

**Indigeneity and Development: Emerging Contradictions in the Case  
of the Misings and the Dam on Obonori**

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**Thesis Submitted to the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati for the  
Partial Fulfilment of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**



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**September, 2025**



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### Declaration

I, Pranab Kumar Pegu, declare that this thesis titled “**Indigeneity and Development: Emerging Contradictions in the Case of the Misings and the Dam on Obonori**” is the outcome of my own research carried out under the supervision of Dr. Vasundhara Jairath in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, India.

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### Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis titled “**Indigeneity and Development: Emerging Contradictions in the Case of the Misings and the Dam on Obonori**”, submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Pranab Kumar Pegu, student at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, embodies research work carried out under my supervision. The present thesis or any part thereof has not been submitted anywhere else for the award of any degree or diploma.

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September 2025

## Contents

<b>Declaration</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Certificate</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>List of Figures</b>	<b>vii-x</b>
<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>xi-xii</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>xiii-xxii</b>
<b>Acknowledgement</b>	<b>xxiii-xxv</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>xxvi-xxvii</b>

### **Chapter 1: Introduction** **1-54**

1. Statement of the Problem	3
2. Literature Review	
2.1. Transition of Tribes in the Writings of Indian Anthropology and Sociology	13
2.2. The Assertion of Tribes as Indigenous	18
2.3. Indigeneity, Capitalist Relations, and Labour Question	26
2.4. Northeast India and New Realities	30
3. Research Questions	38

3.1.Objectives	38
4. Methodology	39
5. The Structure of the Thesis	48

## **Chapter 2: Belang in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century** **55-121**

1. Introduction	55
2. The Present: Land, People, and Relationships in Belang	59
2.1.Nostalgia and Regrets	59
2.2.Fragmentations, Landlessness, and Feuds	67
3. Situating a Colonial Past	74
3.1.The Path Towards Sedentarisation	74
3.2.Negotiating with a Colonial State	79
3.3.The Losers in Negotiations: Increase in Internal Differentiation	83
4. Becoming Belang Dolung after 1950: Aspirations, Ecological Constraints, and Opium Consumption	88
4.1.Accumulating Extensive Landholdings	88
4.2.Access to Unclaimed Lands and having a choice	92
4.3.Increasing Diseases and Land	96
4.4.Opium Consumption and Landlessness	100
5. The Squeezed-Out Populations	105
5.1.Becoming Haluwas and Ruwonis	105

5.2.Finding Work in Concrete Dreams: Breaking the Patron-Client Relationship	109
5.3.Subsisting Agriculture by Wage Labouring	113
6. Conclusion	119
<b>Chapter 3: The Obonori and the Misings</b>	<b>122-181</b>
1. Introduction	122
2. River Dwellers, State, and Recurring Floods	127
3. Being a Mising: Suffering, and Access to Resources along a River	136
4. Competing Claims over the River	142
5. Enclosing the Pathway of the Floating Logs and Driftwood	149
6. The Declining Fish Population	157
7. The Manual Miners, The Quarry, and the Dam	168
8. Conclusion	180
<b>Chapter 4: The Hills: A Fallback</b>	<b>182-227</b>
1. Introduction	182
2. If it were not for the Hills	184
3. Starting One's Own Logging Business	194
4. Competing Claims over the Hills	208
5. Tani Brotherhood vs. Defending a Reserve Forest	213
6. Unlocking Opportunities	220
7. Conclusion	226

<b>Chapter 5: The Dam and the People</b>	<b>228-287</b>
1. Introduction	228
2. Dams, Development, and Resistance in India	229
3. The Coming of the SLHEP: From Dream Zones to Resistance Zones	235
4. Anticipating an Uncertain Future	250
5. Entangled in Material Conditions: Beyond Compulsion or Choice	263
6. Development and Its Differential Impact	274
7. Conclusion	286

<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion</b>	<b>288-297</b>
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<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>298-326</b>
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## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1.</b>	Map of Northeast India with focus on the districts of Assam. The red mark on the map depicts the fieldwork site.	1
<b>Figure 2.</b>	Map showing the larger area of the fieldwork	2
<b>Figure 3.</b>	A gumboot and a helmet of a worker	5
<b>Figure 4.</b>	A map depicting the fieldwork sites	39
<b>Figure 5.</b>	A rough sketch depicting the reserved and de-reserved forest area	62
<b>Figure 6.</b>	A photograph of the cadastral revenue map of the farmlands of the southern part of the road conducted in 1969-70	63
<b>Figure 7.</b>	Chart depicting a case of land fragmentation of a family	72
<b>Figure 8.</b>	Villagers of Béláng performing <i>rigbo</i> to prepare apong (sacred rice alcohol) for a funeral feast	106
<b>Figure 9.</b>	A stilt house on the river island	148
<b>Figure 10.</b>	An under-constructed makeshift house on a small river island	148
<b>Figure 11.</b>	Accumulated driftwood in the river Obonori	153

<b>Figure 12.</b>	Driftwood lying along the river shores, and a boat loaded with wood planks converted from collected logs from the river	153
<b>Figure 13.</b>	A Person holding a <i>Dirdang</i>	163
<b>Figure 14.</b>	A fisherman pulling out fish from the gill net	164
<b>Figure 15.</b>	An old couple manually extracting stones from the Obonori riverbed	168
<b>Figure 16.</b>	Accumulated sand by manual miners	168
<b>Figure 17.</b>	A scene of machine mining on the dried riverbed of Obonori in winter	174
<b>Figure 18.</b>	The central stone crusher that supplies gravel for the dam construction, located on the river island	175
<b>Figure 19.</b>	A poster of the FD that strictly prohibits stocking materials mined from the river	175
<b>Figure 20.</b>	Fresh yeast	189
<b>Figure 21.</b>	Women carrying procured firewood from the hills	190
<b>Figure 22.</b>	Scene of brewing <i>apong</i> in a <i>dodgang</i>	191

<b>Figure 23.</b>	A scene of foraging <i>Kamro ékkam</i>	193
<b>Figure 24.</b>	A person carrying timber on his bicycle	205
<b>Figure 25.</b>	A scene of people doing <i>dulai</i>	205
<b>Figure 26.</b>	People involved in the <i>dulai</i> resting on wood planks	206
<b>Figure 27.</b>	A land document granting occupancy rights in the SRF under the FRA	213
<b>Figure 28.</b>	Women protesting the under-construction road	218
<b>Figure 29.</b>	A letter written to the Bélang village youth council to settle a land dispute on the hill	224
<b>Figure 30.</b>	The under-construction dam on the river Obonori	229
<b>Figure 31.</b>	My family members posing for a picture against the background of the dam	241
<b>Figure 32.</b>	A picture of a meeting held against the dam in 2003	248
<b>Figure 33.</b>	The motto of the dam project	250
<b>Figure 34.</b>	Workers leaving for work in a hired small truck	252
<b>Figure 35.</b>	One of the workers from Bélang poses for the camera before leaving for work	253

**Figure 36.** A sketch map of the dam project 254

**Figure 37.** A hoarding depicting the anti-dam stance of TMPK in a meeting held in Gogamukh in 2023 263



## Abbreviations

AASU	: All Assam Students' Union
AGP	: Asom Gana Parishad
AMBK	: Adi Mising Bane Kébang
BJP	: Bharatiya Janata Party
BFCC	: Brahmaputra Flood Control Commission
CEA	: Central Electricity Authority
CPR	: Common Property Resources
CSR	: Corporate Social Responsibility
EIA	: Environmental Impact Assessment
FD	: Forest Department
FRA	: Forest Rights Act
GMCC	: Galo Mising Coordination Committee
GOI	: Government of India
ILP	: Inner Line Permit
KMSS	: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti
MAC	: Mising Autonomous Council
MPRVDP	: Multi-Purpose River Valley Development Projects
NER	: North East Region
NGT	: National Green Tribunal
NBA	: Narmada Bachao Andolan
NEFA	: North East Frontier Agency

NHPC	: National Hydro-electric Project Corporation
PMSV	: People's Movement for Subansiri Valley
PRO	: Public Relations Officer
RCC	: Reinforced Cement Concrete
SVIPF	: Subansiri Valley Indigenous People's Forum
SEZ	: Special Economic Zone
SLHEP	: Subansiri Lower Hydro Electric Project
SRF	: Subansiri Reserve Forest
TMPK	: Takam Mising Porin Kébang
WCD	: World Commission on Dams



## *Glossary*

<i>A:bang</i>	<i>A:bang</i> is a hymn sung by the Mibus, the traditional priest of the Misings, during rituals. <i>A:bang</i> also conveys oral narratives about the creation of the universe and serves as an oral testimony to the history of the Misings.
<i>Ago golung</i>	A Mising term for a cemetery.
<i>Abkaree</i>	Excise tax.
<i>Ali- A:yé-Lígang</i>	A festival of the Mising community in February, where rituals are performed to revere and appease the deities responsible for a good harvest.
<i>Apong</i>	Name for alcohol made of rice. It is a beverage which the Mising widely consume, and it is believed to be sacred, which is why the deities and ancestors are offered in any rituals. Despite being largely influenced by neo-Vaishnavism and other major religions, the majority of Misings maintain their ritualistic practice of offering fowl, pigs and alcohol.
<i>Babbatta</i>	Male individuals older than one's father who belong to the same clans and kin groups.
<i>Baboi</i>	Refers to a male individual who is younger than one's father, belonging to the same clan.
<i>Balisiri</i>	A sandy, barren patch of land along a river.
<i>Bhanga Singa</i>	Scrap metal.

<i>Bigha</i>	It is a unit of measurement of land. A bigha of land is 14400 square feet and 0.3 acres. It is commonly used as a measurement in Assam.
<i>Biri</i>	A mini cigarette where tobacco is wrapped in locally procured dried leaves or paper.
<i>Chapori</i>	<i>Chapori</i> generally refers to shifting land masses along the banks or in the middle of the river. <i>Chaporis</i> changes its shapes and sizes depending on the ebbs and flows of rivers. These land masses serve as grazing and farming space for riverine populations.
<i>Daklék</i>	A Mising term to denote community labour practice to harvest paddy.
<i>Dalals</i>	Intermediaries or middlemen.
<i>Dangori</i>	This is a term for paddy, which is tied together in a bundle to ease handling and measure the harvest of paddy fields. This bundling process helps transport and store the paddy in granaries easily.
<i>Daran</i>	A raised platform used for slicing/sawing logs.
<i>Dírdang</i>	A large fish trap designed to catch fish in strong water currents.
<i>Dodgang</i>	A funeral feast.
<i>Dobur</i>	A ritual that is held in Mising villages for a good harvest and good health of the whole village population. This ritual is also

used as a medium of conflict resolution within the village. There are different types of *Dobur* rituals. For instance, one is confined to the village's well-being, the second to intra and inter-family conflicts, and the third to the hunters.

