of Multiculturalism are mentioned below:

- **Specificity:** The particular conditions of any nation or area influence multiculturalism. The nature of multiculturalism is influenced by variables like intergroup connections, migration history, and population distribution. Since experiences differ greatly throughout nations, it is imperative to comprehend multiculturalism within the context of the particular society rather than attempting to apply a single model across varied places.
- **Temporal Nature**: Intergroup relations are subject to change over time, as multiculturalism is a continuous process. Coexistence in peace might change for the better or worse. Sri Lanka and the Balkans are two instances of how even peaceful cooperation may be twisted or disturbed. A state's ability to effectively manage its dynamics and foresee future changes is vital.
- **Inherent Tensions**: Diverse modern societies comprise a variety of social diversity, including class and political disparities, in addition to cultural and

religious distinctions. To manage diversity, one must recognize differences while promoting a sense of unity because conflicts might occur, especially in times of crisis or rapid change.

- **Potential Disruptions:** When cultural variety meets with differences in power, wealth, education, and resources, tensions have the potential to turn into conflicts. Societies characterized by such diversity may give rise to cultural disputes, which some see as 'failures of multiculturalism'. Nevertheless, rather than being a reflection of multiculturalism's inherent shortcomings, these disruptions should be understood as an inadequacy in managing the multicultural environment.
- **Effective Management**: At every level of society, multiculturalism necessitates cautious management. This entails encouraging community involvement and tolerance as well as integration and the creation of a shared identity despite differences. To combat racism, bigotry, and prejudice, policymaking is essential. Education is also essential for fostering tolerance, understanding, and an interest in variety.

In conclusion, multicultural environments are specific to each location, dynamic, prone to conflict, prone to disturbances, and in need of efficient state governance. Policies, laws, and educational programs are all part of managing diversity to uphold social justice and cohesion and avoid intergroup strife (Nye, 2007). Some scholars also argue that in a country where several cultural groups coexist, multiculturalism recognizes this fact without imposing a single national identity. It celebrates diversity, and multiculturalists stress how crucial it is to uphold the rights and cultural identities of racial and ethnic minorities while advancing equality. A group of people who share a language, culture, ethnicity, or history might be called a nation. On the other hand, national integration entails forging ties between once-isolated countries, accepting diversity, and promoting broad agreement. Similar to multiculturalism, national integration necessitates an equitable and reasonable government that recognizes, respects, and values these distinctions. While national integration governs diversity with equality and justice, multiculturalism promotes cultural diversity (Folarin et al, 2012).

To comprehend the complexities of multiculturalism in a diverse country like India, it's essential to explore the ethnic diversities and conflicts in various regions. Of them, Assam is particularly notable for being a multi-ethnic state, which makes it difficult to assess the rationality of demands made by a single ethnic community.The Bodoland demand in Assam serves as a fitting illustration, highlighting the complexities and challenges posed by such movements in a multi-ethnic state. Considering the opinions of other groups co-existing in the area calls into question the viability of an ethnic group's demand. This is an appropriate example of the challenges thrown by the movement in the characteristic of a multi-ethnic state like Assam or a broader context of national unity.

To understand the ongoing confrontations between Bodos and non-Bodos, one must first understand the historical context. The origins of tribal exclusion zones may be traced back to the colonial administration when the British sought to govern the Assam valley and surrounding hills. To control tribal affairs, the Government of India Act of 1935 enacted rules such as the Excluded Areas Act, Partially Excluded Areas Act, and Inner Line Regulations. Traditional contacts between the Brahmaputra Valley plains and nearby hill tribes were severed as a result of these laws and it continued even in the post-independence era. The Constitution introduced the Sixth Schedule as a constitutional provision, guaranteeing socio-political-cultural protection to Northeastern tribal territories, maintaining much of the 1935 Act. This schedule, however, was not intended for all regional tribes, excluding those already excluded. The status of plains tribes such as the Bodos, Mishings, and Rabhas was disregarded by the Bordoloi subcommittee. Even though the Constituent Assembly has a separate subcommittee addressing minority rights, some argue that Gopinath Bordoloi, chair of the North-East Frontier Tribal Areas Sub-Committee, failed to do justice to plains tribals, assimilating them into Assamese identity and depriving them of special rights (Mahanta, 2013).

The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was established through a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) signed on February 10, 2003, in New Delhi, by representatives from the union government, the Assam government, and a delegation from the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). The agreement aimed to establish

an autonomous self-governing body, the Bodoland Territorial Council, within the state of Assam, providing constitutional protection under the constitution.However, the agreement encountered difficulties. Unlike the 1993 Bodo Peace Accord, which was signed by the All Assam Student's Union (AASU), the 2003 accord was signed solely by HagramaBasumatary, chairperson of the secretive BLT. The BTC Accord fell short in two critical areas: it lacked the values of fairness, justice, and representation, and it failed to address long-standing difficulties like tribal belts, blocks, and the problem of illegal migration. As a result, the gap between Bodos and non-Bodos grew, particularly among Adivasis, Koch-Rajbanshis, Rabhas, and Assamese communities. The BTC region, which included four new contiguous districts, sparked alarm among many ethnic groups, particularly non-Bodos. The BTC's composition, with reserved constituencies favoured by Bodos, sparked claims of institutional discrimination. Non-Bodo organizations, such as the SanmilitaJanagosthiya Sangram Samithi and Ana-Bodo Surakhya Samity, increased their agitational efforts to be classified as a Scheduled Tribe. The conflict in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) mirrors broader identity assertions, which have been amplified by the Sixth Schedule's acknowledgement of the Bodo Homeland (Mahanta, 2013).

The fragile peace between Bodos and non-Bodos in the region is highlighted by the July 2012 hostilities between the Bodos and illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) of Assam, as well as the 2008 violence in the districts of Darrang and Udalguri. Bodos, Koch-Rajbongshis, Rabhas, Adivasis, Tea Tribes, Assamese, Bengali Hindus and Muslims, and Assamese are among the diverse populations that make up the BTAD. The Bodos are said to have threatened non-Bodos to leave Bodo-dominated areas, there are examples of cooperative coexistence that refute ethnic cleansing allegations.Remarkably, the KLO, which has ties to both ULFA and NDFB, is against ULFA's covert backing of SJSS, a non-Bodo group that opposes the construction of Bodoland. A threat to peace is posed by the Koch Rajbongshi leaders, who criticize the Bodo past in Assam and propose combining the demands for Bodoland. Allegations have it that the state administration fomented Bodo-

non-Bodo disputes in the 1990s to keep regions from being ceded to the Bodo Accord (Basumatary, 2014).

The difficulties of creating homogenous territories in varied, multicultural countries like India are highlighted by the complexity seen in areas like Assam, which are ingrained in its multi-ethnic composition. The complex interactions between historical, cultural, and identity processes among the numerous ethnic populations are reflected in the struggle for territorial demarcation. Because Bodos, Koch-Rajbongshis, Adivasis, and other tribes with different histories and goals coexist in Assam, it is difficult to create a single, homogenous territory. Conflicts over territory, resources, and identity emerge to meet the many requirements of these communities, making the possibility of a cohesive and peaceful regional identity more difficult to achieve.

Bodoland's heterogeneous setting presents a complex interplay of opportunities and problems. On the one hand, the region's unique cultural and linguistic mosaic provides opportunities for cross-cultural enrichment and mutual understanding, as well as contributing to the local economy through a wide range of skills, and agricultural methods. This encourages social cohesion and peaceful cooperation among the various communities that make up Bodoland. However, these opportunities are offset by some obstacles. The desire for Bodoland's statehood, which is frequently anchored in ethnic identity, calls into question the larger values of multiculturalism by raising concerns about the preservation of unique identities v/s assimilation into a unified state. To effectively address these difficulties, inclusive policies that recognize the rights and aspirations of diverse people while encouraging social integration and economic success within Bodoland are required.To promote harmony and guarantee the welfare of all inhabitants in the Bodoland regions, efforts must be made to balance the goals of the Bodo community with the interests of non-Bodo people.

Conclusion

The Indian government has made great walks toward resolving the Bodoland conflict while upholding pluralism. The Bodoland Accord established

the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in 2003, giving the Bodo people some autonomy while defending the rights and interests of non-Bodo communities in the area. Including non-Bodo groups in the governance system and allocating seats for them in the Bodoland Territorial Council to guarantee their political representation has been a key component of this strategy.In addition, the administration has initiated development initiatives to enhance the socio-economic circumstances of every Bodoland area inhabitant, irrespective of their cultural or ethnic heritage. Keeping in mind the plurality of the Indian nation, it's difficult to sum up yes or no to the argument of the whole study. However, in conclusion, to answer if multiculturalism poses a hindrance to nationalism is more affirmative than negative.Although multiculturalism is praised for its diversity in India, there are times when it threatens the country's cohesiveness because of the presence of multiple ethnic groups, languages, and customs which can cause cultural conflict and hinder the development of a unified national identity. Social divisions can occasionally be brought about by differences in customs, beliefs, and behaviours, which prevent the smooth integration necessary for strong national unity. To manage this diversity and cultivate the peaceful cohabitation that is necessary for a united country, policies and activities that support inclusivity, understanding, and appreciation of diverse cultures are necessary.Efforts should be made to balance both the aspects initiated in aiming to accommodate the region's rich cultural and ethnic fabric, promote long-lasting togetherness, and settle historical grievances.

Abbreviations

1. ABSU: All Bodo Student's Union
2. BAC: Bodoland Autonomous Council
3. BLT: Bodo Liberation Tigers
4. BLTF: Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force
5. BPAC: Bodo People's Action Committee
6. BSF: Bodo Security Force
7. BTAD: Bodoland Territorial Area Districts
8. BTC: Bodoland Territorial Council
9. BTR: Bodoland Territorial Region
10. KLO: Kamtapur Liberation Organization
11. LGBTQ: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
12. MoS: Memorandum of Settlement
13. NDFB: National Democratic Front of Bodoland
14. NSCN: National Socialist Council of Nagaland
15. PTCA: Plain Tribal Council of Assam
16. SJSS: SanmilitaJanagosthiya Sangram Samiti
17. ULFA: United Liberation Front of Assam

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CULTURAL ELITES AND MIDDLE-CLASS POLITICS IN POST-INDEPENDENT ASSAM

Dhriti Sonowal

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the role of the elite cultural organisations in shaping the political discourse of Assam. The presence of cultural organizations such as the ones discussed in this paper is important because they articulate the aspirations of the elite in society. In this paper I have tried to identify how socio-cultural organizations reflect the characters of elite clubs and in the context of Assam, how the middle-class, upper-caste, educated elites wielded social, cultural and political power through these organizations. By looking at organisations such as the Assam Association and the Axom Sahitya Sabha, this paper locates how cultural elites create exclusionary spaces, which thereby shape the political discourse for a region. The study of socio-culturalorganisation and middle-class politics in Assam is reframed within the study of politics of cultural elites in Assam. Thiscontributes to the studies on regional specificities of elite formations.

Keywords: Cultural Elites, Middle Class, Politics, Assam.

Introduction

The site of the social has an active potential for developing into sites for political imagination. The language of modern politics in Assam did not emerge synthetically; it had its roots in the vibrant public sphere in the colonial and post-colonial period which informed the cultural and intellectual foundation of the society. The events that transpired in Assam in the nineteenth century have been recognised within a larger movement for the assertion of regional identity and political autonomy. The regionalist tendencies that erupted in the nineteenth century created a rupture between the civil society and the state and within this rupture a class of educated, urban elites materialized as custodians of the Assamese culture. The significance of these educated urban elites came to be projected in the many social organisations that played a vital role in shaping the politics of Assam. The opinions of this dominant Assamese middle class reflected all important developments in Assam since the early nineteenth century. The socio-cultural organizations of which these individuals were members, began articulating their political, social, and economic concerns at a more public platform. Two important socio-cultural organizations, the Assam Association and the Axom Sahitya Sabha have held important cultural and political significance in Assam. Both organizations drew their members from the educated middle class who were vocal participants in the national imagining of Assam.However, the attitude of the Assam Association and the Sahitya Sabhatowards the protection of the 'Assamese' language and culture was criticized on many fronts. They reflected the values and premises of the class it represented, which was a minority, educated Assamese-speaking middle-class elite. What happened as a result was many of the ethnic communities felt left out from the larger Assamese identity which was imagined and constructed by the upper-caste, middle-class elite in Assam. A series of social processes followed that changed the way politics was organised in the region and how different communities in Assam got initiated into organised politics.

Looking back at the history of Assam, many structural and cultural changes occurred that shaped the social and political trajectory of Assam for the years to

come. When the Ahom kingdom came under British rule in 1826, it was the first time that the region became politically incorporated into the pan-Indian imperial imagination. Once Assam was made into an administrative area, its boundaries were drawn up according to administrative conveniences such that many other regions like the area of Angami Nagas and Lushais became a part of Assam, noted Baruah (1999). After Assam was incorporated into the Indian union, the independent Indian state's political manipulations in the north east greatly altered the nature of the social in the region. The modern developmental state was instrumental in connecting the region with the rest of the country and within itself. Towns and villages were linked through railways and print and radio mediums were responsible for disseminating information. A brief tracing of the history of modern Assam takes one back to 1905, when a new expanded province was sought to be created, combining Assam with all of eastern Bengal. Given the circumstances, the boundaries of the newly formed colonial Assam included the large Bengali-speaking districts of Sylhet.

The British often treated Assam as a land frontier for Bengal. As a result of this colonial administrative hijacking of the region, the demography of the region went through transition-large scale immigration from Bengal to Assam began taking place. At the same time, Bengali dominated as the language of the courts and government schools in Assam. This made a very controversial impact on the language question in the region. Assamese intellectuals saw that the progress of Assam would only be possible if its language was given its due status but the colonial authorities saw these demands as demands of a separate province. Since Sylhet was attached to provincial Assam, a bulk of the important opportunities were taken advantage of by the English-educated Bengalis. This was highly resented and this bias was opposed by a section of the educated Assamese who had begun to be vocal about these issues by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

A vibrant social sphere began emerging in Assam which was critical in the consolidation of a group of well-off individuals from upper-caste family

backgrounds who emerged as arbitrators of the political, cultural and social matters of Assam. The educated middle-class Assamese were relationally more advanced than the rest of the ethnic groups in the region. Although the Axom Sahitya Sabha had mass appeal, it was evident that the power to control the narrative remained with a select few, mostly the Assamese-speaking elite. The Assam Association as well as the Sahitya Sabha gave the civil society in Assam an organizational capacity, which saw its impactful fruition in the scale of the Assam movement. Despite the important role played by the Assam Association and the Sahitya Sabha, these organizationsacted as exclusive clubs that followed exclusionary practices opening up selective access to its functioning and membership. the exclusive nature of these organizations led to widespread criticism. Scholars and commentators have criticized the Sahitya Sabha and the Assam Associationovertime for taking a strong Assamese chauvinist stance that sought to create a pan-Assamese identity without taking into account the language, culture and identity of the various ethnic communities who resided in Assam. The Assam Association and the Sahitya Sabha had the characteristics of elite clubs and can be placed within the vibrant public sphere of Assam whose political underpinnings had a significant impact on shaping the cultural politics in the region.

By looking at organisations such as the Assam Association and the Axom Sahitya Sabha, this paper locates how cultural elites create exclusionary spaces, which thereby shape the political discourse for a region.The analysis of socio-cultural organizations and the role of the middle class in shaping the public sphere in Assam is redefined within the examination of cultural elite politics, contributing to the understanding of regional distinctions in elite groups. To delineate the nature of politics in Assam, it is crucial to closely examine the influence of these organizations.

Locating Power in the Social Sphere

Much before the independent state came into being, specifically during the period of British colonial administration, much of the geographical and spatial

dimensions of the region had transformed. Much like how the British altered the socio-political structures in the rest of India, the British presence in Assam initiated a series of changes that left foundational impacts. Guha (1991) notes that the historical accounts of the society of Assam in the Pre-colonial period show that the Assamese society was consolidated largely under the Ahoms, who were the major administrators of greater Assam for almost 600 years. The Ahoms were able to successfully fight off the Mughals in the seventeenth century, and create a strong political and social hold over the area. In 1826, with the signing of the Yandabo Treaty, as the Ahoms relinquished its kingdom to the British for administration, it was for the first time that the region became incorporated into the larger British imperial project. Existing kingdoms ruled by Tribal Kings such as the Kachari Kingdoms and Koch Kingdoms were categorized into administrative areas and the boundaries were drawn up according to colonial administrative conveniences. These historical developments define the present politics in the region in a major way.

In the first few years of colonial rule, the British tried to form alliances with the pre-colonial elites who were termed variously as Chamua*paiks*, Mahantas, Khatdarsetc as noted by Guha (1991) and as such included revenue functionaries into their administrative system. The land ownership pattern in pre-colonial Assam proved to be conducive for the middle class to develop in colonial Assam. The big feudal landlords could avail of modern education and other opportunities under the aegis of British rule and be able to shift their loyalty to the British easily. The landed gentry or *dangarias* and the educated *babus* who were employed as *Mauzadars* and government servants in the nineteenth century belonged to the families of the landholding classes with upper-caste backgrounds, noted Guha (1991). As a result, the upper caste Assamese were able to exploit the colonial bureaucratic apparatus and establish a dominant role for themselves in the society.The Assamese middle class emerged amongst the upper caste as a result of these imperial networks and this educated elite gained prosperity under the patronage of the British.

Most prominent individuals who belonged to this section of the society includedManiram Dewan (1806-58) who became the Dewan of the Assam Tea Company and later started his tea plantation. As urban centres began developing, clusters of middle-class localities emerged in and around areas of present-day Jorhat and Tezpur. As Sharma (2014) notes people like ManiramDewan and AnandaramDhekialPhukan(1829-59), Gunabhiram Baruah (1837-98), Boli Narayan Borah (1852-1927) who was educated in modern English became the youth leaders and prominent faces of a class of English educated, upwardly mobile individuals forming the nascent middle class that was consolidating in Assam. This nascent Assamese middle class was an important catalyst in the socio-economic development and integration of the region. The fear of encroachment on government jobs and employment avenues by the Bengalis was the driving force which led to the consolidationof the middle class in Assam.

This section of the society also had active links to the peasantry and this link gave greater impetus to the movements launched largely to fulfil the middle-class aspirations and interests. This social position also became the cause of antagonism between this social group and theother social groups in the region.nineteenth-centurypolitics in Assam was largely shaped around middlemiddle-classics which was played out through the socio-cultural organizations that although identified themselves as apolitical organizations, played active political roles. Politics in Assam took a drastic turn when the civil society organisations began mobilising public opinion around issues of economic, social and political concerns plaguing the state. These organisations identified themselves as "non-political", as socio-cultural organisations. None of these organisations identified themselves asaligned to a political party or called themselves interest groups but identifiedthemselves as cultural organisations seeking to 'protect' the Assamese culture and identity. However, their presence and authority had massive consequences on the politics of the region. These organisations fell within the purview of civil society as they encompassed a public space beyond the direct state control and worked as a network between formal and informal associations of 'concerned' citizens of

Assam. One way to understand the substantive role of the Assamese middle class is to situate the various socio-cultural organizations of which this social group was an active part of. Two such organizations, the Assam Association in the pre-independent period and the Assam Sahitya Sabha, in post-independent Assam became the mouthpiece of the educated, middle class in the state.

These elite organizations have played a crucial role in shaping the political discourse of Assam. They have stayed pertinent by articulating the aspirations of a small minority of the educated elite.

It was through these socio-cultural organizations that the middle-class, upper-caste, educated minority was able to wield social, cultural and political power. The middle class, upper-caste, educated minority was culturally privileged and they functioned as the cultural elites of Assam.

These socio-cultural organizations, of which these elites were a part, becamethe seat of symbolic power for the existing elite groups and they resisted the entry of other groups into this space. Through these clubs, sanctions are placed, and people are excluded from opportunities and at the same time, mass interests aremanipulated to coordinate the aspirations of the elite groups.As Lamont (1994) argues, elites use cultural symbols and institutions to help constitute their own identities and exclude others through the process of boundary-drawing. A shared culture is sought to be generated through exclusive clubs that crystallize to formthe culture of the elite. Scholarslike Bourdieu (1984) have argued that cultural dispositions serve as markers of elite status and that, in addition to reflecting social position, culture also helps to produce it. Elites have more often than not used cultural institutions to construct themselves as a class defined by a particular set of tastes, values, and ways of being as Beisel(1998) and DiMaggio (1982)note. Often elites, through the mechanism of institutions like social clubs and organisations exclude people from social power. Elites also wield ideological power to manipulate the masses into particular political mobilizations. The English-educated Assamese as such was an elite group that constituted of English-educated intellectuals. These

intellectual elites had a powerful toolkit that influenced the politics of Assam and also counterbalanced the power and authority of both the British and the independent Indian state on various occasions. However, these organisations were far from being democratic spaces and often worked as a platform for the creation and continuation of elite domination. The Assam Association and the Axom Sahitya Sabha and their role during the Assam movement portray the regional specificities of the elite formations and how in Assam these social clubs proved to be a catalyst for social movements of one kind.

Assamese Middle Class and the Assam Association

Tracing the history of the formation of the middle class in Assam opens up an interesting chapter in the economic history of Assam. As Kalita(2011) notes it took several years for the consolidation of the middle class in Assam, which traces its roots to four historical processes -networks of trade and commerce, participation in government employment, land ownership and the d growth of the tea plantation industry. The group which formed a significant foundation for the development of the middle classes was the individuals who were government officials, the job holders at the civil and judicial branches and revenue officials. A section of the middle class that emerged also belonged largely to the tea plantation the tea managers, the *Bura Sahabs.* Due to their economic capital, a lot of these families sent their children to places like Calcutta and Delhi for education. Individuals like Maniram Dewan who was one of the last Ahom feudal aristocrats or AnandaramDhekialPhukan, who was educated in modern, English western education and other such members of a small group of English educated class who were active in the public sphere became prominent faces of this new middle class. Three major elements could be identified to be the core ideology of the nascent Assamese middle class that began emerging in the 1860's- loyalty to the British, provincial exclusiveness and the preservation and expansion of the class interest.

The years 1873-74 were crucial for instituting middle-class politics in Assam. The English middle-class intelligentsia which was also well-versed in the

Assamese language began showing interest and awareness about their separate linguistic, cultural and political existence from the Bengali-speaking population. The assertion of the autonomy of the Assamese language and culture was the task of the first generation of Assamese public intellectuals who had to make the case that the Assamese were a distinct people with a distinct language and culture. Intellectuals like AnandaramDhekiyalPhukan were at the forefront of such activities. Actively publishing in Assamese, he also petitioned General Moffat Millsagainst the use of Bengali language, which was identified as a foreign language in the vernacular schools in Assam. As noted by Sharma (2014) some groups of the middle class began voicing their opinions in leading Assamese dailies like *Prabashi,*and *Mrinmayee* opposing the converging of Assamese and Bengali languages. A staunch rejection of the secondary status given to the Assamese language was taken up by various members of the middle class, which ultimately took up the character of cultural nationalism.

These concerns about Assamese culture and language took concrete shape in the year 1867, with the draft proposal of the Assam Association. The Assam Association was formally instituted in 1903, in its Guwahati session. 1903 was also the year when the reconstitution of the provinces of Bengal and Assam took place. About forty prominent individuals who held influential positions as tea plantation owners, government servants and businessmen gathered to form the Assam Association. This organization became the mouthpiece of the few educated Assamese who put up pertinent social, political and economic questions to the colonial government. The Association remained one of the primary organizations which identified itself as a non-political organization that had in some senses, had a softer approach to the British suzerainty. This association was dominated by the wealthy and the westernised Assamese individuals, mostly men whose objectives were to improve the local self-government and the municipal administration, secure more jobs for the educated Assamese youth in government departments and establish educational institutions and propagate ideals of trade and commerce and industry and also champion the case of Assamese language and literature. It was

dominantly serving the interests of the middle classes but also tried to articulate the grievances of the masses, which was largely a peasant society. As identified by Kalita(2011), the activities of the Association between 1917-1919 prepared the ground for Assam's participation in the national struggle under Indian National Congress. In the sessions conducted over the three years, there was a strong plea for the establishment of a university in Assam similar to the Calcutta University which was the seat of language, literature and culture for the Bengali intelligentsia. The Assam Association was one of the first few region-based local organisations in pre-independent Assam which was institutionalised as a thriving site of intellectual and public debate and discussion. It was also important because it was an active agent for political activity. It was along the footsteps of the Assam Association, that the Axom Sahitya Sabha formed itself, in the post-independent period.

The formation of the Assam Association represented the organizational capacity of the middle class in Assam. The Association as a formal organization was not only instituted to shape the aspirations for the region but to also reflect the middle-class ideology harboured by this group of educated, upper-caste, middle-class individuals that crystallized their position as the elite class in the social hierarchy of Assam. The cultural elites initiated a period of aggressive Assamese nationalism. They were fueled by their desire to protect the Assamese identity from the onslaught of two distinct sets of immigrants over time. First were the Bengali middle class in the colonial period and the Bengali-speaking Muslim immigrants from East Bengal in the post-independent period. The first group was seen as a threat to the advancement to the advancement of the Assamese educated individuals because the Bengali middle class received undue patronage from the British and on the other hand for the other group, the middle class feared that "these immigrants would change the demographic, cultural and political makeup of Assam, noted Guha (2000). In the pre-independent period, the cultural elites framed the nature of middle-class politics in Assam. As Mahanta (2013) notes, there was a specific strand of public opinion that was spearheaded by intellectuals like Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury, Jnananath Bora, and Chandra Nath Sharma were apprehensive that

the Assamese culture would be replaced by non-Assamese Indians. this was followed by their desire to engage in a political leadership that was separate from the dominant All India Congress leadership, which was weaved around strong Assamese nationalism.

Axom Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society)

The political discourse in Assam during l979-85 was centred on the question of illegal immigration from Bangladesh. At the same time, economic underdevelopment in the state had been one of the major points of discussion in the literary works of the nineteenth century and early 20th century. Many writers and social critics at the time started writing about the Assamese fear of becoming a minority in their state. Gyannath Bora published *AsomatBideshi* (Foreigners in Assam) in 1923, a polemical piece that stirred intense reaction among the local intellectual circles, and also Bhupen Hazarika in his famous song "*AamiAxomiyaNahouDukhia*", (We Assamese are not poor) put out a clarion call across the sections of the society calling for social and politically awareness. In short, the nineteenth and twentieth-century literary and cultural discourse of Assam was dominated by the fear of the Assamese becoming a cultural minority in its state.

The Assamese middle class had faced the clear impact of four decades of language subjugation in the colonial period. Definitive administrative preference for Bengalis in the state bureaucracy and lack of opportunities in the government sector prompted the Assamese middle-class leadership to take matters into their own hand; they tried to propel the cause of the lack of opportunities with rigid actions and thoughts. In 1888, an organisation called *AxomiyaBhaxa Unnati XadhiniXobha*(Association for Development of the Assamese Language) was founded in Calcutta by the Assamese students studying there.This association identified that a developed language is a sign of developed people and the goal of the Xobha was to help the Assamese mother tongue grow. The *Axom Sahitya Sabha* was a successor to this late nineteenth-century cultural rise. The *Axom*

Sahitya Sabha was formally constituted in 1917 (Nag 1986). One of the projects of the *Unnati Xadhini* was to remove all grammatical anomalies from the Assamese Language. Ideologically, it was identified that language would be the marker of nationality. All native speakers of Assamese would be seen as belonging to the Assamese *jati.* As Baruah 1999 identifies, those who could and who could not become a part of the Assamese nationality became an important part of the cultural politics of Assam which was later adopted by the Sahitya Sabha staunchly.

Although publically known as a literary and cultural society, almost all of the Sahitya Sabha members were politically active and represented the political ideologies of the *Sabha* in public forums. The Sahitya Sabha actively took a political turn when it openly demanded that Assamese should be made the state language in 1960. It was staunchly opposed to the bi-lingual Bill put forward by theChief Minister in the Assam Assembly, which sought to give recognition to Bengali as the second language of the state. This call by the *Sabha* was preceded and followed by widespread violence which is often referred to as the language riots. The growing political role of the *Sabha* also caught the attention of the Government during the time of intense agitation of the Assam Movement. Although the *Sabha* had always identified itself to be the cultural and literary panel that consistently sought the promotion of the Assamese language during the 1975-89 campaign for ending illegal infiltration into Assam, the *Sabha* gave up its official nonpoliticalposture and formally became part of the *Gana Sangram Parishad* (Organization for People's Struggles). This open declaration strained the relationship between the sitting government and the *Sabha* who were receiving patronage from the state till then (Baruah 1999). The Sahitya Sabha became an active partaker in political activities in the decade of the 1980s in Assam.

The *Sabha,* however, harbored a chauvinist attitude towards adopting the Assmaese language. The educated elite leadership of the Sabha was pressing for the protection of Assamese so much so that they overlooked the many hills and plains Tribal communities living in the region, who did not necessarily speak

Assamese as their mother language. The execution of a fierce cultural nationalism drove the hill tribes to form a separate homeland in Meghalaya for themselves, noted Baruah (2005). Within what remained of Assam, the Bodo tribe also began outrightly rejecting the forced Assamese cultural assimilation and began asserting their identity as a separate nation. In the post-independenceperiod thus, what authors like Sanjib Baruah (2005)call, sub-nationalist tendencies had begun expanding horizontally within Assam.Thusidentity and cultural assertion took centre stage in the political narrative of modern Assam. The *Sabha's* chauvinist stand on Assamese language and identity in the 1960s and 1970s and the emergence of the middle class among the plains tribal speeded up the process of cultural and ideological separation of a sizeable section of the plains tribal from the Assamese mainstream. As it occurred, the Bodo, Mishing and Karbi ethnic communities did not want to live within the political boundaries of Assam. The newly emerging middle class within the ethnic communities feared that their identity would submerge in the expansion of Assamese nationalism, which was popularized as *Jatiyotabad*. In confrontation with this fear, many literary and cultural organizations of these communities were instituted which came in direct opposition to the Sahitya Sabha's chauvinistic stance. The Assamese elite wanted to retain its political, social and cultural hegemony over Assam under the garb of language and cultural standardization, however, this chauvinist attitude adopted by the Sabha led to various reactionary organizations to emerge to challenge the cultural hegemonisation drive led by theAxom Sahitya Sabha. All through the 1950s, 1960 and 1970 the *Sabha* reiterated that all the hills and plains must be assimilated with the composite 'Axomiya' social and cultural milieu. The Assam Sahitya Sabha had become the signatory of the Assam Accord by being a part of All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP).

It was clause 6 in the Assam Accord[3] that struck a nerve with the Bodos. Clause 6 identified that the signing of the Accord would safeguard and protect the cultural identity of the 'Assamese' people. This protection of the Assamese cultural identity was seen as a threat by the Bodos and other ethnic communities who saw

this as an imposition of the Assamese culture on them. As Baruah (1991) had identified, a majority section of the Bodosbelieved that due to the unequal assimilation into the Assamese culture, there was a rising fear that their ethnic culture would get subsumed within this tide of 'Assamesization'.

The Sahitya Sabha has been instrumental in mobilizing public opinion regarding a series of demands that had major public concerns. First was the demand for a refinery in Assam in 1956. Thenthe demandfor the official recognition of Assamese as the official language in then-undivided Assam. As Misra (1984) notes the language movements of 1960, as it is popularly known, crystallized the role of the Sahitya Sabha as the only socio-cultural body that looked after the Assamese-speaking population in the Brahmaputra valley. The Sahitya Sabha's vague standpoint regarding the composite Assamese culture had very well shown that its sphere of influence and concern was narrow. As a departure from its earlier stance, it was only from around the 20th century onwards that the *Sabha* made a conscious effort to recognize other ethnic cultures within Assam.

Cultural Elites and Politics Of Exclusion

The opinion of the educated, upper-caste, middle-class Assamese reflected in all the important cultural and political developments in Assam. Although characteristically, the Assam Association became an openly political organization over time, the *Sahitya Sabha* tried to maintain its non-political stance. Even at a time when it openly supported the Assam movement, it held its cultural ground and established itself as backing the movement from a cultural standpoint. However, the transformation of these socio-cultural organizations into vocal political mouthpieces of Assam needs pertinent analysis because it reflects the political trajectory of the educated, upper-caste, middle class in Assam

Both the Assam Association and the Axom Sahitya Sabha drew their members from the educated middle class who were vocal participants in the regional imagining of Assam. The leadership of these organizations often went into the hands of a literati, who were small in numbers but they took it upon

themselves to be the vanguard of progress and development of the Assam and its culture. The middle-class leadership was characteristically different from the pre-colonial aristocratic leadership because they were capable of mobilizing all sections of the society into a common goal of protecting Assamese nationality. The public petitions and opinionpieces that the members of these organizations took were actively read, heard and followed across all sections of the society and they were able to capture the sentiments of the masses. The masses saw the literati as the spokespersons for the people. The middle-class Assamese literati, that led the Axom Sahitya Sabha, had a mass appeal. The Assam Association as well as the Sahitya Sabha characteristically functioned as elite clubs. They based their foundations purely on literary and cultural grounds but they eventually encompassedpolitical concerns like the development, preservation and protection of the Assamese cultural identity in its agenda. These organizations deeply impacted the socio-political flair of the state by functioning as civil society groups butalso playing active roles as political advocates for society. These organizationson many occasions ceased to be merely cultural organizations; they had strong links to the state, at times gaining state patronage and influencing political decisions. These organizations played a crucial role in transforming the political discourse of the region, moving it from a state of stagnation to one characterized by active and increasingly disruptive political engagement. The Axom Sahitya Sabha's efforts to raise social and political awareness among the masses were instrumental in providing momentum to the Assam movement. The character of these organizations wasdefined by the members who it constituted of. This group of literary elites often came to be identified as public intellectuals or the literati or *Buddhijibi* in colloquial Assamese. The Assam Association as well the AxomSahitya Sabha gave the masses an organizational capacity, which saw an impactful culmination in the scale of the Assam Movement.

Although the Sahitya Sabha had mass appeal, it was evident that the power to control the narrative remained with a select few. The attitude of the Sahitya Sabha towards the protection of Assamese was that of a chauvinist cultural nationalism, which was criticized on many fronts- one being that the Sahitya Sabha was an elitist organization, as Gohain (1973) had noted. This critique was true to

some extend because the Sabha reflected the values and premises of the class it represented, which was a small-numbered educated, middle-class, upper-caste elite. The middle class was still a small social group but this class became the mouth piece for the whole of Assam and inadvertently became the cause of fuellingsub-nationalist tendencies in Assam. These organizations operated as exclusive groups, selectively opening access to individuals. Particular educational qualifications, and specific cultural capital, were essential to be a part of these organizations formally and there was an open favouring of an intellectual bent of mind and social and national awareness of some kind.

A section of the educated elite also turned orthodox in their approach and espoused Hindu conservatism. Educated individuals began commenting and advocating for practices and social ideology that imitated the caste society of Bengal in a way, which came to be reflected in the way they identified the role of women in the household. Sharma (2014) notes that essays such as "*GhoinirKartabya o Strisiksha"* (A Wife's Duties and Women's Education) and "*Tirotar Bon Ki"* (What are a Woman's Duties?) written by intellectuals like Ratneswar Mahanta and Boli Narayan Bora in the Assamese periodicals were read widely in middle-class households and created new ideals for the Assamese women. The Sabha harboured a chauvinist attitude towards adopting the Assamese language. The leadership of the Sabha while pressing for protection of the 'Assamese' culture and language overlooked the many ethnic communities living in the region, who did not necessarily identify with the Assamese language spoken by this middle class as their language. The cause of working for the Assamese emerged as a question within the politics of the region when language standardization was demanded by the Sahitya Sabha. The hill tribes of erstwhile Assam and the Bengali population of Cachar district protested against the arbitrary imposition of the Assamese language. From then on the assertion of separate identity from the Assamese began to spread prolifically; first among the hill tribes and later among the plains tribes. The Sahitya Sabha's chauvinist stand on the Assamese language speeded up the desire for separation of a sizable section of the plains Tribe from the Assamese mainstream. The Bodo, Mishing, and Karbis did not want to live within the political boundaries of Assam, fearing that their

history, culture, and identity would submerge in the expansion of Assamese nationalism. As a result, many literary and cultural organizations of these communities were instituted which came in direct opposition to the Sahitya Sabha's stance. The Assamese elite middle class had wanted to retain its political, social, and cultural hegemony over Assam under the garb of language and cultural standardization. However, this chauvinist attitude turned on the association and various reactionary organizations emerged to challenge the *Axom Sahitya Sabha.* Strong opposition to the dominant Assamese middle class's standardizing tendencies came from the Bodos.