<i>Dom</i>	<i>Dom</i> is a term used for the fishing community in the caste Assamese society. These communities are placed in the lowest strata of Assamese society.
<i>Dulai</i>	The act of manually carrying timbers in the hills.
<i>Époms</i>	Types of deities that inhabit tall trees. The Misings believe these deities play a role in selecting the <i>Mibus</i> , or shamans.
<i>Épop</i>	A Mising term for yeast for brewing alcohol. The yeast is made of a variety of herbs collected locally from the forests.
<i>Ekchaniya</i>	A term to denote an annual lease on land granted by the state.
<i>Yumrang Ui</i>	A ritual to revere the guardian deities of the forest.
<i>Gam</i>	Traditional headmen.
<i>Gagori</i>	Water rapids.
<i>Ghura gari</i>	A horse-pulled cart.
<i>Gram Sevak</i>	A grassroots-level employee who works in villages.
<i>Guwal</i>	Cattle herder.

<i>Hajira</i>	A local term for informal wage labour.
<i>Haluwa</i>	The term literally means a man who ploughs. The term also refers to a man who works as a servant in wealthy families.
<i>Headmistry</i>	A person who is a mason and leads any construction site.
<i>Ísing dukne</i>	A person who sells timber using a bicycle.
<i>Jal</i>	Water.
<i>Jameen</i>	Land.
<i>Jhum</i>	Refers to the practice of shifting cultivation. This term is popularly used in the Northeastern region of India to describe the prevalent agricultural practices.
<i>Jugali</i>	An apprentice in concrete construction work.
<i>Jungle</i>	Forest.
<i>Kamdang</i>	A male water crow (Cormorant).
<i>Kamro ékkam</i>	A local name for packing leaves. The scientific name is <i>Phrynium</i> . The leaves hold cultural and economic significance for numerous communities in the region.
<i>Kani paan</i>	A ritual that is done for the well-being of cattle, where people smoke opium as a part of the ritual.
<i>Karbar</i>	Business transactions.

<i>Karé</i>	Stilt.
<i>Katha</i>	A unit of measurement of land. In Assam, 1 katha is equal to 2880 square feet.
<i>Kayas</i>	<i>Kaya</i> is a term for a business community in India that has penetrated every rural corner of Northeast India. They are also known as <i>Marwaris</i> .
<i>Kébang</i>	A Mising term for an organisation.
<i>Korotiyal</i>	People involved in manual logging, who do felling of trees and slice them into planks.
<i>Kumsung</i>	Granary.
<i>Langis</i>	Gill nets.
<i>Magbo</i>	Brother-in-law.
<i>Magh Bihu</i>	A harvesting festival that is held in January. It is held across communities in Assam.
<i>Mahajan</i>	A term for wealthy people who are involved in the cash crop business or run a shop in the village.
<i>Mahal</i>	It is a designated area where specific forest products are sold. These areas are leased to private contractors who pay a security deposit or a royalty to the state forest department. They function as checkpoints where individuals involved in logging or the

forest product business are required to pay a fee to conduct their operations.

<i>Mahaldar</i>	A lessee of a <i>mahal</i> .
<i>Mahut</i>	A person who herds elephants.
<i>Maliks</i>	A local term for owner or wealthy individuals.
<i>Mauza</i>	A land revenue unit which consists of many villages.
<i>Mibu</i>	A Mising priest or a shaman.
<i>Mipag</i>	A term for non-Misings. It is generally used for the caste Assamese population.
<i>Miya</i>	The term refers to the Muslim migrant Bengali population in Assam.
<i>Monbang jug</i>	These terms refer to the past that many elders consider to be a fool's phase.
<i>Mopin</i>	An agricultural festival celebrated by the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.
<i>Murong ukum</i>	A traditional bachelor's dormitory of the Misings.
<i>Namsing</i>	Fermented fish.
<i>Nébing</i>	Babysitter.

<i>Ngorang</i>	A riverine catfish. Its scientific name is <i>Bagarius bagarius</i>
<i>Ngomug</i>	A riverine carp. Its scientific name is <i>Kuria labeo</i> .
<i>Ngopi</i>	A riverine carp fish. Its scientific name is <i>Bangana dero</i> .
<i>Nodiyals</i>	<i>Nodiyals</i> are another name for a fishing community called <i>Kaibarta</i> in Assam.
<i>Ongo Toli</i>	A fish habitat.
<i>Pam</i>	The term refers to temporary cultivation practices by clearing patches of unused land in Assam.
<i>Pagné</i>	Female slave in Mising.
<i>Pagbo</i>	Male slave in Mising.
<i>Patta</i>	A term that refers to a periodic lease of land granted by the state to an individual.
<i>Pékam</i>	A female water crow.
<i>Pera</i>	A wooden box.
<i>Posa</i>	<i>Posa</i> was an arrangement between the Ahom kingdom and the neighbouring tribes, such as the Nagas, Abors, and Miris. This arrangement was based on the annual payment of tribute to these tribes in kind or cash. This was a way to keep the neighbouring tribes at bay from the plains of the Brahmaputra valley.

<i>Potika</i>	Country liquor, made by distillation process.
<i>Pucca</i>	Concrete.
<i>Pura</i>	A unit of measurement of land. In Assam, one pura is 1.32 acres.
<i>Rigbo</i>	The term refers to community labour institutions used by Mising families requiring significant help in constructing houses or any other work.
<i>Rupit</i>	A term for permanent cultivable land which is away from the riverine tracts and the submontane tracts in Assam.
<i>Ruwoni</i>	A woman who plants paddy, but it also signifies maidservants employed by wealthy families.
<i>Ryot</i>	The term is used against an individual who is a taxpayer and has proprietorship rights of land.
<i>Ryotwari</i>	This is a land tenure system introduced by the British colonial regime in the Brahmaputra valley, where individuals were granted proprietor rights over land against a tax paid to the state.
<i>Sahab</i>	This term refers to an individual with a privileged position and wealth in society.
<i>Sali</i>	Refers to a paddy variety that is also known as winter rice, which is typically cultivated in the monsoon season and harvested in the winter. This paddy requires permanent paddy fields to be cultivated.

<i>Sarok</i>	It is a term used by Misings to refer to another tribe called Hill Miris.
<i>Sorati</i>	A unit of measurement of opium used by the people. However, in the Indian context, it is generally used as a unit of measurement of gold. 1 <i>sorati</i> would be equivalent to 182 milligrams.
<i>Sompa</i>	A term for elephant apple. Its scientific name is <i>Dillenia Indica</i> . It is commonly used in many Mising dishes.
<i>Siang</i>	<i>Siang</i> is the name of the Brahmaputra in the Adi language.
<i>Sulli</i>	Sand.
<i>Tapum Gasor</i>	Shawl made of eri silk.
<i>Tato</i>	Grandfather
<i>Tayeng Ukum</i>	A stilt house. The majority of Misings stay in a stilt house.
<i>Tamul</i>	Areca nut. It has cultural significance in many societies in Assam and the region. People consume it for daily consumption, as well as offer it to guests and use it in rituals in the Brahmaputra valley.
<i>Thela</i>	A hand-cart used for carrying commodities and for daily household usage.
<i>Tiniali</i>	A junction where three roads meet, also serving as a village market centre.

<i>Tingir</i>	A kind of riverine carp fish. Its scientific name is <i>Garra gotyla</i> .
<i>Toujibahi</i>	A term for land that is classified as under the control of the Revenue Department of the state.
<i>Tupula Bhaat</i>	An Assamese term for rice wrapped in leaves.
<i>Ui/Uyu</i>	These terms refer to the deities and spirits that the Misings believe govern every aspect of their lives. Additionally, these terms also signify the act of appeasing these deities.
<i>Yayo</i>	Grandmother.



## Acknowledgement

This thesis embodies the collective efforts of numerous individuals. Without them, it would not have taken its current shape. I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Dr Vasundhara Jairath, for being an exceptional guide and for the firm support throughout my Master's and PhD journey. Her critical insights have been pivotal in shaping my thesis and have left an indelible mark on me as a researcher. She was patient and meticulous with the numerous drafts of the thesis and articles.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the chairperson of my doctoral committee, Professor Arupjyoti Saikia, and the committee members, Dr. John Thomas and Dr. Ngamjahao Kipgen, for their valuable suggestions and comments on my thesis. I am also thankful to Dr. Prasad Khanolkar and Professor Swamy Ray for their encouragement and support throughout my journey since my MA days. Additionally, I would like to extend my appreciation to all the wonderful teachers I have had the privilege of learning from during my educational journey.

I am extremely grateful to Roshni for her unwavering support during my PhD journey. She has supported me during both the highs and lows of my life. I am thankful to her for being so patient in reading my rough drafts. Her feedback and critical insights while writing the thesis were important to shape this thesis.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my friends Debasish, Sourav, Gayotree, Himalaya, and Prathana, who have been my constant support throughout my PhD journey. Without this group of people, I believe the journey would have been much more challenging. I truly appreciate their companionship, which has always been positive and has helped me overcome the obstacles I faced along the way. Many thanks to Debashish and Sourav for sharing the responsibility of reading my chapters. I will always treasure the long discussions we've had on a wide range of topics, from

academic subjects to personal matters. These conversations serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of friendship in both our academic journeys and in life.

I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Biswajit Sarmah for his support and for sharing documents, which have been important to shape the historical narratives in the thesis. I would like to thank Somiwon and Upasana for sparing their valuable time to read a few of my chapter drafts. I am also thankful to Anindya and Abhimanyu for the maps in the thesis. I also take this opportunity to thank my colleagues and friends, Nasir, Abhilasha, and Shilpa Chaya, for being supportive throughout the journey. I extend my gratitude to *Kai* Durlov, who has always welcomed me and opened his room whenever needed.

I would like to sincerely thank Professor Dolly Kikon for her encouraging words and for supporting my work. I also want to express my gratitude to the Roots and Bridges Collective for their workshop on ethnographic writing. I have gained valuable insights into the craft of writing ethnography.

I would like to thank the people of Mingmang, who have been part of the fieldwork. From the bottom of my heart, I thank *Magbo* Susen, *Magbo* Janata, *Bai* Monica, *Kai* Deep, Udar, Bhakha, Dibyajyoti, *Kai* Gojen, *Kaki* Tei, Kanu, and Niki; without their support and collaboration, doing fieldwork and writing the thesis would not have been possible. Many thanks to *Magbo* Harichandra Kaman and Keshab Krishna Chattradhara for sharing reading materials and documents related to the anti-dam movement.

Lastly, I would like to express my deep gratitude to my family for their unwavering support throughout my PhD journey. I dedicate this thesis to my grandparents, the late Moniram (Ko:be) Pegu and Omra Pegu. I am also grateful to my parents, Sormita and Bijoy, and my sisters, Punu,

Onu, and Tapi, who have supported me throughout my educational endeavours. Without their sacrifices and encouragement, I would not be where I am today.