The Sahitya Sabha's staunch language policy cemented the ethnic divisions among the people of the region. Intense politicization and mobilization took place among the ethnic groups which came to define the modern reconfigurations of politics in Assam in the 20th century. The formation of the Bodo Sahitya sabha in 1952 was a result of the rising political consciousness among the Bodos. The consolidation for a separate Bodo identity began to be played out in the form of the Tribal League. This consolidation of the Bodo identity was in response to the role of larger processes of identity formation among the composite Assamese society.With the emergence of a socially aware, literati class among the Bodo and Mishing ethnic groups, the Sahitya Sabha faced its first equal opposition which had the potential to influence the masses. This forced the institutions to rethink their standpoint and politics. Among the Bodos, individuals like Kalicharan Brahma and Rupnath Brahma were the very first individuals trying to rearticulate the traditional beliefs of the Bodos and inculcate the importance of education for progress and self-representation. The creation of institutions such as the Brahma Boarding for male students and the Bodo Club was important for creating social and political consciousness among the newer generations (Kalita, 2011). The Bodo club acted as the foundation for the Bodo Sahitya Sabha which was formed in 1952. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha was an important factor in driving the Bodoland movement forward with the launch of the Bodo script movement where they demanded the Roman script for the Bodo language during 1974-75. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha was also at the forefront of introducing the Bodo language at the primary and secondary educational levels. This Bodo Sahitya Sabha was actively

supported by the All Bodo Students Union, a non-political student organization formed in 1967, mirroring the All Assam Students Union. It can be inferred that the leadership of the Bodoland movement identified with the leadership of the Assam movement as the reference group. The educated Bodo individuals actively participated in organizations like the Bodo ChattraSanmillan, The Tribal league, and the All Bodo Students Union and were at the forefront of advocating for a separate Bodo ethnic identity. It was through the formation of their literary and socio-cultural organizations that the Bodo community was able to cement their political agency.

Conclusion :

The newly consolidated middle class of the nineteenth century in Assam was an important section that brought about eventful social and political changes in the region. These middleclass, upper caste, and elite organized themselves into formal associations that formed the institutional foundations and were used as a platform from which many decisions were taken, that affected the political activity in the region. These organizations reflected the aspirations and ideologies of the class it represented, which excluded many issues and concerns of the hills and plains tribal communities residing in the region. The exclusionary politics played by the educated elite in Assam, point to a larger question of how elite groups seek to seek to control knowledge in society. The educated elites in Assam had access to most of the significant resources- political, economic, social, cultural and as well as knowledge capital. It was in this language of exclusion that Assam saw its political story being played out. These organizations were largely dominated by a group of elites-and in the context of Assam, it was the cultural and the intellectual middle class, upper caste elites who were responsible for generating the political discourse in Assam. The upper caste, Assamese-speaking individuals who were educated in English became the dominant fraction of the middle class in the nineteenth century in Assam. The developments in 18th and nineteenth century Assam- the emergence of newspapers and magazines and associations like the Axom Sahitya Sabha, created a platform for the educated upper caste Assamese individuals to occupy prominent roles in the social and cultural life of Assam, often

establishing favourable links with the dominant intelligentsia outside Assam as well. Cultural elites occupy a social position in a relational structure, even when they do not directly rule, they influence, and often shape, power politics, economic processes as well as normative and aesthetic frames of everyday social lives. Since politics in the region had derived from institutions that were not a part of the state, it was the cultural organizations which were the active drivers of instituting politics in the region. They often excluded groups and aspirations of people who did not fall within their idea of an Assamese Jati. Elite social clubs thus play important roles in shaping political activity. These organizations play a crucial role in social movements and provide platforms for individuals to come together and organize for political action. Cultural Elites in a society use these exclusive platforms to advance their political agendas. The Assam Association and the Ahom Sahitya Sabha served as spaces for the upper caste, middle-class educated elites in Assam to shape the political discourse in Assam, the exclusive character of which shaped the consequent trajectory of politics in the region.

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WOMEN'S EFFORT TO RESIST AGAINST PATRIARCHY AND POVERTY : A TALE FROM AMRAPARI (WE CAN)

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is based on the study of women's collective effort to fight against the twin structural violence of society: patriarchy and poverty. It revolves around the stories and struggle of the women associated with Amrapari and their attempt to use Amrapari as a space to enhance their socio-economic status in society. Amrapari is a registered cooperative society situated inBarpeta district of Assam. It tries to reinvent the art of 'ketha making' a unique traditional art of embroidery and stitching, mostly done by the minority women folk of the Barpeta district of Assam. Amraparistrives to unite rural women across the communities to engage in the making of that by upgrading their traditional skills and subsequently helping them sell their products globally. Poverty and patriarchy are the two biggest challenges witnessed by women for decades. Therefore 'Amrapari' can be seen as a light of hope for the women to resist the exploitation and deprivation done to women for generations. The present research paper is based on a focused group discussion with

different in-depth questions among the women of the Amrapari. The paper tries to deal with the two primary objectives: a) How Amrapari is helping women to resist patriarchy and poverty. b) How Amrapari has been able to reinvent the forgotten traditional skill of making ketha?

Keywords : Women, Patriarchy, Poverty, Ketha, Indigenous Knowledge.

Introduction

The ideological weight of hierarchy and power, the construction of spaces of binary oppositions, and the dynamics of superiority and inferiority cross every realm of human experience and system of possibilities. The hierarchical power relations manifest in existing societal structures, where the subaltern and subordinate are inscribed and reinscribed in the society. Culture, societal relationships, diverse institutions including family, education and religion, literature, sexuality- all bear the imprint of patriarchal hegemony and subjugation. The word "patriarchy" literally means the rule of the father or the 'patriarch' and originally it was used to describe a specific type of male-dominated family – the large household of the patriarch which included women, junior men, children, slaves, and, domestic servants all under the dominant rule of the male. Now it is used more generally to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women and, to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in several ways(Bhasin,1993).Patriarchy is thus the rule of the father or the powerful male head of a social unit over all women in the family and also over younger socially and economically subordinate males. The patriarch is typically a societal elder who has legitimate power over others in the social unit. According to Sylvia Walby patriarchy is the social structure and practices where men dominate, oppress and, exploit women. The concept of patriarchy is central to the understanding of the society (Walby,1990).Marxist feminism defines patriarchy as the development of

private property which is reinforced by the force of capitalism. Marxist feminists explained women's subordination in economic terms. According to radical feminists, patriarchy preceded private property. They believe that the original and basic contradiction is between sexes and not between economic classes (Bhasin 1993). Patriarchy is not simply hierarchical but a hierarchy in which particular people fill particular places(Hartmann, 1981). The ideology of patriarchy tends to reinforce an already entrenched system of exploitation.

The experiences of patriarchy are not even and common everywhere, it is contextual and situational. The everyday experience of patriarchy is different from woman to woman. The present paper tries to examine the role of *Amrapari*(We Can), which is a collective rural local enterprise consisting of rural artisans situated in the Barpeta district of Assam. The primary objective behind forming *Amrapari* is to develop itself as the agency of change to resist the forces of patriarchy and poverty. Women of *Amrapari* consist of both Hindu and Muslim communities mostly from char-chapori areas of the district. Women of both communities have been using *Amrapari* as a space to fight against the oppression of patriarchy.The paper tries to understand the experiences of women associated with *Amrapari*through the lens of intersectional feminism. Intersectional feminism is the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination or discrimination. It explains how the different power structures interact in the lives of the women. Factors such as race, class and gender influence each other and intersect both. Here in the case of the char women of *Amrapari* besides their identity as women, their socio-cultural position, and economic situations also influence their experiences with patriarchy and poverty. Oppression cannot be seen or understood as something that exists in the same manner for everybody. There are layers to it that overlap and intersect and this is precisely what intersectional feminism tries to explain. Therefore the present research paper is an attempt to understand the multilayer experiences of patriarchy and women's fight against poverty and patriarchy through their own effort and collective voice called *Amrapari.*

Knowing the unknown:*Amrapari*

Amrapari is a rural women's artisan's collective effort in the Char-Chapori areas (Riverine Island) of Barpeta district of Assam. The Brahmaputra and other rivers of Assam are replete with numerous sandbars, which are locally called chars. Chars are home to nearly 10 per cent population of Assam. The Brahmaputra is an extremely braided river. An enormous volume of sand and silt flows with the water and gets deposited on river banks and the river bed. Almond-shaped river islands are formed out of these alluvium deposits (Chakraborty, 2012). These sandbars born from silt deposits of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries are locally known as chars and chaporis. In the Assamese language, the two different words chars and chaporis sometimes appear as a single compound word char-chapori. Chars are river islands, while chaporis could be river islands or land masses formed by silt deposits on river banks (Kumar and Das,2019). Many villages of the Barpeta district of Assam are surrounded by river islands known as 'Char-Chapori'. These villages are the worst affected by floods and erosion yearly, making their settlement impermanent and highly volatile. Life of the char dwellers is not easy as they have to adjust their lives with frequent erosion, flood and displacement. The process of inhabitation in chars is intimately linked to the history of British rule in Assam. Most chars, especially those in western Assam, are inhabited by Bengali-speaking Muslims. The migration of peasants from East Bengal started in the late nineteenth century and picked up in the early twentieth century, especially after 1905 when Bengal was partitioned and Assam was merged with East Bengal. This was the economic imperative of the colonial state to maximize revenue generation from land. This interest shaped the colonial state's policy of settling East Bengali migrant peasants, who were mostly Muslims, in sparsely populated flood-prone zones (Das &Saikia, 2011). More than a hundred years later, the lasting impression of the colonial policy is present in terms of neglect and backwardness of char dwellers. Many such things characterize the lives of char dwellers, besides the channels of the Brahmaputra, which separate the chars from the rest of Assam—which is considered to be a neglected territory of the Indian republic. Located at the margin

of the margin, chars have registered a lackluster record of human development. The Assam Human Development Report 2014 estimated that char areas have the highest multidimensional poverty among all regions of the state (GoA, 2016). Economic backwardness limits char dwellers' livelihood options. Severe floods adversely affect char areas and further restrict their economic opportunities. When the char residents migrate to mainland Assam, they face discrimination(Chakraborty, 2012).Internally displaced char dwellers are worst affected due to land and soil erosion. These people whose lives have no permanency are left with dislocated, ruptured and fragmented memories. Forced to move to other parts of the state, these people are often termed illegal immigrants from a neighbouring country.

Historic subjugation, deprivation and the patriarchal power structure of the society force many char-chapori women to lead deplorable lives. It is to bring change in the lives of women of char-chapori areas, *that Amrapari* started to work under the leadership of Manjuwara Mullahwho is a local social activist of Barpeta district of Assam.*Amrapari* began its journey from Rupkuchi village, located between the Beki and Chaulkhowa rivers. Initially, five women became a part of the group. They were daily wage labourers and also started working for *Amrapari.*Manjuwara herself started by procuring raw materials (e.g., fabric, embroidery thread, and sewing supplies) and provided basic training to the five women. Now it has included 140 women artisans who are working for *Amrapari* in three different units: Firstly for Weaving, Secondly for Designing and third group works for Tailoring. Here the designing for different garments including Kethasis done by the women from char-chapori areas. It is now a registered cooperative society. It has been able to expand its business all over the world and earn good revenue also giving financial security to women of different groups and ages.

Dare to Dream: Story of the Manjuwara Mullah

Manjuwara Mullah hails from Khandkarpara village in the Char area of Barpeta district of Assam. Manjuwara belongs to the Mia community and has witnessed different forms of gender discrimination and women's oppression right

from a young age. Since her young age,she has been observing the women's subordination in the society. It is due to rigid gender norms, lack of education, child marriage, lack of knowledge on reproductive health, domestic violence etc all made the lives of the women of the Miya community marginalized. She had to cross through all these patriarchic rules of the society for which she could only finish her studies till graduation and was forced to get married. But her journey of hardship did not end here, although she joined a private company in Guwahati for work, she had to discontinue her work due to the workplace harassment done against her. '*I received the best employer award, but suddenly after my pregnancy things changed, I was not capable enough according to the office authority, and although I took my child into office and continued to work in that condition, they forced me to resign'* said Manjuwara. Returning home, she started building her confidence and began her work with her husband and the JharFoundation for the welfare of the women of the char-chapori areas of Barpeta district. Manjuwara started working to organize awareness campaigns for health rights and social-political rights of women of char-chapori areas. She is also vocal against child marriage, supporting women in education and fighting for equal wage pay. However, it was in 2020, that she started realizing that she needed to integrate women to bring real changes in their lives. The year 2020 was marked by the horror of the COVID-19 pandemic and the situation worsened with recurrent floods and livelihood insecurity battles among the many dwellers of char-chapori areas. The COVID-19 pandemic and flood made the lives of the women of char-chapori more tough and challenging. Many of them were battling food scarcity and witnessingdomestic violence which has increased during lockdown in covid-19 pandemic period. A devastating flood has displaced many peoplefrom their places. Moreover,pregnant women lactating women, adolescent girls, and disabled people were facing serious challenges as they had to share their living spaces with both males and animals during the flood time and continue to live in inhumane conditions. Manjuwara has provided every possible help to this section of women but she led a distressful life during that period because her help was unable to

provide long-term economic security to women. She felt that until the women get economic security they cannot get rid of patriarchal domination. It was in 2020 that she started embroidering a plain white bed sheet with a floral design only to cope with the stress. When she put her bed sheet on a social media platform she started getting huge appreciation for her work. This forgotten art of 'ketha making' got huge responses from people across different sections of society. *'That is the time when the idea generated my mind for the possibility of establishing a women's self help group and collective to stitch and sell khetas. I shared this idea with women in several chars and was met with unequivocal enthusiasm. I felt that if I could make this ketha , why not these women who already possess this traditional knowledge of making ketha. That was the beginning of our collective Amrapari'* narrated the story of the beginning of *Amrapari* by Manjuwara Mullah. *Amrapari* has got Rs 10lakhs from selling these ketha, and also started making masks for different hospitals and organizations. Now it has been successfully generating revenues and giving financial security to the women of cahr-chapori areas. Women have been preparing not only Ketha, but also reusable sanitary pads, kurtas, bags, sarees etc. '*We are now making reusable sanitary pads. In our society where women are struggling to have sanitary pads during their menstruating days, these reusable pads will help women to use them for a maximum of one year. These pads are made of cloths and after using one can reuse them by cleaning and drying them'*, said Manjuwara Mullah.

While asked about the challenges Manjuwara Mullah faces as a woman entrepreneur, she replied *'Making Ketha from very grassroots level to selling it to the market is a huge challenge, apart from that being a single parent I have to manage from household to the business, sometimes I felt that if I were a man I would not have to carry the household work which I am doing presently'* said Mnajuwara. Her views deeply reflect despite being an entrepreneur she is also unable to come out of the rigid gendered division of work and has to go through the public/private dichotomy of work. *'Once I attended a programme outside my home station wearing a jeans t-shirt but due to the sudden health*

issues of my father I had to come back, but my family members and other members of the society were not allowed to see my father, because I was wearing jeans t-shirt. I had to change my dress wearing a salwar suit and covering my head, only then I was allowed to see my father'. It still shows the gendered practices that restrict and limit the personal freedom and choice of many women like Manjuwara. It shows how even though she becomes a well-knownentrepreneur and leader, sometimes it becomes challenging for her to break the patriarchal norms of society. She is optimistic and hoping to bring change in the society. *Amrapari* is not just a financial enterprise; it is more beyond that. It is the women artisans' collective effort to live their dreams and stitch the threads of empowerment. Patriarchy normalizes the subordination of women. The patriarchal system provides self–definitions and norms for women. These social norms restrict the social roles of women as mothers and wives. The story of Manjuwara manifests her efforts to resist everyday sites of patriarchy.

Resistance against Poverty

Experiences of poverty cannot be homogenous; it is a heterogeneous and linked with other factors. Similarly, women of different groups and communities, castes and classesexperience poverty in a varied way. According to Beijing Platform for Action, 1995, Paragraphs 48 and 50, "In the past decade, the number of women living in poverty has increased disproportionately to the number of men, particularly in the developing countries. In addition to economic factors, the rigidity of socially ascribed gender roles and women's limited access to power, education, training and productive resources are also responsible. While poverty affects households as a whole, because of the gender division of labour and responsibilities for household welfare, women bear a disproportionate burden, attempting to manage household consumption and production under conditions of increasing scarcity."This unequal experience of poverty by women has led to the development of the phenomenoncalled, 'feminization of poverty'. 'Feminization of poverty' has been referred to as an attempt to analyze poverty from the gender perspective. The

term "Feminization of Poverty" was used to describe the poor low-income female-headed households in the United States. Women's vulnerability to poverty is associated with the existence of gender inequality in household resource allocations and decision-making, in public policies and legal codes. Women are more prone to poverty due to lack of property rights in land or access to employment, lower wages, illiteracy, and early marriage and childbearing, unpaid domestic and care work. Women are victims of poverty in three ways, first, gender inequalities. Secondly, women work for longer hours than men and earn less. Finally, women face difficulties in extricating themselves out of poverty is decided by cultural, legal and labour market trends. Often the term 'feminization of poverty' is used to mean an increase in poverty due to gender inequalities. The phenomenon of feminized poverty extends beyond the economic domains of income and material needs to the core of individual and family life. The 'feminization of poverty' is linked with the 'feminization of household headship'. Women-headed households are the 'poorest of the poor' and female household headship transmits poverty to children ('inter-generational transmission of disadvantage').(Bradshaw, Chant and Linneker,2017). In this context, the effort of *'Amrapari'* can be seen as a modest attempt to struggle against the 'feminization of poverty'.

Amrapari as a collective effort of rural women artisans promotes gender justice via women's self determination, dignity, and sustainable livelihoods in Miya communities primarily from the Char-chapori areas of Barpeta district. This is primarily accomplished through the creation of self-help groups of women artisans who have revived a centuries-old legacy of quilt making. Women who relied on daily wages (e.g., those who work in fisheries, agricultural work, brick kilns, etc.) suddenly found themselves out of work during covid-19 pandemic and without any means to secure food for their families. *Amrapari* was a ray of hope for many women living in the char-chapori areas of Barpeta district. *'We used to provide relief materials to the women, food, and clothes including sanitary pads to the women in char areas. But gradually women of the char areas requested me to provide long-term economic security, instead of relief materials, which*

instigated me to think about starting Amrapari to help them to fight against poverty, narrated Manjuwara Mullah. Women in char areas experience poverty more intensely than the women living in rural or urban areas of Assam. Grinding poverty and poor socio-economic indicators characterize char areas. Char dwellers of Western Assam including the Barpeta district of Assam are mostly inhabited by Muslim people. In the eastern part of the state, several tribal groups, and riverine communities like the kaibartas and also Nepali grazers have been dwelling on chars. Char areas are deprived of education, health facilities and most importantly their land. Due to frequent floods and land erosion, char dwellers have been experiencing severe land loss, which subsequently pushes them to a state of marginalization and poverty. Experiences of poverty and communal violence which erupted in different periods due to the issue of illegal immigration, and perceptions of mainstream communities towards Muslim char dwellers of Assam as outsiders or illegal immigrantshave made their lives not only insecure but also uncertain. The precarious economic condition is made worse by the uncertainties wrought by the rivers. According to one study of chars of Barpeta district, during the period 1989–1998,

'[W]hen there was no high-intensity flood in Assam, 45 per cent of the total households were affected and 51 per cent of the total land was lost by the surveyed char households. A similar study over 25 years (1980–2004) in the Beki River, a tributary of Brahmaputra in Barpeta district reveals that 77 per cent of the surveyed households suffered due to land erosion and 94 per cent of their land was lost.' (Chakraborty, 2012, p. 23).

These damages that the chars suffer have to be seen in the context of the high degree of flood incidents in the state. Devastations wrought by seasonal floods and soil erosion are experienced by Assam almost regularly. Damages caused to crops, cattle, houses and utilities between 1953 and 1995 was '4,400 crore as per Shukla Commission, 1997 (Goyari, 2005). The estimated flood-prone area in the state was 31.5 lakh hectares or as much as 92.6 per cent of the cultivated land

in 1992–1993. In the period from 1990 to 2008, every year, 62 sq. km of land (excluding forest land) was lost due to erosion (Ahmed, 2016).It also displaces the inhabitants of the Chars almost every year forcing the population to shift with all their belongings. Thus the Chars in Assam contribute the highest Internally Displaced Population of the state. Women suffer most in this forced displacement due to natural causes in Chars of Brahmaputra in Assam.

This dreadful socio-economic condition of char dwellers made the women's lives more marginalized. Women in the char areas of Assam face unique problems and challenges amidst the prevailing disparities. Apart from the daily struggle of survival in the geographically most hostile terrain, the women in Chars of the Brahmaputra endure additional burdens both from the society within and from the state as well since various programmes and initiatives for their empowerment, health, nutrition, education, and financial reliance do not reach these areas. A survey conducted by the Directorate of Char Areas Development (DCAD), Govt. of Assam in 2002-03 shows that about 81% of the males and 92% of females in Chars of the state are illiterate. In Barpeta district, which has the highest numbers of permanent and semi-permanent Chars the educational status of Char women has no difference. Gender inequality, discrimination, deprivation and violence are very common amongst the women of Char areas of Assam.The biggest burden that the women in Chars in Assam carry is early marriage and frequent and high childbirth (Ahmed,2016). These experiences of char-chapori women can be seen through an intersectionality framework. Intersectionality scholars and activistsargue that women's experience is also shaped by privileges and disadvantages stemming from other social groups that they are part of. Women of char areas of the Barpeta district are experiencing systematic power differences stemming from multiple identities such as gender, class, religious and social identity, and geographical and social locations which intersect and jointly impact women's experiences. Char women bear the burden of multiple subordinate identities which double the sufferings for them. It shows that oppression of the women in all circumstances must be understood and overlapping and layered.

Amidst all these difficulties and challenges *Amrapari* allows the women of char areas of Assam to earn and assure a sense of financial security. Most of the women artisans associated with *Amrapari* are agricultural labourers, small fishing net makers or homemakers. Several of them are also D-voters (sometimes also referred to as Dubious voters or Doubtful voters is a category of voters in Assam who are disenfranchised by the government on the account of their alleged lack of proper citizenship credentials) and facing litigation to prove their Indian citizenship.The condition of charwomen can be related to Dalit women. Many feminist scholars have narrated about the condition of Dalit women in their writings. Char women's socio-economic condition is reflexive of Dalit women who can be categorized as, 'downtrodden amongst the downtrodden' (Omvedt,1979). Institutional patriarchy, feminization of poverty, and structural violence acted as 'Thrice burdened' for the char-chapori women.

For the women of *Amrapari*, the Ketha-making work brought them together and they extended support to each other as a group and fostered deep solidarity(Baruah, 2021). Before *Amrapari's*intervention, these women who were engaged in different daily wage-earning jobs had to face gender-based discrimination in the workplace. They were paid less than their male counterparts for the same type of work. *Amrapari* is a platform that provides them the opportunity to earn a modest income in an environment that is free from gender-baseddiscrimination (Baruah,2021).Manjuwara notes a decrease in domestic violence in the places where Amrapari has helped with livelihood building. The women of char areas started valuing their skills and it helped them to feel dignified about their work. *'Amrapari gives them financial security it enables them to earn for their families and provides support to them in reclaiming equal status in the household. They no longer stand silently before violence. Now, their husbands sometimes help with stitching or caring for the children while the women artisan works'*narrated Manjuwara with a sense of joy. '*Amrapari enables me to intervene more effectively on the ground and revive women's traditional skills. It will take time to break deep-rooted patriarchal and economic patterns.*

Furthermore, a highly mechanized market is also a challenge' said Manju. Her desire to design Katha and the changes she sees in women's lives stimulates her work with hope and determination (Agarwal, 2022).

'Before Amrapari came into our life, we were leading a life without any aim and hope. We the women of char areas have been witnessing a lot of struggles in our daily lives. After joining Amrpari our life has undergone a huge transformation. Now when we sit with five or six women together, we generally talk about how our life used to be; now we don't have any reason to be sad. When our children asked for only Rs 5 to spend on schools, we couldn't help them and couldn't control our tears by seeing our helpless condition. We couldn't manage Rs5; being women our condition was more deplorable as our lives were dependent on the income of men in our family. Now Amrapari has given us this scope for earning, we can not only help us our family but also help ourselves' said InuwaraKahtun a woman artisan. *Amrapari* is not only a rural women artisans group, it also conducts regular programmes and awareness camps on women's health rights, reproductive rights, issues on domestic violence, child marriage and women's maternal mortality issues etc. Amidst all the darkness in the lives of char-chapori women, *Amrapari* is a source of light for them. It is committed to elevating women's labour. It also creates space for women's stories where women's stories are shared, heard and received with dignity, respect and compassion. It honours their struggle, stories and experiences. Women's retelling of stories catalyzes space of resistance and empowerment.

Forgotten Art: Making Women's Work Visible

Amrapari is not just a collective effort of the women artisans to fight against poverty and patriarchy but also an attempt to revive the traditional knowledge of women.Katha embroidery stitching—a unique embroidery artwork of the community, initiated by *Amrapari*. Womenfolk of the Miya community

traditionally have unique expertise in Katha stitching with different embroidery designs and they make traditional quilts with the stitch to use at home. *Amrapari* came forward to engage them in making wide-ranging products upgrading their traditional skill and subsequently linking them to the market to sell their finished products.Traditionally, Ketha making was considered a dignified skill for women who would stitch during their leisure time and varieties of design, patchwork and motifs were innovated. Threads of several colours were used aesthetically. To market the products, *Amrapari* started to publicize its Ketha works through social media platforms in October 2020. Within a short period, it gained popularity and support. Traditional designs along with a contemporary pattern are used to stitch Amrapari'sKetha [Cotton quilt]. These are century-old designs and were used by women wearing old cotton clothes. Once made, it was used solely for family members or gift items for close relations or simply as a decorative piece. Manju states, *"We continue to expand our repertoire of designs, patterns and colours. For a group of 5-6 women, it takes 5-6 days to stitch a kethaapart from doing all their household work and other caregiving responsibilities."* She adds that the work speaks for itself, and their dreams are beautifully woven as Ketha stitches by the hands of these artisans. Ketha is an old indigenous art form originating in Bengal and is slowly emerging again from the edge of extinction. It is said to be over 1000 years old and has been mentioned in Vedic and pre-Vedic literature. Ketha originated as an art form where stories (katha) of the villages and the people were woven on cloth. It is a new source of livelihood for thousands of rural women and men. This indigenous art form would have died if not for the efforts of a few individuals who were keen to revive and sustain it (Roy, 2020).Ketha may be most closely described as layers of patched old clothes stitched with a pattern of stitching called 'running stitch' exclusively by the respective household ladies. The making of aketha or the art of stitching has remained an ethnic household art of Bengal including Bangladesh and also in Assam and Odisha. This stitching of Ketha is a unique traditional process of reusing old, torn, or unusable clothes of the house like sarees, dhoti, bed sheets etc primarily used for wrapping

newborn babies. However, ketha are also used for multipurpose and gradually evolved with different forms of art and embroidery and it can be used both in summer and winter as a lightweight blanket. *Amrapari* has taken the initiative to protect and promote this ethnic art and reinvent ketha patches as designer motifs on sarees, kurtas, apparel or other garments. Women are the repository of traditional knowledge which is an undeniable fact. However, due to the patriarchal nature of society, the traditional knowledge of women remains unrecognized and unrewarded. Women are entrusted with the task of the custodians of practising and preserving the unique traditions of their respective communities. The gender roles assigned to women as the caretaker of the household responsibilities subsequently made women learn many traditional skills and these skills are transmitted from mother to daughter. In this context, the art of making kethacan also be called a traditional skill in which women folk are engaged mainly. Due to socialization,women were always assigned to the private sphere that is the domestic sphere. This societal division of the public and private spheres enables women to learn such traditional skills related to weaving, and food processing and also helps them to learn medicinal plants and their uses. In that case, women became experts in their fields and were able to maintain their identities. Therefore*Amrapari* can be seen as a strategy to use women's expertise and skills, which has been harnessed and made as a primary tool for the empowerment of women and their self-sufficiency. Due to the patriarchal power structure in society, the household work of the women is never given importance. But *Amrapari* has given not only a scope to develop the work of the women but also made the invisible work of women visible. This traditional art of Kethastitch is well etched into the hands, hearts and memories of women of this region of Assam. This art is a traditional knowledge of women passed through different generations. But as it become the norm of the patriarchal society to neglect the work of women, this art has also been neglected and submerged. Earlier this art of practisingkethastitching has been considered as the work of women to be done by women in their leisure time which hardly has any market value and is therefore not acknowledged as a very

valuable skill that women hold with them. However, their work has gained market value and it also provides them self-identity with self-confidence with the help of *Amrapari.*

Concluding Observation

Women in the patriarchal society are subjugated due to the structure of patriarchal forces, gender discrimination and exploitation of poverty. All these forces affect women in different layers. Char- Chapori women have gone through multiple layers of oppression emerging from varied sources. The shared experiences of the identity as women, social stigmatization as char women, difficult geographical terrain, poor socio-economic condition, etctogetherly shaped their collective effort against the force of patriarchy and poverty. *Amrapari* has made the work of women visible and enables them to claim access to decision-making and equally giving them financial security. Since its inception, it has been trying to secure gender justice, self-reliance and self-determination, economic security and sustainable livelihood for women. It has been working as a platform to reflect women's skills, build their self-confidence, earn self-respect and ensure women's empowerment through action.

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THE TALE OF COEXISTENCE OF HUMANS AND GIBBONS IN BAREKURI: HARMONY, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Prodakshina Singha

ABSTRACT

Western Hoolock Gibbons, redlistedas a 'critically endangered' species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is a rare treat to the eye but not in Barekuri where one could easily take a lookat this rare arboreal species. Surrounded by woodlands, the villages of Barekuriare a thriving habitat of Hoolock Gibbons sharing space with locals; the amicable symbiotic relationship between these tailless frugivorous apes and the Moran communities of the village has altogether changed the age-old notion of Man v/s Wild to Man and Wild. Nevertheless, the Baghjan tragedy and the politics involved thereafter disturbed the peaceful coexistence, resulting in the dwindling of their populations with no goodwill action from the government, administration and forest department has pushed this endangered species to the brink of extinction.Adequate conservation measures incorporating local ecological knowledge the needfor this rare primate to thrive and a 'bottom-up' framework to strike a balance between development and the environment.

Keywords : Ecology, Politics, Hoolock Gibbons, communities, coexistence.

Introduction

Having a rich history and cultural heritage endowed with picturesque landscapes and favourable physiographic, ecological and climatic conditions, the Northeastern region of Indiais unique in providing a plenitude of habitats to various primates. Northeast comes under the Indo-Burma Region, one of the four Biodiversity Hotspots in India as the forests of the region host some of the most unique species in the world and are known for their diverse faunal nature. One such rare species is the Hoolock Gibbon, a 'critically endangered' species (IUCN, 2020) The forests of the Northeast region are the home to the two ape species of the gibbon family: Eastern Hoolock Gibbons (*Hoolockleuconedys*) and Western Hoolock Gibbons (*Hoolockhoolock*) inhabiting different ranges in India. Prominently,Western Hoolock Gibbons has wider ranges than the eastern ones as unlike the latter it is found inalmost all the Northeastern states - Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur, although restricted between the south of the Brahmaputra river and east of the Dibang river (Choudhury, 2001). In Assam, the protected areas where the tree-dwelling apes are found are Dihing-Patkai National Park, Bherjan-Borajan Padumani Wildlife Sanctuary and the Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary; the Hollongapar Sanctuary in Jorhat district of Assam is famous being the first ever protected areas named after a primate species and solely dedicated to the protection of 23 families of Gibbons currently dwelling. Apart from the protected or specific conservation areas having great potential for long-term conservation of this species, the villages of Barekuriare home to Western Hoolock Gibbons. The villages of Barekuri share contiguity with the Bherjan forests which is why Western Hoolock Gibbons are found in these villages and are known for theirpeaceful co-existing with humans playing the role of local conservationists with little government support (Chodhury, 2009).

Barekuri: A home to the endangered species

Barekuri, a cluster of 21 small hamlets is located approximately 7 km away from the commercial town, Tinsukia in the eastern part of Assam. Barekuri's ancient name was 'Hollongaguri'; this name was believed to be derived from the

'Hollong' tree found in large numbers in the area. Barekuri is a historically, socio-culturally and environmentally rich area. The village is inhabited mostly by Moran communities engaged mainlyin primary activities like agriculture, fishing, handloom, bamboo weaving etc. The primary source of attraction in the area is the WesternHoolock Gibbons easily seen wandering in the woodlands of the villages in Barekuri. Differed by their colours where male Gibbons have coal black while female Gibbons have pale, brown-blonde fur, these tree-dwelling apes in Barekuriare a treat in the eyes of tourists. A few centuries ago, the landscape of Barekuri in the upper Brahmaputra valley was abundantly a lush contiguous forest which is now a cluster of 21 villages, a home to humans as well as Western Hoolock Gibbons. Biswas et.al (2023) in their study conducted in the 6 villages of Barekuri namely Purani MotapungVillage, Nau Motapung Village, Dighalhaku, Torajan, Lesenka and Borgaon found a total of 9 groups of Western Hoolock Gibbons. The Gibbons of Barekuriare notably exceptional in the sense that they bear a cordial relationship with the locals.Singing mostly in unison, the pair soulfully utters '*Hook hookhook-on*' sitting and stretching from one branch to another of lofty Hollong and bamboo trees, the emotive calls echoing across long distances and breaking the silence of the forest indicate delimitation of their territory, repelling rivals, guarding their trees against other species or strengthening their bonds with their mates (Bhattacharya,2023) Being frugivorous by nature, the diet of the species requires 51% to 65% of fruits fulfilled either by locals who call them and they physically respond to their namecalling by climbingdown from the treetops to have the local fruits offered like bananas, oranges, guavas, and mangoes and sometimes the Gibbonsget themselves fed on their own on the ripe fruits grown specifically for them while also snacking on leaves and new shoots in the forests and orchards. Almost all the houses havesmall tea gardens, adjacent bamboo groves to their backyards and different kinds of trees,and orchards in their homestead farm, the tea garden sharbouring tall canopy trees and fruit trees abound are favourable to the species. The tea plantations of Barekuri support diverse groups from native plants to mammals, birds, and reptiles as it has been managed agro-ecologically by

the Moran communities so far. Tea agro systems via adopting traditional practices or incorporating organic farming, and native shade trees and thereby maintaining habitat diversity within monocultures practised by the villagers have become complimentary spaces for conservation outside Protected Areas for the primates.

Symbiotic Living: Field notes from Lesenka on the Moran community-Hoolock Gibbon Harmony

In the early winter morning sun in November last year, I ventured with my cousin to the picturesque Lesenka villagein Barekuri, nestled in the heart of Tinsukia. Guided by the familiarity of my cousinthe serene village, we visited the abode of Dipti Bora, an ASHA worker, known to my cousin's mother. As we approached Dipti's residence, the air was filled with the vibrant greenery of Assam's rural landscape. Dipti welcomed us warmlyradiating a sense of community and connection. We sat down for a conversation that unearthed a unique narrative relating the coexistence of Hoolock Gibbons and the Moran community in Barekuri, spanning time immemorial. Dipti shared insights into the harmonious relationship between her community and the Gibbons disclosing that these primates were not merely wild creatures but integral members of their village life, affectionately referred to by adorable pet names that reflected the precious bond between the locals and these rare species. An hour later Dipti's husband kindly offered to guide us to a site near their residence where lofty trees adorned the landscape with their vibrant green warmth. As wewandered through the village, Dipti's husband shared stories of the wildlife; he spoke of a family of Gibbon, four in number that is the gem of the area. Traversing through the lushpath, we then reached a designated spot and soon Dipti's husband called up the playful nicknames amidst the greens and just within a minute the Gibbons swung into view elegantly slanting from the heights of the trees, taking away the bananas, quicklyascending the canopy and having the fruit in peace. Their acrobatic movements coupled with their distinctive 'hook-koo' sounds created acaptivating spectacle.Witnessed the harmonious relationship that had developed over generations, where the community

not only desisted from cutting down trees but actively embraced a role as conservator to safeguard the surrounding ecosystem.Returning to Dipti's abode,Dipticontinues to describe the common practice of feeding the Hoolock Gibbons, a ritual that went beyond mere sustenance to depicta shared existence and mutual respect.