## Abstract

The thesis delves into a central question: in a context of agrarian crises and changing political economy, how do Indigenous rural communities engage with development projects that introduce a new structure of accumulation? It explores the relationship between an Indigenous community and a development project, specifically focusing on the under-construction dam on the Obonori River in the Assam- Arunachal Pradesh border. The community faces numerous threats and is acutely aware of the negative impacts associated with the dam. Nevertheless, a significant portion of those affected by its construction has opted to engage in the construction economy that surrounds it in order to sustain their livelihoods. This situation creates a paradoxical relationship with the dam. The thesis seeks to investigate the implications of this involvement, arguing that the conflicting nature of this relationship stems from individuals' struggles for social reproduction. It posits that indigenous populations, often perceived as strong defenders of their land, may not always align with this image. This reveals a complex and dynamic relationship. Hence, the thesis highlights that these intricacies are influenced by a combination of historical capitalist agrarian change, ecological factors, landlessness, joblessness, aspirations, and growing capitalist relationships within the community. Thus, this thesis critically interrogates the dominant narrative that posits Indigenous populations as uniformly opposed to development projects that jeopardise their territories, water resources, and forests. By advancing our understanding of indigeneity, this research emphasises the necessity of contextualising Indigenous experiences within historical, material, and aspirational frameworks. It critiques the prevalent inclination to uphold simplistic and generalised representations of Indigenous communities, which can contribute to the reinforcement of stereotypes that portray these groups as ahistorical and static. Furthermore, the thesis contests reductionist critiques of indigeneity that seek to undermine and delegitimise the

claims and agency of Indigenous communities, often without considering the situated nature of claims that are contingent on historical and material contexts.



# Chapter 1

## Introduction



Figure 1: Map of Northeast India with focus on the districts of Assam. The red triangle on the map represents the fieldwork site. (Source: d-maps.com)

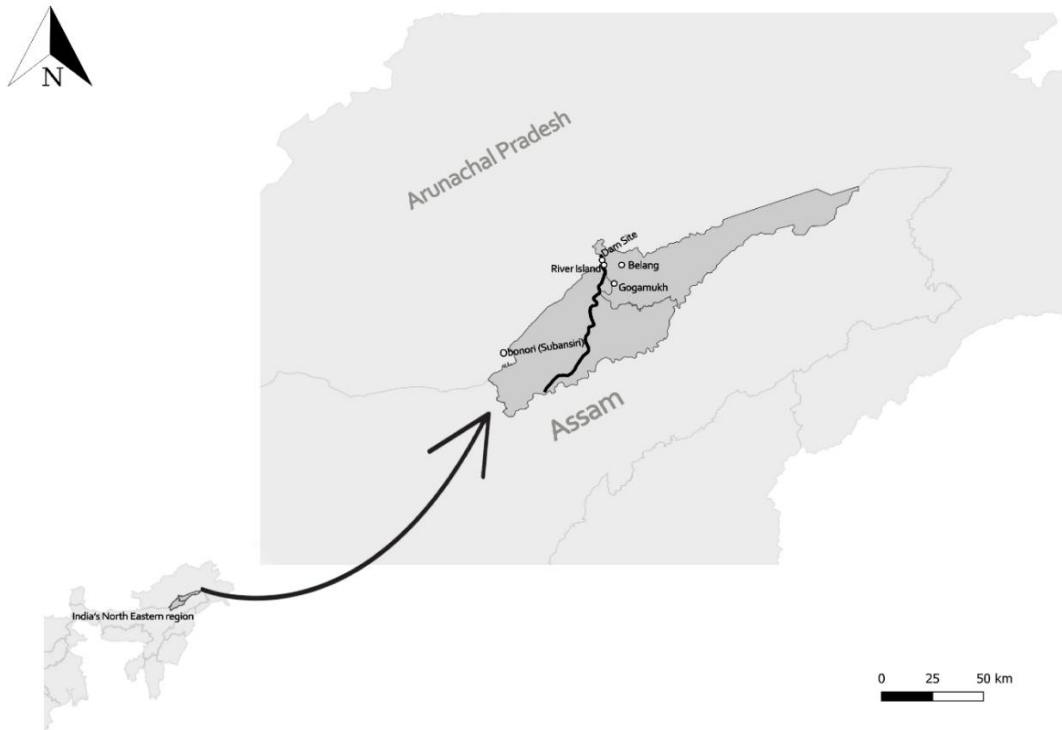


Figure 2: Map showing the larger area of the fieldwork (Source: Abhimanyu Chettri)



## 1. Statement of the Problem

There may be a few labourers working on the dam who support its construction. Most of us do not support the dam. I do not like the dam, but our lives and struggles for livelihood force us to go and work in the dam.<sup>1</sup>

The above statement is from a middle-aged dam construction worker from BÉlang, a downstream village of the dam in the district of Dhemaji, Assam. He hinted at his paradoxical position towards the dam. While explaining his situation regarding the dam, he also represents the voices of many people who work on it. Despite resentment against the dam, he has been earning his livelihood as a construction worker. As the 2000MW Subansiri Lower Hydro Electric Project (SLHEP) under National Hydro-electric Power Corporation (NHPC, a public sector hydropower company) nears completion on the river Obonori<sup>2</sup> in the eastern part of Assam bordering Arunachal Pradesh, the local people surrounding the dam have become a part of the construction process. Mainly, the Mising tribal populations, who form the majority of the downstream communities, consider the dam their workplace. Yellow helmets and gumboot-clad workers throng the roads and *tinialis*<sup>3</sup> that lead towards the project site. I belong to BÉlang, a Mising village. Against this participation in the construction, I have witnessed the anti-dam movement in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and grew up hearing narratives of imminent dangers posed by the dam. However, at present, people's participation in constructing the dam and the absence of protest had left me puzzled.

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<sup>1</sup> Field notes, BÉlang, November 4, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Obonori is the Mising name of the river Subansiri.

<sup>3</sup> *Tiniali* refers to a junction where three roads meet. They are also often the village market center.

I was surprised by how things were different from my expectations, rooted in the assumption that the Indigenous population, who would be affected by the dam, would fiercely defend their resources in the wake of extraction. This disjuncture called for careful attention to understand why people work on the dam when there are narratives of imminent dangers around it. Indigenous politics and movements around the world came into prominence in the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century across the globe. These movements are associated with their close association with nature and their struggle to defend their lands from being grabbed by extractive projects. Similarly, India's tribal/Indigenous<sup>4</sup> communities have been historically considered to be fierce defenders of *Jal* (water), *Jungle* (forest) and *Jameen* (land) against an influx of extractive state-led development projects.<sup>5</sup> These Indigenous movements not only upheld their attachment to nature but also paved the way for an alternative development model, challenging the dominant extractive development models.<sup>6</sup> In these backdrops, there is an underlying antagonistic portrayal of Indigenous people's relationship with development projects that threaten to dispossess them of their means of subsistence. However, the situation in relation to the dam stands in contrast to the images assigned to Indigenous movements in India and across the globe. Rather, it depicts a complex relationship

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<sup>4</sup> I use the terms tribal and Indigenous interchangeably throughout the thesis. The term tribal in Northeast India holds a similar meaning to Indigenous. Although the term 'tribal' has historically been associated with 'primitiveness', it is used by the people of the region to assert their indigeneity.

<sup>5</sup> See also Alf Gunvald Nilsen, "Contesting Resources, Contesting the Nation?," *Contemporary South Asia* 30, no. 2 (2022): 301–3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2022.2060346>.

<sup>6</sup> Alf Gunvald Nilsen, *Dispossession and Resistance in India: The River and the Rage*, Routledge Advances in South Asian Studies 16 (Routledge, 2010); Nilsen, "Contesting Resources, Contesting the Nation?"; Judith Whitehead, *Development and Dispossession in the Narmada Valley* (Longman, 2010).

with the dam. Against this context, this thesis delves into the implications of engagement with the dam in an area predominantly inhabited by an Indigenous population.



Figure 3: A gumboot and a helmet of a worker (Source: Author)

In recent decades, the Government of India (GOI) has pushed to meet the ‘hydro-potential’ of India’s Northeastern Region (NER) in the name of ‘developing’ an ‘underdeveloped’ region. The GOI declared the Northeast the ‘future powerhouse’ for its hydropower potential.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, there is an increase in the number of dam constructions in the region. The SLHEP on the river Obonori is about to be commissioned, following the start of construction in the early years of the 2000s. Recently, the construction work for the Dibang Valley multi-purpose project in Arunachal Pradesh has commenced. Currently, amidst increasing push for a dam by the GOI, there is an

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<sup>7</sup> Neeraj Vaghlikar and Partha J. Das, “Damming the Northeast,” Kalpavriksh, Aranyak and Action Aid India, 2010.

ongoing protest in Arunachal Pradesh by the Adi tribes against the pre-feasibility study of a 11000 MW multi-purpose dam on the Siang River.<sup>8</sup> Like this protest, these mega-dams in the region have faced stiff public protests owing to the dangers associated with the dam construction. The protests reveal apprehensions about the loss of river-based livelihood due to the enclosure of natural resources and the destruction of the Indigenous people's lifeworld. They highlight the risk of building dams in an ecologically fragile region- a highly active seismic zone and a rich biodiversity hotspot region. Amongst these movements, the anti-dam movement against the SLHEP on Obonori stood out for its massive protest and focus on the dam's downstream impacts. As construction started in the early 2000s, numerous students, civil society, ethnic, and peasant organisations of Assam protested the project. To highlight the area being a seismic zone, it highlighted the unprecedented flood following the earthquake of the 1950s on the river Obonori.<sup>9</sup> The landslide triggered by the earthquake obstructed the river, consequently disrupting the flow of water downstream. When the barrier eventually failed, it resulted in the devastation of villages and a significant loss of life in the affected areas downstream. The anti-dam movement portrayed the dam as a bomb in the making, destined to destroy the downstream population. The question of what would happen if the dam breaks because of its location in a highly active seismic zone became imminent. Subsequently, the imagery of the dam changed from a marker of development to a

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<sup>8</sup> Tongam Rina, "Second Major Protest against Siang Hydro Project as Hundreds Gather in Geku," *The Arunachal Times* (Itanagar), October 6, 2024, <https://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2024/10/06/second-major-protest-against-siang-hydro-project-as-hundreds-gather-in-geku/>.