The conversation took a poignant turn as Dipti recounted the aftermath of the Baghjan Disaster, an event that not only affected humans but also left a scar on the Gibbon population; with a heavy heart, she described the sorrow felt by her community as they mourned the loss of a female Gibbon, affectionately named as *'Kolia'*. Despite being a keeper of a rich biodiversity hotspot, Dipti lamented the lack of development in Barekuri by the state. She emphasized the need for sustainable initiatives to preserve the natural habitat of the Hoolock Gibbons, a sentiment echoed by the community's old and youth alike. Dipti spoke of their collective aspiration to develop ecotourism in the area, an endeavour that could simultaneously promote conservation as well as open up economic opportunities for the locals, especially the youths. As we departed from Barekuri, Dipti's words lingered painting a vivid picture of a community united in its commitment to both its humans and primates; the shared responsibility to safeguard nature and biodiversity and the possibilities of boosting conservation that arise when communities become stewards of their natural heritage.

A bond of coexistence and tolerance: Moran communities and the Hoolock Gibbons

Prinates have an integral association with local livelihoods and human cultures primarily inareas where both humans and primates share proximity of ecological space(Kappeler & Schaik, 2006) In the Chinese culture since the era of the Zhou dynasty, Gibbons occupy a significant place and are known by the name 'gentleman'. Liu Zongyuan's notable work 'Essays on the Hateful Monkey Breed' portrayed Gibbons in good light as well-mannered while Macaques as inferior and greedy. The Western Hoolock Gibbons have inhabited the villages of

Barekuri for decades, some even say centuries; existing side by side with humans.The Moran communitieshave along heritage of co-existence with the Gibbons. The primates occupyan important place in the historical and socio-cultural belief of the Moran communities who are simple, kind, nature conscious and have deep reverence towards the rare species. The villagers care, concerned and respect the species are because they consider the Gibbons asan 'integral part of their families' (Kalita, 2018) The Gibbons occupy a significant place in the localculture and even one can find references tothem in the old folk songs and stories in Barekuri. The Forest song or *'Bonoriyageet'* as it is locally referred occupies a prime position in the culture of Moran communities of Barekuri which depicts reverence towards nature, wildlife, society and culture.

The Moran communities have greattolerance towards the primates.John Bowlby, an English Psychologist in his 'attachment theory' gives insights about the universal phenomena of attachment between humans and animals characterized by love, care, sympathy and trust. The villagers solemnly barred the felling of one of the prime roosting trees of Gibbons, namely Dipterocarp us retusus commonly known as 'Hollong'. Even some of the locals owning tea gardens barred themselves from spraying pesticides and herbicides in the tea plantations and are ready to take the economic loss rather than harm the primates or '*Holous'* as they are locally referred to. Such is the level of tolerance of the Moran communities in Barekuri towards the primates. The higher the sense of tolerance, the higher the biodiversity conservation and vice-versa. The tolerance has a history behind it; keeping with the age-old local oral history, it is believed that some centuries ago the forests of Barekuri were in habited by the people of the 'warlike' Moran community who were hunter-gatherers and intolerant to animals and rigidly atheists. Later, a spiritual augur, Shri. Astrobhuj Gukhai preached Hinduism widely in the area and it is believed that under his influence the people left their hunter-gathering lifestyle and transformed their occupation to agriculture. Another local history narrates stories of cordial coexistence between the humans and the Gibbonsa few decades ago when there were no clocks in the village, the emotive call of the

Gibbons used to bean alarm for the school-going students in the morning. Nevertheless, the first physical interaction between humans and Gibbons is believed to have occurred in the early 2000s in one of the villages of Barekuri-Purani Motapung whena young, lone male Gibbon advanced towards an elderly man of the village and the latter affectionately took care until the Gibbon grew-up. Two decades ago, the co-existence was not as strong as today, although the locals didn't harm the Gibbons and their habitat. They were fearful to go close; they used to tie bananas in bamboo groves so that the Gibbons could take them from a distance. The fear has vanished today and locals feed the Gibbons by hand which has become the centre of attention for many tourists who wish to have a look at the Gibbons through a closer lens.

Bridging Generations: Role of Youth in Human-Wildlife Coexistence

The growing human population and the need for settlement into earlier barren unconcernedareas, deep into the wild has resulted in the loss and displacement of wildlife and, the destruction of their natural habitat to make space for human and their greed (Blackwell et.al, 2016). Cases of human-induced mortality of wild species emanating from the justification in the name of self-defence and retaliationhave been increased consequently leading to gradual extinction andposing a threat to the ecosystem (Agarwal & Redford, 2006). The conflicts disrupt the local economies and, the mortality of endangered species thereby harming the developmental efforts in the developing world.Amid such emerging conflicts, the need for Human-Wildlife coexistence stands crucial. Human-Wildlife coexistence denotes the coordinated interplay of the bond between humans and wild creatures in an environment; living harmoniously cutting down the risk of crop raiding, predatory moves, and harm to property and thus promoting an environment of acceptance, tolerance, awareness and reciprocity (Gross et.al, 2021; Konig et.al, 2020; Glikman et.al, 2021). The Moran communities in Barekurisince the past generations; the initiatives led by the youths of the community need to be applauded in striking the balance of coexistence. Coexistence is not static but rather a dynamic

process encompassing talks, negotiation, and willful reciprocity among diverse groups of people carried out consistently. The youthful stewards in a region can be seen with the ultimate possession of traditional ecological knowledge, which holds significance on grounds of crucial understanding of the local surroundings, enhancing the efforts of conservation while encouraging economic ventures sustainably. The case of Barekuri aptly exemplifies the youthful stewards towards maintaining the intrinsic value of ecology and wildlife. The Barekuri Development Committee, the Barekuri Youth Association has taken significant strides in promoting awareness about the Hoolock Gibbons and the importance of biodiversity conservation. The culmination of these efforts is the annual celebration of International Gibbons Day in October inthe past few years in Torajan-Denka Public Ground, Barekuri. This annual event evolved into a grand spectacle, attracting not only local villagers but also renowned environmentalist Jadav Payeng as well as local and foreign visitors. The celebration witnessed speeches on the critical need for the conservation of this rare species and the overall biodiversity of the region. In a poignant moment during the festivities, a book titled "*Kolia: Smiritigrantha"* in the local language dedicated to the memory of a beloved female Hoolock Gibbon was unveiled, symbolising the deep connection of coexistence and depicting the potential for a symbiotic relationship between humans and wildlife. The book narrated stories, poems and the shared history between the villagers and the Hoolock Gibbons, fostering a deeper understanding of the bond that exists. Informed by the local knowledge and circumstances, the youths of Barekuri are leading holistic conservation efforts; the villagers recognising the significance of preserving the gibbons' natural habitat had collectively decided to protect the towering trees that served as the primate's abode. This symbiotic relationship between the community and these arboreal species depicts a testament to the fine balance between humans and the preservation of biodiversity. The practice of giving playful nicknames to the Gibbons, the conscious collective decision to refrain from tree-cutting for the Gibbons to roam freely and the vision of developing ecotourism portrays the efforts of the community committed to conservation and sustainable development. Amidst

the colossal loss of biodiversity and the subsequent extinction, the conservation efforts led by the Moran communities of Barekuri for the IUCN red-listed endangered speciesare commendable. Barekuri, in a true sense, epitomizes the co-existing symbiotic relationship between humans and Gibbons in Barekuri and the local ecological knowledge and practices can well contribute to conserving an endangered species like the Western Hoolock Gibbons.

Challenges of spiralling extractivist: The BaghjanTragedy and the dreadful impact on Coexistence

The colonial rule in India was largely accompanied by the exploitation of forests and natural resources for the development of various kinds of industries, railway tracks, roads etc for vested purposes. The British had an instrumental understanding of forests; forests were seen as a hub of a commercial entityand the colonial concept of nature was that of a 'Revenue Maximiser'.Even after India gained independence, it did not put a halt to these capitalist expansionist processes at the cost of the environment and its well-being. Since 1991, with the liberalization of the Indian economy,the trend towards modernization and its accompanying prospects of economic developmenthas been heightened. The diversion of forests and grazing grounds by the state and the corporations for commercial exploitation does much more harm than good to our planet Earth. Contemporary state practices areby the neo-liberal capitalism and amendments in the acts like the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) 2020 are proof of it. Such amendments in the legal system area bane to environmental sustainability buta boon to economic development; exemplifying 'economic development' overweighs 'environment'. Northeast India is quite rich in natural gas and oil in addition to abundance in biodiversity; oil was first discovered by the British in 1867 in the Digboi area in the Tinsukia district of Assam. Since then, in many areas crude oil was discovered, thus beginning the golden era of Assam glorifying development and inducing environmental destruction. In Assam, one of the major companies working for exploration, and drilling operations of the reserves of

petroleum is the Oil India Limited (OIL). Following the economic reforms in the early 1990s, there has been a tremendous increase in building oil rigs and oil pumps without obtaininga proper mandate from the locals who might be affected. The continued explorationspose serious ecological, and climate crises besides creating acute health problems and livelihood crisesamong the local people.

Barekuri is suitable for tea plantations and the surrounding areas nearby are rich in oil and coal; eminent economic aspirations underlie amid forests, and as such the ongoing wrath of extractivism looms large. The region which includes Dibru Saikhowa National Park, Maguri Motapung Beel and the surrounding villages suffered serious devastation from oil spills and the clearing of trees for accessing roads to the oil drilling sites, exploration and production activities. In the early decades of the 20th century during colonial rule in Assam, tea plantations exacerbated the deforestation and fragmentation of the habitats of many mammalian species. Nevertheless, Barekuri was still imbued with two dozen of the ape species before the blowout.The minimal population of Western Hoolock Gibbons suffered a huge blow following the Baghjang as leak. The oil leakage through pipes and the fire aftermath created huge havoc and disrupted the local ecosystem like Barekuri. The oil spills on agricultural lands, burning of houses of the villagers and the death of many domesticated animals as well as endangered species like Western Hoolock Gibbons, dwindling the population of the 'acrobats of the forests' thus causing a grave biodiversity-related crisis in the history of Assam. The condensed oil too has coated crops, leaves and trees including betel nuts, bananas, tea gardens and bamboo posing a serious threat to the endangered Western Hoolock Gibbon population and their habitats inBarekuri. In October2020 the death of a pregnant Hoolock Gibbon in Barekuri was reported. The medical treatment revealedthe death due to liver and lung ailments which was very obvious; the death in thepost-blowoutmonths is proof that the oil spill with gas absorbed by the trees and leaves all across the villages in the surrounding areas resulted in the untimely death of domesticated animals and this endangered species in the village as they feed on the leaves and fruits in the trees coated with harmful ingredients. Since the blowout,

each year 2-3 Gibbons died due to diseases like Tuberculosis, and lung diseases as revealed by wildlife experts. The death of the tailless apes in Barekuri left the villagers grieve-stricken. The Baghjan fire caused irreparable damage to the region's ecology and negatively impacted the livelihood of local communities and animals that rely on wetlands and forests (Gogoi et.al, 2022).

The Baghjan tragedy unveiled the bureaucratic lethargy, the corporate negligent attitude,the lack of goodwill of the state and the prioritization of 'development' over 'environment' (Isfaq& Vardhan, 2020)The irony here is that the MoEFCC whose primary concerns are implementation of policies and programmes relating to the conservation of the country's natural resources including its lakes and rivers, its biodiversity, forests and wildlife, ensuring the welfare of animals andthe prevention and abatement of pollution is contributing to pollution by approving ECs to industries, making amendments inhibiting thewelfare of humans as well as the animals by giving a 'free passin the hands of industries for carrying out their projects. The regulatory authorities, ministries, and expert committees seemto be in hand-in-hand gloves with operating industries andpay no heed to improving the deteriorating ecological situation, thus posing a severe threat to the endangered species in a local ecosystem like Barekuri. The negligent political and administrative will has made these tail-less monkeys once abound in Barekurid windling in numbers at a rapid rate.

Prospects for an eco-sensitive future

The menace ofecological deteriorationand biodiversity destructionin general and the protection of the rare and endangered ape species Hoolock Gibbons in Barekuri, in particular, has to be dealt with at the earliest to ensure an eco-sensitive future. The country's national policies like Northeastern Hydro Carbon Vision 2012, the New Exploration Licensing Policy and the recent amendment to EIA in 2020 enabled extensive environmental destruction and biodiversity loss.Rare species likeWestern Hoolock Gibbons aredwindling in numbers due to such policies creating havoc as we all witnessed in May 2020 in Baghjan. Even though the fire was

doused after 159 days, the danger lingered for months; the sound of a blowout, the smell of oil, earthquake-like feelingimpacted the health of humans and animals in the area. The company was bound to provide compensation to the people who lost their property, but the question here arises - Wasthe temporary monetary benefits levied as compensation, sufficient? How will it undo the disastrous impact the tragedy caused to the thriving ecosystem? How will it bring back the glorious ecology of the region and its essence it had in the pre-contamination phase? The need is that the anti-environmental and anti-wildlife policies should be scrapped andan efficient regulatory framework coupled with complete adherence to the environmental laws and scrapping of the detrimental amendments is one of the ways forward for a sustainable planet where both humans and animals could coexist harmoniously.

The exclusionist model leading alienation of local communitieswhich are the hub of sustainable conservation practices has been detrimental to the environment. In several regions, local communities are leading conservation efforts deeply informed by their local circumstances. Since they have strong ties at ground level and have a better understanding of their ecosystem and its dynamics, hence can well contribute their insights to informed management and conservation-related decisions.The urgent need is to evolve a mechanism in Forests and Wildlife governance taking into account the local communities as key participants in the planning, monitoring and decision-making process, management and assessment to ensure long-term conservation of biodiversity existing in varied altitudinal variations. To conserve the existing populations of Gibbons in Barekuri, utmost priority should be given to protecting the forest fragments, restoring them, preventingfurther degradation,afforestation and building corridors to connect the tree canopies and all this is not possible with the top-down framework. The government must incorporate local communities and their local ecological knowledge system as a complementary mechanism of action and accordingly devise a ‘Hoolock Gibbon Project’ which willprovide guidelines and data to undertake area-specific action plans and conservation efforts.

Unlike any protected sanctuary where there is aloofness between animals and humans, Barekuriis the epitome of a harmonious relationship between humans and animals. This has become a tourist draw. Ecotourism, an important aspect of tourism has three key principles- ecology, locals and tourists it has a huge potential in a village like Barekuri but it remains far away from satisfactory. In the words of The International Ecotourism Society, '*Ecotourism is the responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education*'.Ecotourism has the potential to yield social and economic benefits, uplifting the poverty of the villagers via increasing employment opportunities thus improving the standard of living of locals and having positive impacts on the environment as well (Seba, 2012) Few steps have been initiatedby tourism management teams in Barekuri comprising of local youthswho guide tourists for sightseeing; making arrangements for local guest houses, providing authentic meals, showcasing local culture, practices through programmes and even ensuring a clean and green, pollution-free spaces to attract more tourists. But the Baghjan blowout was a huge blow to the possibilities of Ecotourism in the area. However, the revival of the possibilities was observed with the celebration of International Gibbon Day in Barekuri to generate awareness of the 'Acrobats of the Forest'which imminent personalities attended and the event successfully ended with a proposal to establish 'Hoolock Gibbon Research Centre' in the upcoming years. Ifecotourism can be developed effectively with the local resources and governmental support in hand, Barekuri will soon be a classic example for many other local communities residing in areas rich in biodiversity to develop economy and ecology hand in hand.

Conclusion

The case of Barekuri, a thriving home to the IUCN-listed 'critically endangered' species in the Post-Baghjan tragedy well portrays the inextricable connection between ecology and politics. Although, indeed, many times the political context in ecology is not vibrant still it has its presence more or less. The ecological

trajectory is influenced by the political circumstances, the giant public-private partnership has put the environment at stake as revealed in the Baghjan tragedy and its aftermath havoc. In the recent past, 'Project Tiger', 'Project Elephant', 'Project Rhino' and other projects have been launched for the protection and holistic conservation of flagship species, so initiatives also need to be taken in the case of primates like 'Project Primate' for the future survival of this rare species. It is to be remembered that our planet Earth not only belongs to just one species, that is humans but all other species who cohabit on this planet; living in consonance with the other organisms would help humans to sustain in the most pristine manner. The people in power democratically should take the lead in accommodating local ecological knowledge in advancing the condition of Barekuri and surrounding ecologically sensitive areas whose uniqueness lies in the familial amicable relation between the Moran communities and the Western Hoolock Gibbons.

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THE JOURNEY OF THE INDIAN STATE FROM EXCLUSIONARY TO INCLUSIONARY FOREST CONSERVATION MODEL WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JFM

Puja Dihingia

ABSTRACT

In a developing country like India, Community Property Resources (CPR) such as forests play a vital role in the rural economy and more particularly in tribal areas of the country in terms of generating income and employment opportunities and also improving the food security for the poor and marginal households. According to the theory of the tragedy of commons developed by Garret Hardin community property resources will face tragedy in future if these are not judiciously managed. However, some recent literature on CPR management has revealed that the tragedy of commons often results not from any inherent failure of the common property but from institutional failure to control and access resources and to enforce internal decisions for collective use. These critics argue that Hardin's tragedy of commons can be easily ruled out if institutions work perfectly through active participation of the people in the management of CPRs (Hardin, 1968, p. 1245). At present, almost all the countries of Asia and Africa are promoting

the idea of the participation of rural communities in the management of natural resources through some form of Participatory Forest Management (PFM) practices. They have now developed or are in the process of developing, changes to national policies and legislation that institutionalize PFM. The main aim of PFM is to engage forest-dwelling communities to maintain healthy forests and improve degraded forests by sharing with them benefits accrued from forest resources. Within this context, this article mainly intends to look into India's journey towards a participatory forest management system from centralised forest management practices. The required information obtained for this study is collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include archival materials in the form of files, and reports housed in the state and district archives and secondary sources are mainly taken from different books, reputed journals, seminar papers, newspapers etc.