<sup>9</sup> To understand the magnitude of the earthquake, see Bérénice Guyot-Réchar, "Reordering a Border Space: Relief, Rehabilitation, and Nation-Building in Northeastern India after the 1950 Assam Earthquake," *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 4 (2015): 931–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X14000250>; Arupjyoti Saikia, *The Unquiet River: A Biography of the Brahmaputra*, Second impression (Oxford University Press, 2019).

destroyer of human lives, river-based livelihoods, and ecology. These anti-dam movements have shattered the image of the dam promoted by the Indian state. Especially in Assam, public opinion on incoming dams has shifted from the dam as a symbol of development to an inducer of unprecedented floods downstream to the Brahmaputra valley from the dams in the hilly regions.<sup>10</sup> While the anti-dam movement was ripening on the banks of Obonori as early as 2003, water released from the Kurichu dam in Bhutan had unleashed an unprecedented flood in the valley areas of western Assam. In addition, the Kapili dam, built in the hilly districts of Karbi Anglong, continues to wreak havoc in the districts of middle Assam. The Ranganadi dam in Arunachal Pradesh, the nearest to the anti-dam protest hotspot, became an example of a dam as a flood inducer. These unprecedented floods led the movement to garner support against the dam. The organisations painted a dystopian future for the downstream population. Consequently, discussions about the dam became focused on depicting it as a destructive force.

These protests somehow delayed the commissioning of the SLHEP dam by stalling the construction for a few years, from 2011 to 2019. However, following a judgment passed by the National Green Tribunal (NGT)<sup>11</sup> invoking public interest, construction resumed in 2019.<sup>12</sup> In recent years, no organisations or communities living downstream have been seen actively agitating, even as the dam construction continues. Numerous news reports state that the dam will

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<sup>10</sup> Chandan Kumar Sharma, “Dam, ‘Development’ and Popular Resistance in Northeast India,” *Sociological Bulletin* 67, no. 3 (2018): 317–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022918796942>.

<sup>11</sup> NGT is a judicial body in India that oversees environmental disputes.

<sup>12</sup> Arunabh Saikia, “Subansiri Dam Will Produce Costly Power and Won’t Control Assam Floods. Why Is It Still Being Built?,” *Scroll.In*, December 4, 2019, <https://scroll.in/article/944565/subansiri-dam-will-produce-costly-power-and-wont-control-assam-floods-why-is-it-still-being-built>.

likely be commissioned in 2025.<sup>13</sup> While conducting fieldwork and conversing with people downstream who were considered to be affected in the future, the ghastly images related to the dam never left people's minds. In the absence of an active movement, individuals residing downstream of the dam have been passively anticipating the manifestation of a dystopian reality. Poignantly, the recent dam disaster in Sikkim and Uttarakhand failed to draw an active resistance.<sup>14</sup> Overlooking such incidents of dam disasters, the GOI continue to promote hydropower development as a harbinger of development in an underdeveloped region. Moreover, the dam is also to provide 15% free electricity to the power-deficient states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>15</sup> In India's mission to produce renewable energy and to be a global leader, the impetus of the Indian state to exploit the hydropower potential is of utmost priority; however, this puts local communities under unequal risk.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "NHPC Awaits Final Dam Safety Clearance to Commission 250 MW at Subansiri Dam," North East, *The Assam Tribune*, June 30, 2025, <https://assamtribune.com/north-east/nhpc-awaits-final-dam-safety-clearance-to-commission-250-mw-at-subansiri-dam-1582995>.

<sup>14</sup> Pramod Giri, "Sikkim Disaster: 1,200 MW Project Dam Washed Away," *Hindustan Times*, October 5, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/sikkim-disaster-1-200-mw-project-dam-washed-away-101696446796387.html>; "Uttarakhand Dam Disaster: Race to Rescue 150 People Missing in India," *BBC*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55975743>.

<sup>15</sup> "Subansiri Dam to Benefit Assam: Gen Singh," Archive, *The Assam Tribune*, September 15, 2010, <https://assamtribune.com/subansiri-dam-to-benefit-assam-gen-singh>.

<sup>16</sup> Amelie Huber, "Hydropower in the Himalayan Hazardscape: Strategic Ignorance and the Production of Unequal Risk," *Water* 11, no. 3 (2019): 414, <https://doi.org/10.3390/w11030414>.

In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anti-dam movements in India paved the way for an alternative development discourse challenging the state-led development model in India.<sup>17</sup> The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) against the Sardar Sarovar Project on the Narmada River was one of the leading examples of such movements. However, in recent years, scholars have observed a decline in anti-dam movements across India.<sup>18</sup> Amita Baviskar highlights the lack of radical critique and dying collective mobilisation of anti-dam movements in India against the backdrop of the rise of economic liberalisation, Hindu nationalism and environmental bureaucracies.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, many scholars have shown the unsafe settings in which social movements function in India.<sup>20</sup> Despite the numerous arguments presented by anti-dam movements and scholars, the central government has consistently justified its development initiatives, often at the expense of the rights and well-being of those who resist these projects. In Northeast India, the state had

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<sup>17</sup> Nilsen, *Dispossession and Resistance in India*; Whitehead, *Development and Dispossession in the Narmada Valley*.

<sup>18</sup> Amita Baviskar, *Nation's Body, River's Pulse: Narratives of Anti-Dam Politics in India*, 150, no. 1 (2019): 26–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513618822417>; Whitehead, *Development and Dispossession in the Narmada Valley*.

<sup>19</sup> Baviskar, *Nation's Body, River's Pulse: Narratives of Anti-Dam Politics in India*.

<sup>20</sup> Angela Ixkic Bastian Duarte and Vasundhara Jairath, “Anti-Dispossession Movements in India and Mexico,” *ritimo*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.ritimo.org/Anti-Dispossession-Movements-in-India-and-Mexico>; Baviskar, *Nation's Body, River's Pulse: Narratives of Anti-Dam Politics in India*; Bengt G. Karlsson, “Into the Grid: Hydropower and Subaltern Politics in Northeast India,” in *Staking Claims: The Politics of Social Movements in Contemporary Rural India*, First, ed. Uday Chandra and Daniel Taghioff (Oxford University Press, 2016); Alpa Shah, “When Decolonization Is Hijacked,” *American Anthropologist* 126, no. 4 (2024): 553–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.28021>; Annie Shattuck et al., “Life on the Land: New Lives for Agrarian Questions,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 50, no. 2 (2023): 490–518, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2023.2174859>; Whitehead, *Development and Dispossession in the Narmada Valley*; Virginius Xaxa, “India's Tribal Situation and Self-Determination,” *Seminar*, 2022, <https://india-seminar.com/2022/751/751-VIRGINIUS%20XAXA.htm>.

declared anti-dam movements as a security issue led by anti-national organisations.<sup>21</sup> Besides, Judith Whitehead argues that one of the reasons for the failure of the anti-dam movements, such as the NBA, is the failure to recognise people's historical and material contexts.<sup>22</sup> This lack of understanding in social movements reproduces a simplistic, homogenising, ahistorical and isolationist image of Indigenous communities, thereby ignoring the historical and material reality of people shaped by capitalism. Tania Li points out that global Indigenous movements have failed to recognise these realities, and she stresses that until social movements give importance to understanding the insidious ways of how capitalist relations form, there will be a failure in promoting the alternatives these movements envision.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, emerging resistance literature informs us that people's reactions to development projects vary across communities as some acquiesce, co-opt or resist.<sup>24</sup> In the context of resistance against the push for dams in the Northeast region, Mibi Ete highlights the absence of opposition from communities against many dams proposed in Arunachal Pradesh, which threaten the lifeworld of the Indigenous communities.<sup>25</sup> Ete's observation challenges the simplistic

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<sup>21</sup> Sanjib Baruah, "Whose River Is It Anyway? Political Economy of Hydropower in the Eastern Himalayas," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 29 (2012): 41–52; Karlsson, "Into the Grid: Hydropower and Subaltern Politics in Northeast India."

<sup>22</sup> Whitehead, *Development and Dispossession in the Narmada Valley*.

<sup>23</sup> Tania Murray Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier* (Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Ruth Hall et al., "Resistance, Acquiescence or Incorporation? An Introduction to Land Grabbing and Political Reactions 'from Below,'" *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 42, nos. 3–4 (2015): 467–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2015.1036746>.

<sup>25</sup> Mibi Ete, "Hydro-Dollar Dreams: Emergent Local Politics of Large Dams and Small Communities," in *Geographies of Difference: Exploration in Northeast Indian Studies*, ed. Bengt G. Karlsson et al. (Routledge India, 2017).

understanding of Indigenous communities portrayed as stewards of nature and the assumptions of antagonistic relations with a capitalistic development model that threatens their existence and way of life. In contrast, her work points to people taking part in development projects. Similarly, emerging scholarship critically analyses the notion of a global Indigenous discourse of imagining Indigenous/tribal communities securely attached to the land.<sup>26</sup> This scholarship highlights the increasing internal differentiation within Indigenous communities and their failure to sustain a living off the land. Tania Li reiterates that capitalist relations arise in Indigenous frontiers, which are rooted in communities becoming a part of modernisation projects and improving their living conditions.<sup>27</sup> She further points to the emergence of capitalist relations in these Indigenous frontiers without direct intrusion from external factors conventionally believed to be destroyers of Indigenous people's lifeworld and resource base. In addition, scholars point to aspirations and desires that are fundamental to understanding the assertion of indigeneity in present times.<sup>28</sup> It is

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<sup>26</sup> Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*, 2. ed., 4. impr, Oxford India Paperbacks (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009); Bengt G. Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*, 1st ed. (Berghahn Books, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.3167/9780857451040>; Dolly Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India*, Culture, Place, and Nature (University of Washington Press, 2019); Dolly Kikon and Bengt G. Karlsson, *Leaving the Land: Indigenous Migration and Affective Labour in India*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108637817>; Alpa Shah, "The Dark Side of Indigeneity?: Indigenous People, Rights and Development in India," *History Compass* 5/6 (2007): 1086–832; Alpa Shah, *In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India* (Duke University Press, 2010); Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

<sup>27</sup> Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

<sup>28</sup> Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*; Kikon and Karlsson, *Leaving the Land*; Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

reflected in the claim and exploitation of resources in the NER by Indigenous communities, especially in the hilly region safeguarded by constitutional guarantees by the Indian Constitution, often leading to clashes, frictions and overlapping claims by the central government, state government, community leaders, and individual land owners.<sup>29</sup> In this gradual process, there has been an increase in internal differentiation and class formation, leading to the migration of poorer populations in distress and in need of employment.<sup>30</sup> These findings entail a labour question for a majority of Indigenous populations, where the process of social reproduction has become increasingly complex. The fieldwork sites aligned with scholarly findings concerning the labour issues faced by Indigenous and tribal populations, which are frequently perceived as being relatively self-sufficient and egalitarian in nature. Given the varied context of Indigenous populations and the increasing push for development projects in these areas, it is essential to understand the relationship between Indigenous peoples and such projects.

Thus, considering the varied Indigenous people's realities and experiences, the thesis delves into understanding people's relationship to the dam. I draw attention to the Misings, a riverine Indigenous community in Assam. Misings are in the majority downstream of the dam on Obonori, recognised as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of India. Situating Misings in a historical

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<sup>29</sup> Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*; Duncan McDuie-Ra and Dolly Kikon, "Tribal Communities and Coal in Northeast India: The Politics of Imposing and Resisting Mining Bans," *Energy Policy* 99 (December 2016): 261–69, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2016.05.021>.

<sup>30</sup> Bengt G. Karlsson, "Destroying One's Own Home: Resource Frontiers and Indigenous Governance in Northeast India," *Contemporary South Asia* 30, no. 2 (2022): 298–300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2022.2060344>; Kikon and Karlsson, *Leaving the Land*; Shah, "The Dark Side of Indigeneity?: Indigenous People, Rights and Development in India"; Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*.

and material context, and in the light of the proliferation of Indigenous politics worldwide, I try to uncover why and how people become a part of the dam despite having a dystopian image of the future. Recognising this contradiction allows us to better comprehend their complex situations and the influence of the broader political economy in shaping their future amidst uncertainties and vulnerabilities.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Transition of tribes in the writings of Indian Anthropology and Sociology

For over two centuries, there has been an ongoing effort to study tribal communities. Colonial administrative officers, ethnographers and anthropologists made several attempts to study them. Officially, the effort to understand tribes began with the formation of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784.<sup>31</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship considered the tribal communities as primitive, savages, semi-primitive, and semi-savages at a stage of evolution.<sup>32</sup> The writings portrayed a self-contained and self-sufficient imagery of tribes, who were not ready to take on modern market forces and needed protection.<sup>33</sup> This notion is dubbed ‘colonial paternalism’. The colonial legacy of

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<sup>31</sup> Virginius Xaxa, *State, Society, and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India* (Pearson, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> André Béteille, “The Idea of Indigenous People,” *Current Anthropology* 39, no. 2 (1998): 187–92, <https://doi.org/10.1086/204717>.

<sup>33</sup> Tania Murray Li, “Indigeneity, Capitalism, and the Management of Dispossession,” *Current Anthropology* 51, no. 3 (2010): 385–414, <https://doi.org/10.1086/651942>; Saqib Khan, *Tribe-Class Linkages: The History and Politics of the Agrarian Movement in Tripura*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032679143>; Saqib Khan, “Is Tribe a Homogeneous Category? Evidence From Tripura in North-East India,” *Society and Culture in South Asia* 9, no. 1 (2023): 7–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23938617221076175>.

knowledge production about tribes continued in India even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the nature of studies on tribes has evolved in recent decades. Citing Vidyarthi, Virginius Xaxa mentions the three trends of the study of tribes, i.e., the formative period (1784-1919), the constructive period (1920-1949) and the analytical period (1950 to present).<sup>34</sup> The writings in the formative years paved the way for how the tribes were understood. The period saw significant efforts by ethnographers to understand the broadly diverse Indian society in monographs and handbooks. However, the British writings in the formative period did not distinguish between tribes and caste; instead, they were used interchangeably.<sup>35</sup> Finally, in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, British census officials and ethnographers differentiated the term tribes from castes based on animism as their religious practice.<sup>36</sup>

However, the seed sown by colonial ethnographers and administrators comparing tribes to caste has paved the way for the following literature on tribal studies. The decades before 1950 saw a rise in polarised arguments between two scholarly trends. One side of the scholarship represents the views of Verrier Elwin, who put forward an isolationist understanding of tribes.<sup>37</sup> He observed the pauperisation of tribes when encountering caste communities and hence called to protect the communities from exploitation and urged for reserve areas like National Parks.<sup>38</sup> In his book, *The Baigas*, he pleaded to keep the Baigas, a tribal community in Central India, in isolation before it is 'too late' since they are on the verge of getting exploited and oppressed.

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<sup>34</sup> Xaxa, *State, Society, and Tribes*.

<sup>35</sup> Xaxa, *State, Society, and Tribes*.

<sup>36</sup> Xaxa, *State, Society, and Tribes*.

<sup>37</sup> Verrier Elwin, *The Baiga* (John Murray, Albemarle Street W., London, 1939).

<sup>38</sup> Elwin, *The Baiga*.

While Elwin had a paternalist approach to the tribal issue, there were arguments against Elwin's ideas. Scholars like N.K. Bose and G.S. Ghurye discarded his ideas on isolationism and advocated for assimilating tribes into the Hindu caste society. These scholars were proponents of the idea of a tribe-caste continuum. N.K. Bose's idea of 'The Hindu method of tribal absorption' talks about the symbiotic relationship between the two, although there is an unequal relationship between them.<sup>39</sup> He stresses that when tribal people encounter their Hindu neighbours, they gradually get sucked into the Hindu fold and lose their identity. He emphasised occupation-related transition, where the nature of the caste-based economic system guarantees work for tribes and guarantees them against competition. He further states that caste-based economies, technology, and division of labour gave material advantage, which was absent in tribal society. Hence, when there is a scarcity of work or pressure on the tribes because of an increasing population, they are induced into the larger society and subsumed as belonging to the lower section. Another proponent of the assimilation theory, G.S. Ghurye, considered tribes to be 'backward Hindus'.<sup>40</sup> He proposed assimilating tribes into the larger society to uplift them from poverty. He also accused colonial ethnographers of hindering the assimilation process of becoming Hindu.

The trend of scholarship that treated tribal society as a phase of evolution from tribe to caste and peasants has continued post-independence. Simultaneously, tribes in India have continued to be treated as homogeneous and self-sustaining communities. In post-independence, a new trend of scholarship tried to break the notion associated with tribes as self-contained and homogenous communities.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, another trend in the post-1950s anthropological writings resonated with

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<sup>39</sup> Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Cultural Anthropology and Other Essays* (Indian Associated Publishing Co Ltd, 1953).

<sup>40</sup> G.S. Ghurye, *The Aborigines- "So Called"- And Their Future* (Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, 1941).

<sup>41</sup> K.S. Singh, *Tribal Movements in India*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Manohar, 2006).

a broader acceptance of tribe and caste as different social categories.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the evolutionary approach of study never ceased during the post-independence period. Hence, scholars like Andre Beteille stressed a historical over an evolutionary approach to understanding tribes.<sup>43</sup>

He writes,

Where tribe and civilisation co-exist, as in India and the Islamic world, being a tribe has been more a matter of remaining outside of state and civilisation, whether by choice or necessity, than attaining a definite stage in the evolutionary advance from simple to the complex.<sup>44</sup>

At the turn of the century, scholars began to challenge the previous approaches to studying tribes in India. Virginius Xaxa criticised the nature of post-colonial writings, which were engrossed in understanding how the communities cease to be tribal societies, becoming caste, peasant, and class societies.<sup>45</sup> He argues that tribes should be studied in their context rather than compared to the larger society. Hence, he appeals,

The counterparts of tribes are not castes or peasants but communities or societies incorporating castes and peasants. The latter are not whole societies but only elements of wholes. Tribes on the other hand are whole societies each with its own language, territory, culture, customs and so on. Generally speaking, therefore, they must be compared with

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<sup>42</sup> Surajit Sinha, "Tribe-Caste and Tribe-Peasant Continua in Central India," *Man in India* 45, no. 1 (1965): 57–83; André Beteille, "The Concept of Tribe with Special Reference to India," *European Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 2 (1986): 296–318, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000397560000463X>.

<sup>43</sup> Beteille, "The Concept of Tribe with Special Reference to India."

<sup>44</sup> Beteille, "The Concept of Tribe with Special Reference to India," 316.

<sup>45</sup> Virginius Xaxa, "Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 24 (1999): 1519–24.

other societies and not, with castes, as has been the case in sociological and anthropological writings.<sup>46</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been an increase in criticism of writing by early sociologists and anthropologists. T.K. Oommen criticises Ghurye; he states that the scheduled tribes suffer from cognitive dissonance in Ghurye's writings.<sup>47</sup> He criticises the assimilationist theory of Hinduisation, 'Ignoring multiple identities shared by collectivities and privileging a single identity, Ghurye and most Indian sociologists and social anthropologists believed that Hinduisation of tribes would result in a total transformation of their identity from tribes to Hindus!.'<sup>48</sup> More recently, Abhijit Guha criticises N.K. Bose's idea of the tribe-caste continuum.<sup>49</sup> He argues,

Nirmal Kumar Bose's idea of the Hindu method of tribal absorption, which is still regarded as an established anthropological theory, stands on weak methodological foundations and insufficient field data. Bose's theory not only served the privileged class, but also foreclosed the growth of an Indigenous, nationalist, and secular Indian anthropology.<sup>50</sup>

The writings of the previous anthropologists and sociologists have treated the Indigenous people as mute objects of their studies. The knowledge production process had secluded marginalised communities from the research process and described them as ahistorical beings.

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<sup>46</sup> Xaxa, "Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse," 1524.

<sup>47</sup> T.K. Oommen, "Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and the Nation: Situating G. S. Ghurye," *Sociological Bulletin* 60, no. 2 (2011): 228–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022920110202>.

<sup>48</sup> Oommen, "Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and the Nation," 237.

<sup>49</sup> Abhijit Guha, "Scrutinising the Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special article, vol. 53, no. 17 (2018): 105–10.

<sup>50</sup> Guha, "Scrutinising the Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption," 105.

Amidst the process of semantic understanding of tribes, there was a dearth of literature that situated the tribes historically, that tried to understand the complexities of tribes by profoundly analysing their oral narratives and their lived experiences. Efforts towards historicising tribes have been put forward by authors like David Hardiman, Amita Baviskar, Ajay Skaria and Sumit Guha.<sup>51</sup> The works of Hardiman and Skaria gave importance to understanding the histories and agency of Adivasis with the help of oral narratives and also shaping an Adivasi consciousness against an exploitative regime.<sup>52</sup> While early scholars were engaged in understanding the continuum of tribe to caste or peasant or scrutinising the term tribe, these historical works give a sense of historicity to Adivasi assertion and their self-identification as Adivasi rather than diminishing the Adivasi and tribal consciousness to the effort of the colonial masters.

## **2.2. The Assertion of Tribes as Indigenous**

By the turn of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a notable global shift occurred in the recognition of Indigenous peoples, encompassing communities that were previously characterised by terms such as primitive, tribal, or native.<sup>53</sup> Internationally, the Indigenous term also gained significance

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<sup>51</sup> David Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1987); Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*; Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers, and Wildness in Western India*, Studies in Social Ecology and Environmental History (Oxford University Press, 1999); Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*, Cambridge Studies in Indian History and Society 4 (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*; Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*.