Keywords: Forest Dwellers, Forest Rights, Joint Forest Management, Livelihood Security, Participatory Forest Management.

Introduction :

The World Bank report (2006) indicates that forests play a vital role in poverty eradication and rural economic growth in India. In India, a large number of people live close to the forest and depend on forest resources for livelihood needs. Various government reports and research papers reveal that approximately 275 million people in India depend on forest resources for their sustenance. The

forest-dwelling community of India is heterogeneous as it is comprised of different tribes and ethnic groups. Further, these forest-based people are mainly belonging to the marginalized and most disadvantageous section of society. In independent India until the adoption of the second national forest policy of the country, the livelihood security of these people did not get any attention in the forest conservation model adopted by the Indian state. The activities of these communities were considered as 'biotic interference' that must be minimised to protect the forest. The state saw the well-being of forest and forest-dwellingcommunities as two different things and this idea is based on the premise that the forests can be well protected only if the local forest-using communities are excluded and that the needs of the forest-dependent communities can be met only if the society is ready to lose the forest. However, such attitude of the Indian state towards the forest-dwelling community underwent a sea change with the adoption of the second national forest policy of the country in 1988. To be precise, the second national forest policy of India forms the basis of participatory management practices in the country which attempts to mitigate the challenges of forest conservation and blend the livelihood needs of its forest dwellers with forest conservation goals. It began the process of communication of forest management across the country.However, the saga of the Indian state's journey towards participatory forest management practices will be incomplete if it does not delve into its colonial history. To be precise, it was the British administration, which altered the forest-people relationship in the country and formed the basis of the exclusionary forest conservation model that snatched away the age-old traditional rights of the forest-dwelling community over the forest.

Forest Administration in Colonial India: Historical Perspective

It is to note here that since time immemorial, the forest-dwelling community in India shared a symbiotic relationship with the forest. With few exceptions, the forest dwellers exercised unrestricted rights over forest resPuja Dihingia156through a fair, equal distribution of forest resources which also helped to reduce conflicts among communities and between rulers and communities. However, the advent of colonial rule marked a major change in the forest-people relationship in India.

through a fair, equal distribution of forest resources which also helped to reduce conflicts among communities and between rulers and communities. However, the advent of colonial rule marked a major change in the forest-people relationship in India. To be precise, with the arrival of the British, the forest-dependent people lost their customary rights over the forest and became alienated from their land.

Interestingly during the initial phase of their rule, the British did not pay much attention to colonial forestry rather they considered these resources as an impediment to agricultural expansion. As a result, the British government vacated large patches of forest land for agricultural activities. However, the ignorant attitude of the British towards colonial forestry gradually changed after they realized the value of teak that was found in India's forest. However, the customary forest rights of the local inhabitants put restrictions on the path of utilizing forest resources according to the will of the colonial masters. Therefore, to achieve monopoly power over Indian forest resources, particularly timber, the British government felt the need to implement strict rules and regulations for curtailing the rights of local inhabitants who depended on forests for their sustenance. Accordingly, the colonial state came up with various forest Acts and policies which were mainly designed to curtail the erstwhile customary rights of forest dwellers over the forest. It is relevant to note here that the whole gamut of British forest policies/Acts are mainly driven by the interest to control people's access to forest resources and centralization of state power (Aravindakham, 2011, p.7). They introduced scientific forestry on the pretext of forest conservation which in reality ensured a sustainable supply of timber to the British Empire (Stephen, 2010, p.49) and kept the forest dwellers outside the purview of the forest. As noted by environmental historian Ramchandra Guha, the British colonial government had established its monopoly over the vast forest tracts to meet their commercial needs with utter disregard for the rights of forest dwellers. On the other side when these deprived forest-dependent people rebelled against the repressive policies of the British administration then they were labelled as 'born criminals' under the criminal tribes Act of 1871. It is to note here that before the British some feudal lords also tried to establish their

control over the forest lands but such practices were very few and they did not affect the customary rights of the forest dwellers. It was the arrival of the British which made a huge change in the forest-people relationship in India.

Interestingly the plight of the forest dwellers under British colonial rule did not come to an end with the end of the colonial rule. The exclusion of these people from entering the forest and using the forest resources continued even after India attained its independence. It is to note here that after gaining independence the Indian state tried to redefine social utility and social welfare functions but so far, the forest management regime is concerned its main emphasis continued to be on the commercial exploitation and exclusion of the local people.

Environmental historians Ramchandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil stated that there are close similarities between the colonial and post-colonial forest policies of the Indian state. That is why the post-colonial forest administration of India is said to be a replica of the British forestry system(Sarma, 2012, p.495). Like its colonial predecessors, the post-independent forest management of India also denied the rights of the tribal community over the forests. In independent India, the first national forest policy was announced in the year of 1952 which was an extension of the colonial forest policy of 1894(Balooni, 2002, p.113). The 1952 forest policy did not pay any attention to the livelihood needs of forest dwellers and stated that the forest should be used to satisfy the developmental goals of the country. This particular policy of 1952 established a state monopoly over the forest resources and completely excluded the forest community from exercising any rights over those resources but this time the exclusion was justified in the name of fulfilling the national interest of the country. To be precise it can be said that the 1952 forest policy of India paved the way for the forest department to keep India's forests firmly under its control and people out of them. This approach towards the forest dwellers continued to be perpetuated in Independent India until the revision of the forest policy in 1988. India got its second national forest policy in the year 1988 and this marked a radical shift in the forest conservation model of the Indian

state from exclusionary to inclusionary. This new policy has accorded the highest priority to sustainable management of forest resources and at the same time gives recognition to the rights of the forest dwellers living within and near the forest areas and depend on forest resources for livelihood needs. It laid the foundations for participatory forestry by facilitating the involvement of local communities in the management of forests in the country. Before NFP 1988, the forest communities were denied any role in forest management activities. They were treated as a threat to forest conservation.

Circumstances that led to the Evolution of Participatory Forest Management in Indian Forestry

In Independent India, until the late 1970's the forest administration mainly emphasised production forestry where no efforts had been taken up to address the livelihood needs of the forest dwellers. Ramchandra Guha also argued that the forest legislations of India during the period from 1864-1972 were mainly designed in such a manner which facilitated the commercial and industrial exploitation of forest resources (Guha, 1994, p.13). Further during that period, the Indian state also did not have any sound conservationist policies which finally led to the depletion of the vast amount of forest resources in the country. However, the scenario gradually changed when as an outcome of some significant national as well as international events the government of India adopted various measures to conserve the forest. At the national level, the Chipko movement of 1973 brought into focus a wide range of issues concerning the forest policies of the country. Such growing awareness finally paved the way for the legislation of many laws relating to forest conservation in the country. It is to be noted here that the conservationist model adopted by the Indian state during that time was mainly influenced by the Western conservation model which believes that the forest should be made people people-free zone. This particular model of forest conservation resulted in the miserable lives of a large number of people living in and around the forest. Particularly the creation of the Protected Areas following the provisions of the Wild Life Protection

Act of 1972 caused the eviction of a large number of forest dwellers across the country. Similarly, another draconian Act, The Forest Conservation Act of 1980 also added more plight to the lives of these people. However, such an exclusion-based forest conservation regime did not go unchallenged and led to violent uprisings and struggles throughout the country. In different forest regions of the country, the forest-dependent people as a sign of protest continued to enter the forest and used to collect the forest products which in turn resulted in the forest depletion at an increasing rate.

Interestingly, in the mid part of the 1980's apart from India, other developing countries also witnessed large-scale forest depletion which finally drew the attention of international policymakers. The issue was finally placed in the Brundtland Commission Report of 1987. In that commission, a report was submitted which had established a link between poverty and environmental degradation. In that report, it has been argued that the poor people are not in a position to use the environment in a sustainable way which leads to environmental degradation and in a cyclical way impoverishment of environmental resources generates more poverty amongst these people (Rangarajan, 2010, p.17). The report further argued that the livelihood needs of forest-dependent people must be secured and protected for forest conservation. Thus, because of that report, the commission has spelt out the need for a new livelihood approach which can cater to the livelihood needs of forest-based people along with forest conservation goals and this new approach has come to be popularly known as the sustainable livelihood approach. It is to note here that apart from the Brundtland Commission Report, the idea of SLA can also be found in a discussion paper co-authored by Robert Chambers and Gordon R. Conway (1991). Both Chambers and Conway argue that sustainable livelihood can maintain, and enhance its capabilities & and assets and improve opportunities for the next generation (Chambers & Conway, 1991, p.5). The sustainability of livelihood can be measured by two indicators i.e., environmental and social. A livelihood is environmentally sustainable when it does not undermine local and global resources. On the other side, a socially sustainable livelihood implies the

capacity of a human unit (individual, household or family) to avoid or recover from outside pressures such as accidents, sudden sickness, the death of a family member, loss of assets through theft etc. In short, a sustainable livelihood approach is a holistic approach which integrates the environmental, social and economic factors while formulating any programme for poverty eradication.

In the forestry sector, the idea of SLA gave birth to the practice of Participatory Forest Management which has now been adopted by almost all the countries of the world including India. The Indian state incorporated the idea of PFM in its second national forest policy which was introduced in the year of 1988. The NFP states that -The life of tribals and other poor living within and near forests revolves around forests. The rights and concessions enjoyed by them should be fully protected. Their domestic requirements of fuel wood, fodder, minor forest produce and construction timber should be the first charge on forest produce. It indicates that the NFP 1988 gives special emphasis on securing and promoting the rights of forest dwellers over forest resources. Further, as a follow-up to the NFP 1988, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change introduced the Joint Forest Management Programme in 1990 which has made the idea of PFM more realistic in the country. JFM is said to be one of the important components of India's natural resource management strategy which mainly aims at poverty eradication, rural development etc. To be precise JFM is the avenue for rural development strategy for sustainable development because the communities are involved in protecting and managing the forest.

JFM programme: The Dawn of Participatory Forest Management in India

The Joint Forest Management Programme of India is a laudable effort towards devolution and decentralization in forest administration. It attempts to achieve the goal of NFP to keep 33% of the total geographical area under the tree cover. The JFM programme has recognized the livelihood and sustenance needs of the people through the principle of care and sharing. In JFM the local communities and government manage the resource and share the cost equally[1]. It mainly

emphasizes empowering the local communities in their livelihood practices through self-sustaining local environmental governance. To be precise, JFM provides a visible role to the forest-dependent communities in the planning, management and prevention of forests and gives them a share in the benefits of the forests. Since its inception, the government of India has been reviewing this particular programme from time to time to make it more effective. The JFM programme has been amended twice in the year 2000 as well as in 2001 to make it more participatory and demand-driven. The JFM guidelines 2000 sought to give importance to women's participation, preparation of micro-plan, legal back up to JFMCs etc. Similarly, the guidelines of 2002 give impetus to the relationship with Panchayats, capacity building for the management of NTFPs etc. The JFM programme comprises all categories of forest land as classified under the Indian Forest Act, of 1927. In Protected Areas, The JFM committees function as eco-development committees. In Addition to JFM activities, these committees aim at protecting wildlife and improving biodiversity.

Surprisingly, the JFM programme had its roots in innovative experiments carried out in the Arabari and Sukhomarji regions of West Bengal and Haryana respectively in the late 1970s. To be precise in 1972 A.K Banerjee, the divisional forest officer carried out an experiment in the Arabari region of Midnapur district where he asked the local people to refrain from grazing in an area of new plantation in return for a share of the final timber harvest and this particular strategy initiated by A.K Banerjee turned out to be a successful one in protecting the new plantation area and thus helped in developing an idea that the involvement of local community could be beneficial for rejuvenating the forest. Again, after this experiment, the strategy of involving the local community in forest protection tasks was also applied in Sukhomajri village of Haryana in 1975 which also became a successful event. However, in addition to these two events of Arabari and Sukhimarji, the importance of some Self-Initiated Forest Protection Groups (SIFPG) must not be overlooked in the rise of the JFM programme. The SIFPGs were established by the local villagers mainly in the states of Orissa, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra

Pradesh, Haryana etc. to protect and conserve the nearby forest areas. In the initial phase, these SIFPGs were poorly documented and did not get adequate attention but in the later period, they received popularity at village, state and national levels. Thus, it can be said that the experience of these successful instances of people's participation in forest regeneration activities across the country encouraged the idea of harnessing people's participation in forest conservation tasks which eventually got institutional recognition in terms of the emergence of JFM.

The JFM programme starts with the formation of a village-level committee of the local people which is popularly known as the Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC). The JFMC is a democratic, decentralized and transparent body of the local forest-dwelling people. In every state, JFMC is formed as per the guidelines of the existing state JFM resolution. The formation of the JFMC involves some significant steps starting from organizing a meeting with the local villagers of the selected forest fringe village. The meeting is mainly facilitated by the local gaon panchayat, forest department staff, NGOs etc. In that particular meeting, the concept of JFM will be explained to the local villagers and if they show their willingness to protect the forest, then they have to write a letter requesting the formation of JFMC addressing the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) with a copy to the local gaon panchayat. Once the request is granted for the formation of JFMC, an ad-hoc committee will be formed to facilitate the process at the village level. Notably, NGOs have played a very significant role in facilitating the implementation of the JFM programme by making people aware of the benefits of the programme and thus motivating them to form a JFMC. In states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujrat, Karnataka, Orissa and West Bengal the NGOs have done a commendable job in the implementation of the JFM programme (Murali, Rao & Ravindranath, 2000, p.75). Further, they also help in building long-term coordination and understanding between JFMC and the forest department. Apart from this, there exist some NGOs, which also take an interest in forest conservation and collaborate with the JFMC by making use of their financial resources.

As already mentioned above, under the JFM programme the forest areas are protected and managed by the local communities in collaboration with the forest department and for their participation in the forest regeneration tasks the JFM progarmme allows these people to use and collect the Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). The NTFPs mainly include bark, roots, leaves, fruits, valuable medicinal plants, flowers etc. It is a well-known fact that the NTFP has played a very significant role in the livelihood security of forest dwellers. Various research studies show that in states like Orissa, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar etc. over 80% of forest dwellers exclusively depend on NTFPs for their livelihood needs. Earlier the forest dwellers were denied to access these NTFPs but now under the JFM programme, they are legally entitled to collect and use the NTFPs. It is to be mentioned here that apart from the forest regeneration task, various developmental activities are also carried out under the JFM programme to upgrade the socio-economic life of the forest-dwelling people. These activities are popularly termed as entry point activities which mainly include the construction of community halls, drinking water facilities, distribution of biogas plants, conduction of training programmes to generate employment opportunities amongst the youth etc. The aim of these activities is mainly to win the trust of the local people to involve them in forest regeneration tasks.

At present, the JFM programme has been implemented across the country but its outcomes are not uniform as they vary from state to state. Many states consider this particular programme as a top-down approach which further strengthens the control of the forest department over the forest-dependent people. In many states of the northeast part of India, people are reluctant to participate in this programme as they believe that it may snatch away their customary rights over forests. However, in contrast to this in some states like West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh etc., JFM performs a tremendous role in enhancing the livelihood security of the forest-dependent people. According to various research works, the JFM programme has managed to generate employment opportunities in the far-off inaccessible forest fringes. It has also resulted in linking the remote forest villages

to the market for the sale of NTFPs. Apart from this JFM also helps to reduce the illicit felling of trees, reduce the area under illegal encroachment, forest fire prevention and control by community involvement and to enhance the forest cover through the afforestation programme. It is to be noted here that the JFM programme acts as an implementing agency for various afforestation schemes like the Green India Mission, National Afforestation Programme etc. Again, along with this, the government of India is also now attempting to implement the international climate change programme Reduction of Emissions through Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD Plus) in the country through the mechanism of JFM.

Conclusion :

The forest conservation model of the Indian state has witnessed tremendous change with the implementation of NFP 1988 in the country particularly with the coming of the JFM programme. The JFM has now gradually emerged as a powerful tool for sustainable forestry and recognizing the livelihood needs of forest dwellers. There is no denying that forest conservation is the utmost need of the hour due to its growing importance in climate change. But it also cannot be denied that conservation activities rarely take place in isolation; it has a deep impact on the livelihood needs of forest dwellers. As mentioned earlier in Indian society a huge chunk of the marginalised section lives within and near the forest and depends on the forest resources for their livelihood needs. To be precise, in a country like India, participatory forest management such as JFM bears great significance in improving biodiversity and the livelihood of forest-dependent people. As rightly observed by Vasant K. Saberwal and Rangarajan who assert that it has not yet been proven that the human beings who reside within and nearby the PAs are responsible for the shrinking of wildlife habitats and if it is so then it is also quite unclear that the eviction of those who resides within the PAs will ensure the survival of India's wildlife.

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LABOUR CONSCIOUSNESS AND CLASS STRUGGLE IN COLONIAL ASSAM : SOME REFLECTIONS ON DR. BIRENDRA KUMAR BHATTACHARYA'S NOVEL PRATIPAD

Satyadeep Lahkar

ABSTRACT

The emergence of the Labour consciousness and the spirit of trade unionism can be considered an inevitable phenomenon of the modern industrial set-up. Importantly, such consciousness has been accelerated in different parts of the globe including India after the historic Bolshevik Revolution and the industrial hubs of then Assam were also not exceptional from this fact as various labour unrest, strike and movements have been registered across the region during the said era. The strike of Digboi Oil Refinerythat occurred during the third decade of the previous century is one of the major developments in this regard which had not only paralyzed the colonial administration surrounding the refinery but also been able to drawinternational attention due to its magnitude and class solidarity. The novel Pratipad authored by Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharaya, a versatile figure of Assamese literature is solely based on the said strike of Digboi

Oil Refinery. Here, the novelist has portrayed a vivid description of the lived experiences of the labourers of Digboi Oil Refinery ranging from class discrimination to class solidarity along with focusing on various socio-economic dynamics of the contemporary surrounding society. Hence, the present paper aims to shed some light on the scenario of society, politics and labourconsciousness of Digboi Oil Refinery and its surroundings in the light of the novel Pratipad.

Keywords: Digboi Oil Refinery, Labour, Union, British.

Introduction :

The name of Dr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya (1924-1997) occupies a special position in the greater realm of Assamese literature especially that of Post –War era.Recipient of the JnanpithAward, the highest literary award inIndia, Bhattacharya also served as the president of the prestigious *Asam Sahitya Sabha* during the tenure of 1983-85. Bhattacharya has enriched Assamese literature through his various creations ranging from short stories to novels. *Mritunjay, Iyaruingam, Pratipad, Aai, Ranga, Megh and Nasta Chandra* are some examples of noted novels authored by Dr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya. It has been widely observed that most of his novels have socio-political orientations showcasing contemporary diverged social and political issues. Importantly, among his novels, *Pratipad's* novel is a widely read one based on the historic labour unrest of Digboi Oil Refinery that occurred in 1939 and its surrounding narratives.

In short, the present article is prepared with a view to unfolding the dynamics of labour consciousnessand class struggle carried out by the labourers of Digboi Oil Refineryin the light of the said novel.

Background of the Novel : The said novel authored by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya is based on the strike initiated and carried out by thelabourers recruited in Digboi Oil Refinery during the closing years of the third decade of the preceding century. It is a widely accepted fact that the sense of labour solidarity and labour consciousness emerged in India during the closing decades of the 19th century by the effects carried out by some philanthropic personalities likeS.S. Bengali (Sharma, 1971, pp.151-152). Here, the fact must be mentioned that thehistoric labour strike of Digboi Refinery sparked in 1939 and the labourconsciousness in colonial India got acceleratedafter the Bolshevik Revolution thatintensified labour consciousnessamong the different corners of the globe and Indian subcontinent was also not exceptional this fact (Banerjee, .2005, p.4). For instance, the Madras Labour Union, the First Indian trade unionin the modern sense came into being in 1918just after the above-mentionedrevolution (Sharma, 1971, p.78). Along the same line,the All India Trade Union Congress (AIUTC), being the first trade union with a national outlook appeared in the national landscape with Lala Lajpat Rai as its founding President accordingly in 1920 (Meena, 2007. P. 208). Importantly, the influence of such an environment had also been recorded indifferentparts of Assam asseveral events of labour unrest, agitation and strikes carried out by the labour class had been recordedin various pockets of the region including the Digboi Oil Refinery.

The novel depicts the distinct narratives of the contemporary socio-political fabric of the greater labour class of Digboi Oil Refinery along with shedding light on thepolitical spectrum of contemporary India.

Reflection of Contemporary Society and Class Differences in *Pratipad* Novel

The novelist has made a rigorous attempt to showcase the contemporary social and political fabric of the country in general and the surroundings of Digboi Oil Refinery in particular. The novelist, at the very outset of the novel, has vehemently opined that "No specific Hero or Heroine is there" The novelist has portrayed theday-to-day life, struggle and daily narratives vividly.Characters like

Dandi, Durga, Nayanmoni, Pannu and othersportrayed the daily life, struggle and conflicts of the workers recruited in the said refinery. Hence, it would not be an exaggeration to say the said novel is the living saga of the society and politics of the contemporary era aboutthe Digboi Oil Refinery.

It has already been mentioned that the historic labour unrest atDigboi Oil Refinery occurred in 1939. Hence, the novel has lucidly depicted the various conflicts and contradictions that occurred between the colonial refinery authority and the labourers belonging to various ethnic and linguistic groups. The novel vehemently depicts the vulnerable and pathetic conditions of the labourers recruited in Digboi Oil Refinery. The labourers were deprivedof their basic rights of survival and there were no provisions for proper medical facilities for the workers. Further, no leaves were granted to labourers during their respective festivals even in case of death of the dear ones too. The novelist described *"Eid, Puja Nanakar Janma Tithi Buddhar Janma Tithi Kotu Sutinapa Manuhe…..Suti Bisarile Sahabe Koi, Emanbur robot kam khoti hole Company r xhoti hobo"*(Bhattacharya, 1987, p.11).(Meaning- No provision for a holiday for labourers on account of their respective festivals … Authority says, while requesting for leave, leave for lots of such festivals will result in loss of company" Thelabourers were even devoid of hygienic and humane settlements. Houses with only two rooms were provided to the married labourers along with ordinary and unhygienictoilets that spoiled the surrounding environment of the entire settlements,especially during summer. Such pathetic living facilities, as illustrated by the novelist,compel the labourers to stay away from their families. For instance, Chandi, a central figure of the novel, opted for night duty and go for listening religious preaching of Swamiji of Ramkrishna Mission in case ofno night duty. Sucha pathetic depictionof the labourers is nothing but the implication of what Karl Marx termed as alienation. According to Marx, alienation isthe distortions of human nature that are caused by the domination of the worker by the "alien will" of the capitalists(Ritzer, 2018, p.55).

On the other hand, the novelist also penned down the privileges and various perks enjoyed by the British of the same company. The novel describes a lavish

way of life led by the British along with narrating the fragile and worst living scenario of the labourers. Further, there was a clear distinction between the labourers and their colonial masters in case of availing of medical facilities. The British were entitled to get medical care and facilities forminor ailments where asthe authority was reluctant to extend medical careto the labourers evenin case of medical emergencies and life-threatening conditions. For instance, the physician of the company was busy treating *Sahab* (British master) even the wife of Chandi, an ordinary labour recruited in the company, was in critical condition and her demise was so imminent. Chandi, out of great resentment and grief, says to one of his colleagues that his wife is not a Ma'am Sahab, so the physician has no time for her !!! (Bhattacharya,1987, p.11).

Hence, the novel portrays the class differences among the labourers and their colonial masters of the Digboi Oil Refinery in a lifelike manner.

The Gender Issues

The novelist hasn't confined the narratives of the novel skipping the gender issues. In contrast, adequate attention has been paid to unveiling the dark scenario of the refinery wherein the female sections of the labourers were exploited and molested in various forms by the colonial authority of the company. The novel vehemently depicted the vicious scenario of the British of the company with extreme misogynistic orientation who did not have any sort of reluctance to indulge in adultery. The daughters of the labourers had often to hand over their virginity to the lustful British. Even the contemporary rigid society also had reservations towards such victims and treated them as inauspicious ones.Jaibunnicha, in the novel, represents such a woman whose mother was also a victim of the lust of the British *sahab*. Jaibunnicha'swidow's mother was sexually abused byone sahib and Jaibunnicha was born accordingly. After attaining her puberty had to fulfill the perverted lust of the Jilapchi*sahab*. She acted as an ordinary worker during the time and had to indulge in sexual copulation with *Sahab*at night !!!

However, the novel also narrates the emergence of gender sensitization among the workers,especially the feminine ones. For instance, the characters like Lachmi, Pannu and others represent thepragmatic females of the same society.Pannu, as described in the novel, has vehemently opposed the proposal of marrying Ramu, a man the age of her father. Despite being born into an ordinary family, Pannu opted to become self-reliant through the means of education. Similarly, Nayanmoni, another revolutionary female character in the novelchooses her life partner on her own tackling all the constraints posed by her parentsand society. She also went for educationandlearningmusiceven after her wedding. Further, Lachmi is another revolutionary character who exhibited her calibreby opposing and spoiling the nefarious intention of Birbhadra, the contractor who wanted to molest her physically. She also set examples of pointing out the drawbacks of contemporary society especially that of the male ones. Nevertheless, the novel while presenting the fragile gender dynamics of contemporary society also showed the seed of gender sensitization through the above-mentioned pragmatic and revolutionary characters.

***Pratipad*: Emergence of new light**

As per the Vedic lunar calendar, the term *pratipad* denotes the first day after the amavashya(the dark moon) that leads towards the full moon. Hence, it represents the initiation of the journey from darkness to light, from solitude to solidarity,from age-old domination to liberation.

It has been widely perceived fact that modern industrial set-up and intensification of laboursolidarity cum trade unionism are both sides of the same coin The Digboi Oil Refinery also witnessed such spirit of labour sensitization which resulted in historic labour unrest listed with a golden script in the greater saga of the labour movement of colonial India.

The introduction of modern machinery is widely considered detrimental to the utilization of human labour as the former ones are equipped with producing

more outputs compared to manual or human labourers. The company authority's planning to install new machines sparked widespread controversy in and out of the refinery. Such news eventually resulted inmassive resentment of the labourers. The novel also depicts the initial phase of uniting the labourers and the creation of a trade union of the labourers.

The novel also deals with the political dynamics of a contemporary era when the leadership of the Indian National Congress tried to make inroads towards the realm of labourers of Assam. For instance, the refinery met with an accident claiming the lives of four labourers. However, the authority concerned was busy with a Christmas party during the accident and didn't take any measures to provide compensation to the bereaved family members of the labourers who succumbed to the accident. On the other hand, Janardan Goswami, local congress leaderinformed the provincial congress governments headed by Gopinath Bordoloi regarding the fatal accident and complained to the government about the negligence shown by the company authority towards the labourers who lost their lives due to the accident. Importantly, the company authorityresponded to the query of government towards the accident just as "Minor cases of accidents, some unavoidable deaths, due to medical attendance given"(Bhattacharya, 1987, p. 108). Apart from this, the novel also depicts the scenario of the historic visit made by Pt Jawahar Lal Nehru to Assam and its far-reaching impact on the political spectrum of then Assam. This visit of Nehru intensified the sense of unionism among the working-class population of then Assam(Guha, Amalendu,2004. pp. 16-7.)

The novel also depicted the developments of World War II and, the acceptability of Gandhian ideas not only among the common masses but amongsome Britshers too. Further, the author has given a vivid description of organizing the labourers underthe banner of a union and articulating their twelve-point demands. Further, the novel also incorporated the tactics of company authority to make the attempts to unionize the labourers futile. The labourers whoactively participated in the activity of labourunion were laid off and the attempts had been made to create

communal sensation among the workers so that the unity and solidarity of the labourers can be weakened on religious lines. Further, the novelist sheds adequate light on the acceleration of the organization of the union and their organized activities ranging from approaching the Labour Commissionto mitigate their respective demands to paralyzing the entire refinery and the town. The novel ends with a scenario indicating the imminent fall down of the British empire and the emergence of a new light, a new ray and indeed *Pratipad*!!!

Thus the novel acted as an anecdote of the transition of class differences to class solidarity. Different characters from different backgrounds and different personalitieshave made the novel enriched enough to unveil the scenario of thehistoric labourunrest of Digboi Oil Refinery which occupied a distinct position in thegreater history of the labour movement in India.

Conclusions :

Concluding the present discourse, it would be remarked that the novel Pratipad authored by Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya reflects the socio-political dynamics of the labourersworking at the Digboi Oil Refinery. The novelist has been able to shed adequate light on various socio-political aspects of the said era including the catastrophe of World War II, acceleration of anti-colonial struggleand many others. In short, the novel Pratipad can widely be considered a living documentportraying the historic labourunrest of Digboi Oil Refinery and its surrounding unsung stories in a fictional yet lucid manner.

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STATE ADMINISTRATION AND TRIBAL POLITICS: ETHNIC ASSERTIONS AMONG THE MORAN COMMUNITY OF ASSAM

Sun Gogoi

ABSTRACT

The terms 'tribes,' 'indigenous communities,' and 'ethnic groups' are frequently used as inter-exchangeable expressions. In the context of India, it can be noticed that while some of the cultural groups have been officially recognized as 'Scheduled Tribes' (ST) by the state, some others have been left out due to various reasons. Over recent decades several ethnic communities in Northeast India have tended to invoke their tribal and indigenous roots by glorifying their traditional culture, beliefs and way of life, and rendering wider publicity to them via social media. The 'Moran' community which is mainly concentrated in Tinsukia district of Upper Assam is one among them. The Morans along with the Mataks are historically known as the author of the Moamoria Rebellion of the Eighteenth Century Assam which paved the way for decline and fall of the mighty Ahom monarchy. During the colonial era, the community remained marginalised both economically and politically. This paper will explore the genesis of growing politico-cultural

consciousness among the Morans in the post-colonial era. This consciousness is aimed at ensuring ST status for the community. In India,ST status remains a political marker of indigeneity and a grantor of some special political and economic privileges and concessions.Though from the late 1930s to the early 1960s, both the Morans and the Mataks were recognisedas the same community by most of their leaders, but after the formation of 'Moran Sabha' in 1965, the majority of the Morans began to introduce themselves as a distinct ethnic group. On the other hand, a section of Matak leaders still upholds that the Morans constitute only a sub-group of the Matak community. This paper is an attempt to analyse the political dimensions of the assertion of indigeneity among the Morans.

Keywords : Assam, indigenous, ethnic, Moran, Matak, Scheduled Tribes.

Introduction :

The Moran is one of the ethnic groups of Assam. The Morans have their traditional belief system and social organizations which they have been maintaining to date in some transformed ways, even after the inclusion of Vaishnava belief in their socio-cultural sphere. Like many other tribes of India, jungles and their species and resources have had a crucial role in the socio-economic life of traditional Moran villages. They can unanimously claim themselves as the 'son of the soil'. During the Ahom era (1228-1826) which once included almost the entire Brahmaputra valley under their jurisdiction, the tribes of plains and hills were left to their own and the degree of their loyalty to the Ahom Government had always been fluctuating during the long six centuries. Among all the tribes of Assam, the

Morans were closer to the Ahom administration and they contributed a lot to the expansion and consolidation of the Ahom regime. E. Gait in his 'Report on the Census of India, Assam 1891' noted that the Morans had their language which was akin to that of the Kacharis. However, when the process of assimilation and then *Sanskritization* began during the days of Ahoms, the Morans gave it up in favour of Assamese.It was further confirmed by G. A. Grierson. Some scholars like Kedar Brahmachari, Benudhar Sarma and Biradhar Das tend to ascribe the Morans 'Aryan' origin. However, linguistic affinity as well as physical features and some other common characteristics of the Morans with the rest of the tribes of Bodo origin confirm that like the Kacharis they are a sub-branch of the greater Bodo ethnic group who speak Tibeto-Burmese language.S. K. Chatterjee places the probable period of migration of the Bodos from 2000 B. C. onwards. As regards the original home of the Bodos and thus the Morans as well, there appears to be a consensus among the scholars that the trans-Himalayan territory to the west of China and Tibet was the original place of these people. Important routes of migration followed by the different waves of these immigrants to India were through the courses of great rivers like the Brahmaputra, other routes between India and Tibet through Nepal and Bhutan; and later on through the passes of the 'Pat-kai' mountains in theNorth-eastern border.

The Morans and the Barahis were the first inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley with whom the Ahoms established close tiesthat were sanctified with matrimonial relations.The Morans often call themselves 'Moran-Matak' to distinguish themselves from the rest of the tribes and castes that belong to the Matak community.Although the Morans had been represented in the *All Assam Matak Sanmilan* (hereafter AAMS) during the period 1939-65, they were always conscious about their separate identity as a specific group among the Mataks. This ethnic consciousness finally led to the formation of *Asom Moran Sabha* (hereafter AMS) which became an exclusive ethnic civil society organization of the Morans. Though the Morans are still known as 'Moran-Matak' in general, it can be noticed that the ethnic and civil society organizations of the Moran community

are named only with the term 'Moran', thus specifying their own identity excluding the term 'Matak'. The Moran is one among the six communities of Assam which are demanding Scheduled Tribe (ST) from the government.

Tribal Politics: Specific context of Northeast India

The terms like 'indigenous communities,' 'tribes' and 'ethnic groups' essentially belong to the domain of 'identity' which has political implications. These terms are frequently used interchangeably. Tribal communities are known to be the aboriginal or earliest settlers of their respective territories. These groups are largely known as *Adivasi* in the Indian subcontinent having their specific cultures and primordial lifestyle, and sometimes these groups also refer to themselves by this term. Apart from its literary portrayal, the term has a political underpinning as well. The term *Adivasi* is derived from the Hindi word *Adi*, 'beginning' and *Vasi*, 'resident', and is equivalent to the term 'aboriginal', referring to the original inhabitants of a particular place. The term 'indigenous' was first used in the late Nineteenth Century as an effort to distinguish the Europeans from the non-Europeans, and not to delineate the differences amongst the people in the colonies. However, the usage of the term took a significant turn in 1938 when the Pan-American Union declared that 'indigenous populations, as descendants of the first inhabitants of the lands which today form America, and to offset the deficiency in their physical and intellectual development, have a preferential right to the protection of the public authorities'.

However, the term *Adivasi* has not been accepted by several tribal groups of Northeast India to define themselves due to their specific historical context. These groups' early access to missionary education and the birth of articulate ethnic ideologues transformed 'colonial tribes' into larger ethnicities or ethnic-nations, such as Naga, Mizo, Khasi and Garo, during the late colonial and post-independence period (Zou, 2016, p. 119). In the Northeast, the tribal groups particularly from the hills have not endured the same exploitation as the tribal groups of central India did in terms of economic and political subordination. In

Northeast India, the term *Adivasi* is a symbolic one and is restricted to communities which were brought in as indentured labourers by the British tea companies to work in the tea states that had begun to be opened up in Assam from the middle of the Nineteenth century. These communities mostly belong to the groups referred to as *Adivasi* in their original habitats. This is, however, not to say that ethnic communities in Northeast India do not identify themselves as 'indigenous people'. In fact, in Assam, where most of the *Adivasis* live,some leaders of various tribal and other ethnic communities have questioned the 'indigenous' status of the *Adivasis*, because they were transported to Assam by the colonizers mainly for commercial purposes. These ethnic leaders have raised objections to the *Adivasis'* struggle in Assam to get recognition as a Scheduled Tribe, which may entitle the latter to certain constitutional privileges. It is obvious that the term *Adivasi*, which is equivalent to the nomenclature 'indigenous people', and has been in use in mainland India for a long period, has a different symbolic meaning in Northeast India where the term is equivalent to 'tea garden workers', and not to 'indigenous people'. Moreover, the term is considered a derogatory marker of being wild and unsophisticated by several members of other ethnic and tribal communities. It is worthmentioning that the leaders of some ethnic groups of Assam including the Morans, who are also seeking Scheduled Tribe status from the government, prefer to use the term *Khilonjiya*, an Assamese nomenclature, which is equivalent to the term 'indigenous' in the context of Assam.