<sup>53</sup> Beth A. Conklin and Laura R. Graham, "The Shifting Middle Ground: Amazonian Indians and Eco-Politics," *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 4 (1995): 695–710, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1995.97.4.02a00120>; Xaxa, "Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse."

with the endorsement of the United Nations Organisations.<sup>54</sup> With the increasing assertion of indigeneity worldwide, there was a dissemination of a widely accepted understanding of Indigenous people across the world, which was based on their close relationship with nature. Drawing from the worldwide notion of Indigenous people, Virginius Xaxa conceptualised Indigenous communities in three aspects,

First, the Indigenous are those people who lived in the country to which they belong before colonisation or conquest by people from outside the country or the geographical region. Secondly, they have become marginalised as an aftermath of conquest and colonisation by the people from outside the region. Thirdly, such people govern their life more in terms of their own social, economic and cultural institutions than the laws applicable to the society or the country at large.<sup>55</sup>

The assertion of the idea of Indigenous populations has been a collective effort from tribal/native communities from around the globe, with many international organisations. It is rooted in acknowledging the significance of the Indigenous way of living, which is associated closely with nature, against a destructive development model that dominates the world. With the rise of the Indigenous discourse, many scholars have observed a transition in the imagery of tribal

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<sup>54</sup> The Martin Cobo study under United Nations (UN) in 1981 led to a general understanding of the term Indigenous. Following this, a series of events unfurled in UN with formation of Working Group on Indigenous Populations to Indigenous concerns and issues. These practices have led to ILO convention 169, 1993 international year of world's Indigenous people, 1994 international decade of world's Indigenous people and many more in the following years. See <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/Indigenous-peoples/Indigenous-peoples-at-the-united-nations>

<sup>55</sup> Xaxa, "Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse," 3590.

populations from ‘savages’ to ‘ecologically noble savages’.<sup>56</sup> The Indigenous imageries of close relation with nature were primarily used as a discourse and ‘potent symbolic resource’ to challenge a capitalist and exploitative developmental regime and promote transnational politics.<sup>57</sup> The NBA in India represented a tribal way of life of alternative development, challenging a state-led capitalistic development model. Hence, Subhadra Channa states, ‘The debates on environment and sustainable development have put a completely different perspective on the tribal ways of life. From being regarded as ignorant and superstitious, tribes are now considered wise, having a sustainable relationship with the environment.’<sup>58</sup>

However, the portrayal of Indigenous/ tribal communities as being ecologically knowledgeable continued to be challenged by scholars as a continuation of an *a priori* ahistorical understanding of tribes. Worldwide, there was a revisionist challenge against the idea of the ‘ecologically noble savage’ as a myth.<sup>59</sup> These emerging debates led to the comparison of the assertion of the Indigenous people with right-wing groups using essentialised images, with its potential to promote

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<sup>56</sup> Conklin and Graham, “The Shifting Middle Ground”; Kent H. Redford, “The Ecologically Noble Savage,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1991).

<sup>57</sup> Conklin and Graham, “The Shifting Middle Ground.”

<sup>58</sup> Subhadra Channa, *Anthropological Perspectives on Indian Tribes* (Orient BlackSwan, 2020), 41.

<sup>59</sup> Hames Raymond, “The Ecologically Noble Savage Debate,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36, no. 1 (2007): 177–90, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123321>; Redford, “The Ecologically Noble Savage.”

ethnic frictions and conflicts.<sup>60</sup> Thus, according to Vasundhara Jairath, the rise of Indigenous discourse over control of their resources has brought numerous academic debates.<sup>61</sup> She writes,

...academic debate in this regard include the nature of relationship of Indigenous people to their surrounding environment, whether or not this relationship is distinct from that of other rural communities to the environment and their land and finally to what extent indigeneity as a basis of organisation and mobilisation can serve to make claims over lands and territories legitimately.<sup>62</sup>

In India, the term Indigenous sparked debates in academic discussions on the validity and legitimacy of the term. Andre Béteille has argued that the context of Indigenous peoples, particularly in India, is very different and stresses that in India, the term tribe is appropriate over the term Indigenous based on an existing relationship between tribes and non-tribes, which was never in isolation.<sup>63</sup> Thus, an increasing scholarship have challenged the assertions of the tribal population in India as Indigenous.<sup>64</sup> Amita Baviskar's seminal work succinctly scrutinised the tribal people's relationship with nature against a popularly held romantic notion of their

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<sup>60</sup> Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*; Adam Kuper, "The Return of the Native," *Current Anthropology* 44, no. 3 (2003): 389–402, <https://doi.org/10.1086/368120>.

<sup>61</sup> Vasundhara Jairath, "Indigeneity as Assertion: Understanding Social Movements" (University of Delhi, 2015), <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/373913>; Vasundhara Jairath, "Situating Claim-Making: Land and Adivasi Assertion in Jharkhand," *Sociological Bulletin* 69, no. 1 (2020): 51–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022919899017>.

<sup>62</sup> Jairath, "Situating Claim-Making," 52.

<sup>63</sup> Béteille, "The Idea of Indigenous People."

<sup>64</sup> Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*; Béteille, "The Idea of Indigenous People"; Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*.

relationship with nature.<sup>65</sup> Sumit Guha strongly critiqued the rise of the tribe's assertions based on indigeneity.<sup>66</sup> His writings sum up his critique,

But the past is past, and the dead must bury the dead: the claims of the living have to rest on their own entitlements, not on those of their supposed ancestors. Human rights and freedoms exist for the present generation, and cannot be extended to the charnel house of history- from Kosovo to Kashi, too many unfulfilled revenges lurk in that abode. The past is irredeemable, and the price of even the attempt to redeem it will be much blood.<sup>67</sup>

Conversely, another body of scholarship had upheld the notion of Indigenous people. Although Virginius Xaxa is aware of the problems of the 'Indigenous' term in the context of India, he tends to understand the term differently.<sup>68</sup> He states that the tribal people have internalised the marker of being 'tribal' assigned to them and have been used to make political claims for identity claims and assertions. When talking about the original inhabitants of an area or a region, tribals have developed a close association with the place they have been living. In his words, 'Adivasi consciousness and the articulation of Indigenous people status is not so much about whether they are the original inhabitant of India as about the fact that they have no power whatsoever over anything (land, forest, rivers), that lies in the territory they inhabit.'<sup>69</sup> In this context of challenge

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<sup>65</sup> Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*.

<sup>66</sup> Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*.

<sup>67</sup> Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*, 203.

<sup>68</sup> Xaxa, "Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse."

<sup>69</sup> Xaxa, "Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse," 3595.

against the assertion of indigeneity, Tania Murray Li's arguments based on her work in Indonesia remain significant in understanding the assertion of indigeneity globally.<sup>70</sup> She writes,

My argument is that a group's self-identification as tribal or Indigenous is not natural or inevitable, but neither is it simply invented, adopted or imposed. It is rather, a positioning which draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle.<sup>71</sup>

Likewise, Bengt G. Karlsson, considering the assertion of people's claim as Indigenous/Adivasis/tribals in India, writes, '...I claim that anthropologists need to move beyond the sterile debate about whether the concept of Indigenous people is relevant and take note of the fact that the concept is already out there.'<sup>72</sup>

In a similar vein, Dipesh Chakravarty calls it 'politics unlimited' in recognition of the oppressed who depend on adopting whatever means to fight back against an oppressive regime.<sup>73</sup> These understandings stem from acknowledging the potential of using an essentialist image in challenging the oppressor. The essentialist discourses, which scholars discard, are known to have the potential as a tool to challenge their marginalisation and are useful for mass mobilisation. Vinita Damodaran marks the upcoming scholarship of nullifying the tribe, Adivasi/ Indigenous terms as revisionist, which challenges the theoretical and historical validity of the assertion of

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<sup>70</sup> Tania Murray Li, "Articulating Indigenous Identity in Indonesia: Resource Politics and the Tribal Slot," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 1 (2000): 149–79, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500002632>.

<sup>71</sup> Li, "Articulating Indigenous Identity in Indonesia," 151.

<sup>72</sup> Bengt G. Karlsson, "Anthropolgy and the 'Indigenous Slot': Claims to and Debates about Indigenous Peoples Status in India," in *Indigeneity in India*, ed. Bengt G. Karlsson and Tanka Bahadur Subba (Kegan Paul, 2006), 51.

<sup>73</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Politics Unlimited: The Global Adivasi And Debates About The Political," in *Indigeneity in India*, ed. Bengt G. Karlsson and Tanka Bahadur Subba (Kegan Paul, 2006).

Indigenesness in India.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Shashank Kela objects to the comparisons of Indigenous people's assertion to the right-wing assertion, upholding the historical and political validity of assertion as an Adivasi in India.<sup>75</sup>

Following these debates, an increasing scholars have considered the assertion of indigeneity as a tool for marginalised populations traversing nation-state borders.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, the work of Kaushik Ghosh, Alpa Shah, Amita Baviskar, and Shashank Kela echoes class differentiation amongst tribal communities and the disconnect in the assertion of indigeneity between the elite and the poorer tribal populations.<sup>77</sup> Alpa Shah, in her article "The Dark Side of Indigeneity?" writes, 'The 'dark side of indigeneity' might show that the local appropriation and experiences of global discourses of indigeneity can maintain a class system that further marginalises the

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<sup>74</sup> Vinita Damodaran, "The Politics of Marginality and the Construction of Indigeneity in Chotanagpur," *Postcolonial Studies* 9, no. 2 (2006): 179–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790600657843>.

<sup>75</sup> Shashank Kela, "Adivasi and Peasant: Reflections on Indian Social History," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 33, no. 3 (2006): 502–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150601063074>.

<sup>76</sup> Amita Baviskar, "The Politics Of Being 'Indigenous,'" in *Indigeneity in India*, ed. Bengt G. Karlsson and T.B. Subba (Kegan Paul, 2006); Chakrabarty, "Politics Unlimited: The Global Adivasi And Debates About The Political"; Kela, "Adivasi and Peasant"; Shah, "The Dark Side of Indigeneity?: Indigenous People, Rights and Development in India"; Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*.

<sup>77</sup> Kaushik Ghosh, "Between Global Flows and Local Dams: Indigenesness, Locality, and the Transnational Sphere in Jharkhand, India," *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 4 (2006): 501–34, <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2006.21.4.501>; Shah, "The Dark Side of Indigeneity?: Indigenous People, Rights and Development in India"; Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*; Baviskar, "The Politics Of Being 'Indigenous'"; Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*; Kela, "Adivasi and Peasant." Also see , Erik de Maaker, "On the Nature of Indigenous Land: Ownership, Access, and Farming in Upland Northeast India," in *Indigeneity on the Move: Varying Manifestations of a Contested Concept* (Berghahn Books, 2018) where he shows the disjuncture between urban Indigenous activists and rural populations in the Garo hills.

poorest.’<sup>78</sup> These scholarships represent a significant misrepresentation of the communities that the Indigenous movement, led by upper-class and tribal elites, is claiming to represent.<sup>79</sup> The transnational nature of Indigenous movements led by middle-class and elite urban middle-class and non-government organisations might not address the real problems of the marginalised populations. Moreover, a burden of resistance has been placed on the Adivasi/Indigenous communities, where rural marginalised people might be unable to assert their real needs and desires.<sup>80</sup> There is pressure from the transnational Indigenous movements, which pressure the communities to adhere to the community and communal fix.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, scholars like Shashank Kela criticise the existing writing for not locating the tribal history and experiences in the process of peasantisation and sedentarisation that India has seen in British rule.<sup>82</sup> He further critiques Indigenous politics on the grounds of failure to produce a nationwide class consciousness among the varied oppressed groups.