It is worthmentioning that there are different lists of STs for different states in India.The STs of Assam are mainly divided into two categories, ST: Plains and ST: Hills. There are 15 Hills ST groups and 14 Plains ST groups in Assam as of February 2019. These groups account for around 13 percent of the total population of Assam. The six communities seeking ST status mostly belong to the plains. The Scheduled Tribes along with the Scheduled Castes are considered as backward communities of Indian society. In the aftermath of Independence, the Indian government recognized that it was facing considerable social problems

with respect to these two groups mainly due to the existing hierarchies in terms of caste-consciousness and economic status. The government had mainly three options to these problems: to change social attitudes; to generate economic development that would trickle down to the backward tribes and lower castes; and to institute an affirmative action policy (Bajpai, 2012, p. 38).The government finally decided to adopt the policy of 'reservations' as a form of affirmative action. The 'reservations' were relatively attractive because they could be implemented at once and they would also affect material deprivation and social attitudes simultaneously. The reservations for scheduled tribes and castes establish quotas in three domains; educational institutions including universities, public employment and political representation.

Thus, the term 'Scheduled tribe' is an officially defined category invented in post-colonial India and it is still in common use. The Indian Constitution has never promoted the term *Adivasi* and instead, defines the STs as *Anusuchit Jana Jati*. Traditionally '*Jana*' was the predominant term to define the excluded groups in the Hindi heartland. The Sanskrit word *Jana* referred to the non-monarchical societies of ancient India, existing outside the hierarchical *Jati* (caste) system of the mainstream society (Radhakrishna, 2016, p.5). The British administration defined those people as 'tribes' who retained their distinct identity and culture, particularly in remote and isolated areas.

Electoral Politics: Defection of the Morans from the Mataks

There were several underlying causes which resulted in the defection of the majority of the Morans from the Mataks. After a long period of ethnic co-existence with the Mataks (1938-64), the Moran leaders finally decided to choose their separate path in the arena of ethnic mobilization. Those reasons were primarily associated with electoral politics and the issues of socio-economic development.

The Moran leaders' failure in the 1950s and 1960s, to send any representative from the community to the state legislature of Assam was one of

the major causes behind the defection of Morans. After Independence, the Matak-Moran leaders' joint struggle to get recognition as a 'backward tribe' remained relatively passive for around two decades because the ethnic elites of the group primarily emphasizing ensuring their political representation in the Assam Legislative Assembly (ALA). They also pressured the Congress leaders of Assam to offer candidacy to the members of the Matak-Moran community to contestelections in the districts where the Matak-Moran population was predominant. In the ALA election of 1952, Indreswar Khaund was the only person among the Matak-Morans who was offered a Congress candidacy (Deka Moran, 2018, p. 247).Khaund was elected to ALA from the erstwhile Constituency of 'Tinsukia North'. He subsequently served as the Transport Minister of Assam.Though the Matak-Moran leaders of AAMS urged the Congress leaders of Assam to offer candidacy to Ghanakanta Moran, the former general secretary of the organization, for the Constituency of Doom-Dooma, it was not taken into account by the party.Instead of giving opportunity to Moran who had been a worker of Assam Congress since its inception in 1921, Harihar Chowdhury, a stranger to the local Morans, was offered Congress candidacy for Doom-Dooma Constituency.Subsequently in the elections of 1957, 1962 and 1967, the Congress ticket for the Constituency was offered to Molia Tanti, a member of the community of Tea tribes. Doom Dooma is a region which has been traditionally and culturally associated with the Morans. Continuous political alienation of Morans in their homeland persuaded some ethnic elites of the community to strengthen their organizational base in the region. If the disadvantaged ethnic group is a minority and is concentrated in a geographical area, its elites would demand a legitimate share of political power in the political system.The electoral victory of Khaund in 1952 was perceived by some Matak leaders as an achievement of the first joint political move of the Matak-Morans. A section of ethnic Morans who were working under the banner of AAMS, however, did not recognize Khaund as a representative of the community because Khaund was not an ethnic Moran.

Deka Moran (2018) notes that the Morans cannot claim that Indreswar Khaund belonged to the Moran tribe; currently,the Mataks and the Morans introduce themselves separately and hence, Khaund represents only the Mataks excluding the Morans (p. 247). The Moran leaders had been bearing a grudge below the surface against this electoral deprivation from the very beginning. In the ALA Election of 1957, Indreswar Khaund, Devendra Nath Hazarika and Powaram Dutta from the Matak community were given Congress candidature in response to the demand of AAMS. Bhuban Chandra Chutia, on the other hand, was the only person belonging to the ethnic Morans who was given a Congress ticket for the Constituency of Tinsukia. Subsequently, Indreswar Khaund and Devendra Nath Hazarika were elected to the state legislature, but Chutia suffered a reverse. Devendra Nath Hazarika became a member of the Cabinet of Bimala Prasad Chaliha, the head of the newly elected Congress Government of the state. Among these four persons who were offered candidature of Indian National Congress in the Vidhan Sabha election of Assam, only Bhuban Chandra Chutia was an ethnic Moran, the other three persons represented only the Matak community, albeit in a parochial sense. It can be noticed that Ghanakanta Moran and Bhuban Chandra Chutia later became foundingmembers of *Moran Sabha* in 1965.In the election of 1962, again from the 'non-Moran' section of the Mataks, Devendra Nath Hazarika and Indreswar Khaund were elected to the state legislature. On the other hand, two ethnic Morans Bhaba Barua and Rabin Moran failed to secure victory although they too had been offered Congress candidature.These continuous political failures persuaded the ethnic elites of Morans to consider the 'non-Moran' Mataks as a privileged group which had been occupying the entire political space of the greater community by overshadowing the former.

Subsequently, on the eve of the ALA election of 1972, the organizations of the two groups submitted separate memorandums to the Congress leaders seeking candidature for their respective groups. In the post-colonial history of Assam, it was the first separate political mobilization of the two groups in the field of electoral politics.Thereafter, Indreswar Khaund from the 'non-Moran' Mataks and Tarulata

Bora from the Morans were given Congress candidature. Both were elected to the state legislature. Tarulata Bora is regarded as the first person among the ethnic Morans who represented the community in ALA.

Thus, the criteria of 'blood relations' has been put forward quite consciously by Deka Moran to distinguish his kinsmen from the 'non-Moran' Mataks. In this connection, one can cite the view of Clifford Geertz who believes that people attribute primordial attachment to the ties of blood and kinship. Geertz in his renowned work *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) argues as follows,

By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the 'givens' – or more precisely, as a culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed 'givens' of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the given-ness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language... and following particular practices. These congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to one's kinsman, one's neighbour, one's fellow believer, ipso facto; as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself" (Geertz, 1973, pp. 259-60).

Alienation and Socio-Economic Backwardness of the Morans

Most of the Morans are the inhabitants of Tinsukia district, the easternmost point of Assam. There are currently 114 Moran villages in the district (Dohutia, 2018, p. 176). Some Morans are also found in the districts of Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Jorhat and other regions of Upper Assam. Moreover, a handful of Moran villages are found in the Lohit and Namsai districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Shrikumar Dohutia, a prominent writer and activist from the community argues that "currently the traditional culture and ethnic identity of the Morans is preserved only among the members of the group living in the relatively isolated places of

Tinsukia district". During their protracted Rebellion (1769-1805) against the Ahom State, several Moran people retreated to interior places of the frontier regions surrounded by dense forests to escape Royal wrath. Military campaigns of the Ahom Regime into the villages of Morans in the late Eighteenth Century were often followed by the deportation of a large number of Moran families to the areas which were under the strict surveillance of the Regime (Gogoi, 2007, p. 101). Such campaigns shattered the village-based agrarian economy of the community to a great extent. It was the beginning of their alienation from the 'mainstream Assamese' society.

Before the Morans could overcome those debacles, their territory was colonized in 1839. The British Government introduced several new land policies to facilitate the expansion of tea plantations in the areas inhabited by the Morans and subsequently a new phase of land alienation and displacement began among the Morans. As the Morans had not yet learned to use their landholdings as a commodity, the colonial masters and their agents could grab their land property with minimum effort and under different pretexts. Moreover, being entrapped by the money-lenders and due to the influx of aliens particularly the working and business communities of mainland India, the Morans, who liked isolation, further retreated towards isolated forests and rural areas. The incompatibility of the indigenous communities debarred those groups from entering into newly opened economic and educational opportunities, andtherefore, their conditions deteriorated. The Morans sold their finest lands to the outsiders at throwaway prices, and ended up their money in no time, as they lacked entrepreneurial skills to invest money for profit making.

The worst effect of colonization on the Morans was the expansion of the habit of taking opium. By the end of the Nineteenth Century, a large number of Morans became opium addicted. Opium was patronized and made available in such a way that in the late 1960s there were around 10,000 habitual opium addicts and 20,000 occasional opium eaters among the Morans. With time, opium found

its place even in the religious rituals practised by the community. Under the initiative of AMS,several opium eradication programs were introduced in the Moran villagers in the late 1960s and 1970s. Educational backwardness emerged as another major issue among the Morans.

The educated section of the Moran leaders regarded those issues as some specific socio-economic problems among the Morans which could be solved only through special care and consideration. In the first session of AMS held in March 1966, the leaders of the ethnic group passed a resolution that sought ST recognition for the Morans exclusively. The session passed another resolution demanding the creation of a '*Moran Belt*' including 300 villages of the undivided Lakhimpur district predominantly inhabited by the Morans.

The Quest for ST Status

The Kaka Kalelkar Commission alias the First Backward Class Commission (1953) of India in its Report (1955) recognized both the Morans and the Mataks as a 'most backwards' group, but simultaneously the Commission identified both groups together as a 'Religious Sect'. Subsequently, they were not included in the official list of the STs which was revised in 1956 by the Indian Government in response to certain suggestions of the Kalelkar Commission. The 'primitiveness' and 'backwardness' were the general criteria in government parlance for recognizing a group as an ST in the official lists of 1950 and 1956 (the revised version of the list of 1950), but the Morans were not considered eligible for this recognition mainly due to the erstwhile ethnic interchangeability of the Morans and the rest of the Mataks in official parlance. Though the Morans did fulfil those criteria to a considerable extent, they were perceived as a single ethnic group along with the rest of the Mataks. Thereafter, the Government of India constituted another committee under the chairmanship of B. N. Lokur in June 1965, the aim of which was to advise the Central Government on the revision of the existing lists of both the STs and Scheduled Castes (SCs). The committee in its Report remarked that the specification of certain groups as ST was a problematic affair. The Lokur

Committee reveals that "the difficulty in applying the criteria or characteristics in defining a tribe arose from the fact that the tribes in India were and had been for some decades 'tribes in transition'" (Kulkarni, 1994, pp. 3073-74). For recognizing an ethnic group as ST, the committee put forward certain criteria such as (i) Indications of primitive traits, (ii) Geographical isolation, (iii) Distinctive culture, (iv) Shyness of contact with other communities at large; and (v) Backwardness. It mainly concentrated its focus on certain technical changes in the list which included minor inclusions and exclusions.

The Lokur Committee maintained that "tribes whose members have by and large mixed with the general population were not eligible to be in the Schedule". This recommendation of the Committee was technically very crucial to the erstwhile official ethnic ties between the Mataks and the Morans, as the former includes certain relatively forward castes and communities. The Moran leaders consequently defected from the rest of the Mataks perceiving that if the Moran community identified itselfwith the Matak community, which included some non-tribal groups as well, theMoran's demand for ST status would be weakened (Dutta, 1996: 9). A major break came in 1972 when the community was separately listed from the Mataks in the MOBC list of the Assam Government in response to the repeated demand of the Moran leaders. Hence, safeguarding tribal traits and acquiring tribal recognition from the state for political gain are the major underlying causes behind the bifurcation of the Morans from the rest of the Mataks.

The Morans culturally portray themselves as *Soumar Giri,* meaning the 'owner of the Upper Assam'. However, the issue of seeking a separate Moran Land from the Central Government has not yet found its place in the official agenda of various organizations representing the community. The activities and demands of these organizations are generally aimed at ensuring justifiable political and official representation of the Morans in the state apparatus. According to the Moran leaders getting ST recognition will be the first step in their move towards economic development and political autonomy. But the existing ST groups of Assam

are not in favourof any step taken by the government to bestow official tribal status upon the six ethnic groups of the Brahmaputra Valley namely Ahom, Chutia, Koch Rajbangshi, Matak,Adivasi (Tea-tribes) and the Morans. In 2004, various organizations representing these ethnic groups established *Soi Janagosthiya Oikya Mancha* (a united forum of the six ethnic groups), to strengthen their movement for tribal status.

Political Challenges

On the opposing side, there is the Coordination Committee of the Tribal Organizations of Assam (CCTOA). It is a forum of several organizations representing the recognized 'tribal' ethnic groups (ST) of Assam which constitute 12.45 percent of the total population of Assam as per the Census Report of 2011.The ethnic groups that have already been enjoying ST status fear that the inclusion of more ethnic groups within the same constitutional category would slice away the benefits and concessions they currently avail. Thus, the entire issue of ethnic resurgence in Assam primarily revolves around the perception or fear of 'relative deprivation' in the sphere of material gain and resource sharing. Sometimes, fear of deprivation becomes politically more influential and effective than the actual degree of relative deprivation existing in the socio-political apparatus. The leaders of the state-recognized tribal groups assert that the quest of these six ethnic groups for ST status is against the rules of the Indian Constitution because these groups do not fulfil the criteria to become ST.The irony is that the Indian Constitution has not fixed any specific criteria for recognizing any group as a 'tribe' unlike the SCs, and left the matter to the consideration of the Executive. It gives opportunity to the political parties to make the matter of identifying and recognizing 'tribal' groups more politicized.

The concepts like 'indigenous' and 'tribal' can be defined only concerning the state. Material considerations of both the government and the aspiring communities play a vital role in the making and unmaking of identities which leads to the birth of new ethnic claims and demands based on 'indigeneity'. In September

2020, the Assam State Assembly passed three bills to create autonomous councils for the Morans, the Mataks and the Koch-Rajbongshis; instead of granting ST status to these communities. Subsequently, in July 2021, the Government of Assam announced the creation of a new AdministrativeDepartment named "Indigenous and Tribal Faith and Culture Department"to preserve and promote the customs and rituals of different indigenous groups. This department will explore the scope for using indigenous tribal knowledge in fields like culture, healthcare, education and agriculture. The jurisdiction of this department includes not only the STs but also the other indigenous and tribal groups of the state like the Morans and the Mataks, which arecurrently not included in the list of STs.

Conclusion

The socio-economic and cultural traditions of the Morans have been marked by their inalienable relation with jungles and their species and products. During the first five hundred years of the Ahom regime, the Morans contributed a lot to the expansion and maintenance of the Ahom State. However, later on, due to growing sectarian rivalries and finally oppressive and authoritarian policies pursued by some Ahom officials,the Morans broke their age-old tradition of collaboration with the existing statesystem and raised the banner of a powerful rebellion which would turn the tide of political history of Assam. The military expedition carried out by the Ahom Government ruined the village-centric socio-economic structure of the Morans to a great extent and changed the demographic distribution of the community as well. Apart from the Morans who perished in the Rebellion, many other Morans reportedly disguised themselves as Ahoms to escape persecution and finally, they merged with the latter. The social and psychological alienation of the Morans from the mainstream Assamese society as well as from the British administration continued throughout the greater part of the colonial era after the annexation of the 'Matak territory' and the formation of the erstwhile greater Lakhimpur district, which included the territory of the present-day Tinsukia district. British tea planters' greed for land to expand the territories of tea gardens and

colonial forest policy alienated the Morans to a great extent not only from their cultivable lands but also from their age-old right to use some of the most resourceful jungles of the area. Cultural conservatism among the Morans led to the further stagnation of the Moran society.Primarily a warrior race, being proud, resolute, simple, determined and sturdy people, the Morans were unable to retain their place in Assamese society and ended up being severely marginalized. Throughout history, every interaction of the Morans with outsiders has brought about several adverse changes to the community. While the advent of the Ahoms reduced their political space, the interaction with the British deprived them of their landholdings and socio-economic status, thereby drastically eroding their social, economic and educational profile. In post-colonial India, the civil society organizations among the Morans such as *Assam Moran Sabha*, *All Moran Students' Union*, *Moran Jatiya Mahia Parishad* and*Moran Sahitya Sabha*are working to preserve cultural heritages of the community and bringing about socio-economic development by placing their demands before the Government.

The connection between ethnicity, state and nationality is due to the requirement that the political space of a nation must be shared. If the voice of some social groups remains unheard, then they in certain ways cease to be a part of the greater socio-political apparatus called 'nation-state'. It leads to the politicisation of one's social identity which leads to ethnic resurgence. In Northeast India, ethnicity remains the pivot around which much of the local politics of the region revolves. Even the ruling BJP, the staunch nationalist political party, has become bound to take into consideration the demographic distribution of various ethnic groups in different pockets of Assam in the cases of both the State Assembly elections and the Parliamentary elections. In essence, the assertion of the 'tribal' identity by the Morans and some other ethnic groups of Assam is not essentially inclined towards seeking rejuvenation of a glorious past, nor they are necessarily secessionist. Ethnic resurgence among the Morans is aimed at ensuring a justifiable position for the community in terms of political representation and resource sharing.

The Morans' desire to get recognition as a 'Scheduled Tribe' is being backed by their quest for constitutional safeguard in the fields of land, jobs, political representation and overall resource sharing. It is evident that though the intra-group components like kinship, culture and tradition, have become the ideological and inspirational base for the Morans for defining ethnicity and triggering ethnic resurgence, one can easily notice that such ethnic mobilizations are originally triggered by material concerns. The official recognition as a 'tribe' in India is followed by the advantages of reservation, concession and constitutional safeguard in the fields of education, employment and legislature. The Moran leaders are resenting the fact that both the Congress Party and BJP are using the issue of conferring tribal status upon the community as a diplomatic means to secure Morans votes of Upper Assam, but these political parties have made it their habit to sideline this demand once they capture power after elections.

The moran leaders belive that the government's act of granting scheduled Tribe Status to the indigenous ethnic groups of Assam will ensure constitutional safeguard for the indigenous groups of Assam.

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