Recent writings by Vasundhara Jairath critically engage with the existing literature on understanding indigeneity and highlight a lack of understanding of the situated nature of

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<sup>78</sup> Shah, “The Dark Side of Indigeneity?: Indigenous People, Rights and Development in India,” 1825.

<sup>79</sup> Ghosh, “Between Global Flows and Local Dams”; Li, *Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*; Maaker, “On the Nature of Indigenous Land: Ownership, Access, and Farming in Upland Northeast India,” Shah, “The Dark Side of Indigeneity?: Indigenous People, Rights and Development in India”; Whitehead, *Development and Dispossession in the Narmada Valley*.

<sup>80</sup> See also Michael L. Cepek, *Life in Oil: Cofán Survival in the Petroleum Fields of Amazonia*, First edition (University of Texas press, 2018).

<sup>81</sup> Li, “Indigeneity, Capitalism, and the Management of Dispossession.”

<sup>82</sup> Kela, “Adivasi and Peasant.”

Indigenous assertions within a historical and material complex in previous scholarship.<sup>83</sup> She states that the existing scholarships somewhat denaturalise the relationship between the tribe and natural resources. However, she criticises that these writings have helped in historicising the tribal identity, but tend to ignore the situated characters of claims on land and identity in these movements. In doing so, Jairath moves beyond the binary of reinforcing romantic images and questioning the nature of indigeneity with an understanding of the situated nature of Indigenous claims in historical and material contexts. She writes,

However, a meaningful way of engaging with some of these questions, specifically within the context of active politics, is to shift focus onto social movements of communities that confront the power of capital and seek to challenge it in different ways. Doing this allows us to move away from seeking to either legitimise or delegitimise claims made by such movements, to instead ask how and why the confrontation takes the shape that it does.<sup>84</sup>

### **2.3. Indigeneity, Capitalist Relations, and Labour Question**

Recent scholarship continues to point out that studies on tribal/Indigenous communities continue to promote a linear understanding of Indigenous communities.<sup>85</sup> In her seminal work, Tania Li stresses a conflicting image of Indigenous communities struggling to sustain a livelihood in Indonesian highlands as opposed to a self-contained, self-sustaining, and romantic attachment to the land image of the Indigenous communities.<sup>86</sup> She points to the diverse realities of Indigenous

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<sup>83</sup> Jairath, “Indigeneity as Assertion: Understanding Social Movements”; Jairath, “Situating Claim-Making.”

<sup>84</sup> Jairath, “Situating Claim-Making,” 64.

<sup>85</sup> Eva Kristin Gerharz et al., eds., *Indigeneity on the Move: Varying Manifestations of a Contested Concept* (Berghahn, 2020).

<sup>86</sup> Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

populations across the world. The global advocacy of Indigenous and environmental movements underlines top-down capitalism, entrenching the Indigenous lifeworld.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, Yan Hairong and Tania Li also point to the capitalistic relations that emerge within the Indigenous communities that have a role to play.<sup>88</sup> Tania Li underscores that in this portrayal of Indigenous communities affected by capitalism and the incursion of market and state development policies, we scholars tend to overlook capitalist relationships that arise from within many peasant and Indigenous societies.<sup>89</sup> She argues that tribes may not represent the fixated idea of Indigenous communities of cultural attachment to land that is widespread in global Indigenous discourse.<sup>90</sup> Historically, she traces in the context of Asia and Africa that there has been a disjuncture in the ideas promoted for the interest of Indigenous communities and the ideas promoted against them. She writes, ‘So long as social movements don’t recognise the insidious ways in which capitalist relations take hold even in unlikely places, they can’t be effective in promoting alternatives that will actually work.’<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Yan Hairong, “Bottom-up Capitalism as a Challenge for Social Movements: A Conversation with Tania Murray Li,” *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 2 (2017): 257–67; Tania Murray Li, *Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*; See also Dolly Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India*.

<sup>88</sup> Hairong, “Bottom-up Capitalism as a Challenge for Social Movements: A Conversation with Tania Murray Li”; Li, *Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

<sup>89</sup> Li, “Indigeneity, Capitalism, and the Management of Dispossession”; Li, *Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

<sup>90</sup> Li, “Indigeneity, Capitalism, and the Management of Dispossession.”

<sup>91</sup> Li, *Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*, 4.

In the context of writing on Indigenous people's relation with the resources and understanding them in their situatedness, scholars like Tania Li, Dolly Kikon, and Michael L. Cepek highlight wishes, fantasies, and aspirations people have which are related to the control of resources and their usage and their expression of indigeneity.<sup>92</sup> Dolly Kikon observes that in the Nagaland-Assam border in the NER, there is competition to control the resources by state actors, non-state actors, and tribal communities, whether rich or poor.<sup>93</sup> In this foothill region, according to her, tribal communities 'perceived oil and coal as resources that could radically transform their lives,'<sup>94</sup> In the process, oil and coal mining activities have been reshaping and refashioning people's understanding of land ownership, alliances and their relationship with natural resources. In the context of the NER's violent political reality and poverty, tribal communities struggle to fulfil the needs of their families and see natural resources as economic prospects to develop themselves. She further states that these aspirations for a better life by using resources as a commodity are also rooted in the government's negligence in reaching out to the interior people to provide necessities like schools, medical facilities and roads. In these contexts, Tania Li stresses that Indigenous people see their lands as 'zones of potential', driven by aspirations for a better life.<sup>95</sup>

Further, Michael L. Cepek's book, *Life in Oil: Cofan Survival in the Petroleum Fields of Amazonia*, highlights the challenges faced by the Cofan Indigenous population in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The incoming oil fields in the region have disrupted their daily activities by contaminating the

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<sup>92</sup> Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*; Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*; Cepek, *Life in Oil*.

<sup>93</sup> Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*.

<sup>94</sup> Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*, 120.

<sup>95</sup> Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

rivers with oil spills. Additionally, the accumulation of land owned by oil companies has restricted the Cofans' mobility and access to the forest, hindering their ability to meet their basic needs.<sup>96</sup> The Cofan population had been protesting against the oil companies by asserting their Indigenous rights over their land, forest and resources. However, he brings out a complex relationship between the Cofan and oil. It is not a linear acceptance or rejection of oil, but is shaped by a larger political economy. Cepek observes that over the years, the Cofans tried to engage with the development narratives of the oil companies. People's engagement with the oil company is rooted in the wishes and aspirations of the people and their will to move away from impoverishment by earning money from the company; however, it is not devoid of contestation. He observes, 'They see no reason to remain impoverished. They identify many ways that increasing their access to material resources, including money, will help them to maintain rather than cause them to lose their cultural distinctiveness.'<sup>97</sup> This engagement shows how Indigenous people find ways to negotiate for a better life, even if that means opening doors to an extractive development project.<sup>98</sup>

In a similar vein, contextualising people's reactions from below to global land grabs, Hall et al. argue that communities' reactions to land grabs vary amongst communities.<sup>99</sup> Sometimes, communities may resist or acquiesce/co-opt with incoming development that threatens their livelihood source, not necessarily upholding the peasant and Indigenous way of life. However, emerging scholarship challenges the neat categorisation of people's reactions as resistance,

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<sup>96</sup> Cepek, *Life in Oil*.

<sup>97</sup> Cepek, *Life in Oil*, 221.

<sup>98</sup> See also Joe Sacco, *Paying the Land*, First edition (Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2020).

<sup>99</sup> Hall et al., "Resistance, Acquiescence or Incorporation?"

acquiescence, or co-optation; instead, it is non-linear, dynamic, and dialectical.<sup>100</sup> The dynamic character is grounded in the community's efforts to negotiate with powerful state entities, corporate interests, and capital, as they shape and influence local communities.<sup>101</sup>

## 2.4. Northeast India and New Realities

In recent times, scholars have continued to place the tribal situations of the NER to be better than the central Indian tribes based on seeming enhanced economic development status, less dispossession from their lands and more rooted in culture, language, and history.<sup>102</sup> Tribes of the NER were projected differently from those in mainland India.<sup>103</sup> K.S. Singh and Virginius Xaxa affirmed that, unlike the rest of India, the NER, especially the hilly region of the Northeast, has not seen land and forest-based social movements. The lack of land and forest-based movements is contingent on what Virginius Xaxa points to, the fact that NER hill tribes have control over their land and forests. However, he states that land and forest-based movements were prevalent amongst the plain tribes of Assam, such as the Misings, Bodos, and Rabhas.<sup>104</sup> Scholars like Suryasikha Pathak and Manas Jyoti Bordoloi assert that plain tribes have been using colonial tropes like 'primitive' and 'backward' to articulate their demands for electoral representation, government

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<sup>100</sup> Vasundhara Jairath, "Special Issue on Dispossession and Resistance in India and Mexico: Introduction," *Journal of Developing Societies* 40, no. 3 (2024): 267–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796X241260102>.

<sup>101</sup> Jairath, "Special Issue on Dispossession and Resistance in India and Mexico"; Minati Dash, "'Future Uncertain!' — Dispossession by Mining and Young Men - Mining Company Engagements in Eastern India," *Journal of Developing Societies* 40, no. 3 (2024): 298–313, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796X241264315>.

<sup>102</sup> Xaxa, "India's Tribal Situation and Self- Determination."

<sup>103</sup> Singh, *Tribal Movements in India*, vol. 2; Xaxa, *State, Society, and Tribes*.

<sup>104</sup> Xaxa, *State, Society, and Tribes*.

jobs, and improvement in education.<sup>105</sup> These two scholars quote a memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission by Bodo leaders, where they asserted that they were ‘ignorant’, ‘backward’, and could be easily fooled by the caste Hindu Assamese, hence demanding protection under the British authorities. These led to a consolidated assertion of plain tribal politics across Assam, rooted in their grievances against caste Assamese politics. These demands were not only about securing government jobs, electoral representation, and improvement of the education system, but also about issues of land that the plain tribals raised because of the British policies of bringing in Bengali and Nepali immigrants, where the leaders raised concerns that they were losing cultivable lands. According to Chandan Kumar Sharma, the increase in the number of immigrants led to the usurping of agricultural land and forced the tribal communities to move away to more remote places and even forest areas to avoid living alongside strangers.<sup>106</sup> The fear of losing lands has led to the demand to protect tribal lands under the law of tribal belts and blocks in Assam.<sup>107</sup> The works of Historian Arupjyoti Saikia imply a complex relationship between the colonial and post-colonial states with several peasant communities (tribal/non-tribal) in the Brahmaputra valley grappling with a struggle over land and forests.<sup>108</sup> The plain tribes of Assam have been asserting

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<sup>105</sup> Suryasikha Pathak, “Tribal Politics in the Assam-1933-1947,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 10 (2010): 61–69; Manas Jyoti Bordoloi, “Impact of Colonial Anthropology on Identity Politics and Conflicts in Assam,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 20 (2014): 47–54.

<sup>106</sup> Chandan Kumar Sharma, “Tribal Land Alienation: Government’s Role,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 52 (2001): 4791–95.

<sup>107</sup> Juri Baruah, “Tribal Politics in Assam: From Line System to Language Problem,” *Social Change and Development* XVI, no. 1 (2019): 90–100.

<sup>108</sup> Arupjyoti Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Arupjyoti Saikia, *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900* (Routledge, 2014); Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

their identity and raising their concern from colonial times until now. The Bodos have attained Sixth Schedule status granted by the Constitution of India with self-control and self-determination on the issues of the Bodos.<sup>109</sup> However, the fight for autonomy and self-determination of the plain tribes, like the Misings, Rabhas, and Tiwas, continues to demand inclusion in the Sixth Schedule under the Constitution.

On the contrary, the hill tribes in Northeast India were known for their identity politics rather than land and forest resource issues. Most of the hill tribes in the NER continue to enjoy traditional rights on their land through constitutional provisions granted by the Indian Constitution under the Sixth Schedule and Article 371A. However, land and forest resource issues attached to the plains tribes in Northeast India are now associated with the hill tribes. Today, the issue of land alienation is highly debated in the hilly region.<sup>110</sup> The tribes have been experiencing increasing changes in land relations in the region. A. K. Nongkynrih gives four causes of alienation in the region: transfer to non-tribal, encroachment by immigrants, acquisition for development projects without

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<sup>109</sup> Nel Vandekerckhove, “‘We are sons of this Soil’: The Endless Battle over Indigenous Homelands in Assam, India,” *Critical Asian Studies* 41, no. 4 (2009): 523–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672710903328013>.

<sup>110</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast* (Navayana, 2021); Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Borbora, eds., *Land, People and Politics: Contest over Tribal Land in Northeast India*, IWGIA Document 121 (North Eastern Social Research Centre, IWGIA, 2008); Erik de Maaker and Meenal Tula, eds., *Unequal Land Relations in North East India: Custom, Gender and the Market* (North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2020); Meenal Tula and Upasana Goswami, *Intimate Inheritance: Indigenous Women, Land and Customs in Northeast India*, Tribal Studies Series 6 (North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2022).

recognising community rights, and monopolisation by the tribal elite.<sup>111</sup> The scholars argue that this started with British rule and their non-recognition of traditional rights, which were superseded by new legal rules after Indian independence, increasing their vulnerability. Today, as Uttam Bathari observed, most of the land ownership has transformed from Common Property Resources (CPR) to the monopolisation of individual resources, often through developmental projects that disregard traditional holding of lands.<sup>112</sup> Recent work of Erik de Maaker and Meenal Tula highlights the region's increasingly unequal land relations within Indigenous communities.<sup>113</sup> They argue that the process of changing relations with land in the region is related to the Indian state's failure to promote an inclusive development model with education, health and nutrition. In the context of increasing class relations, changing land relations, and privatisation of land in the region, Maaker and Tula allude to the fact that the privileged in the hill region are reaping the benefits.

In addition, the region remains a political and economic frontier.<sup>114</sup> The frontier thinking of the Indian state is evident in its policy documents for developing the region.<sup>115</sup> Thus, one could see the rise in protests against development projects pushed in the NER, especially the anti-dam

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<sup>111</sup> A.K. Nongkynrih, "Privatisation of Communal Land of the Tribes of North East India: A Sociological Viewpoint," in *Land, People and Politics: Contest over Tribal Land in Northeast India*, ed. Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Borbora (NESRC, IWGIA, 2008).

<sup>112</sup> Uttam Bathari, "Land, Laws, Alienation and Conflict: Changing Land Relations among the Karbis in Karbi Anglong District," in *Land, People and Politics: Contest over Tribal Land in Northeast India*, ed. Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Borbora (NESRC, IWGIA, 2008).

<sup>113</sup> Maaker and Tula, *Unequal Land Relations in North East India*.

<sup>114</sup> McDuire-Ra and Kikon, "Tribal Communities and Coal in Northeast India."

<sup>115</sup> See "NEC Vision-2020." Retrieved from <https://necouncil.gov.in/about-us/nec-vision-2020-0>

movement in the region. In these movements, upholding the people's rights over resources and controlling them are central. The anti-dam movement against the dam on Obonori reverberates old anxieties of control over resources in Assam.<sup>116</sup> These understandings of tussle over resource control portray only one way of clashing with the Indian state or an image of challenging external forces. However, historical works by Boddhisatva Kar portray complicated imagery of the tribal populations dealing with the incoming global capital rather than a straightforward rejection, with predominantly tribal chiefs becoming a part of the expanding global capital of the plantation economy.<sup>117</sup>

In recent decades, with the increase of extractive industries in the region, there has been an increase in the struggle to control resources by Indigenous individuals and organisations, and government and private organisations.<sup>118</sup> Hence, there is a refashioning of how one asserts indigeneity and people's relation with the landscapes.<sup>119</sup> The region seldom asserts its sovereignty and identity in sociocultural terms, but it is engaged in asserting its rights and control of its resources.<sup>120</sup> As stated, fantasies, aspirations, and desires are central to understanding the contemporary stories of Indigenous people. In this region, the right to mine and extract resources from their land is upheld

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<sup>116</sup> Baruah, "Whose River Is It Anyway?"

<sup>117</sup> Bodhisattva Kar, "Nomadic Capital and Speculative Tribes: A Culture of Contracts in the Northeastern Frontier of British India," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 53, no. 1 (2016): 41–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019464615619533>.

<sup>118</sup> Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast*; Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*; McDuie-Ra and Kikon, "Tribal Communities and Coal in Northeast India."

<sup>119</sup> Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*.

<sup>120</sup> Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*; McDuie-Ra and Kikon, "Tribal Communities and Coal in Northeast India."

as tribal rights that national or state laws cannot violate.<sup>121</sup> Duncan McDuie-Ra and Dolly Kikon explored Indigenous communities' reactions to the coal mining ban in the two states of Meghalaya and Nagaland.<sup>122</sup> In the process, they seek to understand how Indigenous populations assert indigeneity against a challenge to their resource control. They write,

First, in both locations the majority of coal mining activity has been initiated and managed by members of tribal communities rather than profit-driven outsiders. Second, in contrast to other contexts in India (notably Orissa and Jharkhand) where large state or private enterprises seek to modify the law to enable coal extraction, in Nagaland and Meghalaya it has been the communities that resent and challenge state and national laws being applied to their lands. Third, the right to extract coal is connected to the right of tribal communities to determine what happens on their lands.<sup>123</sup>

The Indigenous assertion seen in these hill regions in the NER in India is counterintuitive to the global discourse of indigeneity. The instances appear against the popular belief of external forces taking control of resources in Indigenous land. In these cases, Indigenous people are central in controlling and exploiting resources. Likewise, the works of Mibi Ete point to the disjuncture in the light of incoming mega dams in the state of Arunachal Pradesh and the lack of resistance against them.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*; Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*; McDuie-Ra and Kikon, "Tribal Communities and Coal in Northeast India."

<sup>122</sup> McDuie-Ra and Kikon, "Tribal Communities and Coal in Northeast India."

<sup>123</sup> McDuie-Ra and Kikon, "Tribal Communities and Coal in Northeast India," 261.

<sup>124</sup> Ete, "Hydro-Dollar Dreams."

These recent scholarships on NER challenge the semantic understanding of Indigenous communities.<sup>125</sup> It brings out the region's varied Indigenous realities. Moreover, Dolly Kikon and Bengt G. Karlsson recorded an increasing migration of Indigenous youth leaving the hills of the NER to mainland India, and a growing hospitality industry in India.<sup>126</sup> The Indigenous youths who migrate show a contrasting image of what is 'perceived as holding on to their land and livelihoods or being attached to their land'.<sup>127</sup> The authors stress that the Indigenous migration of highland communities should be read against militarisation, conflicts, the emergence of new land relations and wealthy Indigenous landowners, an increase in monocropping of profit-driven crops, and against a more subsistence Jhum cultivation. Thus, the migration for jobs in the hospital industry is one of the varied Indigenous realities and experiences in the present times.

These scholarships point to increasing class relations amongst the Indigenous communities in the region, who were known to be isolated, relatively egalitarian in nature, and closely attached to nature. In this context of internal differentiation amongst the tribals, Erik de Maaker and Meenal Tula ask fundamental questions about who decides and dictates the customary rights of the region; similarly, one has to raise the classic question in rural agrarian political economy raised by Henry Bernstein, which becomes fundamental 'Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What

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<sup>125</sup> See Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*; McDuie-Ra and Kikon, "Tribal Communities and Coal in Northeast India"; Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*; Kikon and Karlsson, *Leaving the Land*; Ete, "Hydro-Dollar Dreams"; Maaker and Tula, *Unequal Land Relations in North East India*; Khan, *Tribe-Class Linkages*.

<sup>126</sup> Kikon and Karlsson, *Leaving the Land*.

<sup>127</sup> Kikon and Karlsson, *Leaving the Land*, 9.

do they do with it?’ This region has emerging labour questions, implying a newer experience and reality for large populations of poor Indigenous people.<sup>128</sup>

In this age of neoliberal development, where land, rivers, and forest resources are at stake, it is in this context that I take an interest in how the tribes or Indigenous populations, who are heterogeneous, engage with development projects which are deemed to grab their lands and resources. The question of controlling or giving up their resources is central to such development projects. There are instances where there is a vehement opposition to such projects. On the other hand, there are cases where we do not see such opposition, and there are tendencies to accept those development activities in some parts of tribal areas in the Northeast or elsewhere. Nevertheless, new research on resistance informs us that it is more dynamic and in continuous negotiation than simply opposition or becoming a part of it.<sup>129</sup> Considering the dynamic nature of people’s reactions, aspirations, heterogeneity, and capitalist relations, I have framed my research question.

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<sup>128</sup> Maaker and Tula, *Unequal Land Relations in North East India*; Henry Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change* (PRACTICAL ACTION PUBLISHING, 2021).

<sup>129</sup> Jairath, “Special Issue on Dispossession and Resistance in India and Mexico”; Dash, “‘Future Uncertain!’ — Dispossession by Mining and Young Men - Mining Company Engagements in Eastern India.”

### 3. Research Questions

In a context of agrarian crises and changing political economy, how do Indigenous rural communities engage in development projects that introduce a new structure of accumulation?

#### 3.1. Objectives

1. To understand how historical rural distress has come to be and the shape that it has taken.
2. To explore the nature of changes in the political economy in the light of rural agrarian distress.
3. Within these changes, I explore how they reconfigure Indigenous communities within the rural economy.
4. In this renewed context, the thesis explores how Indigenous people engage with the entry of development projects.

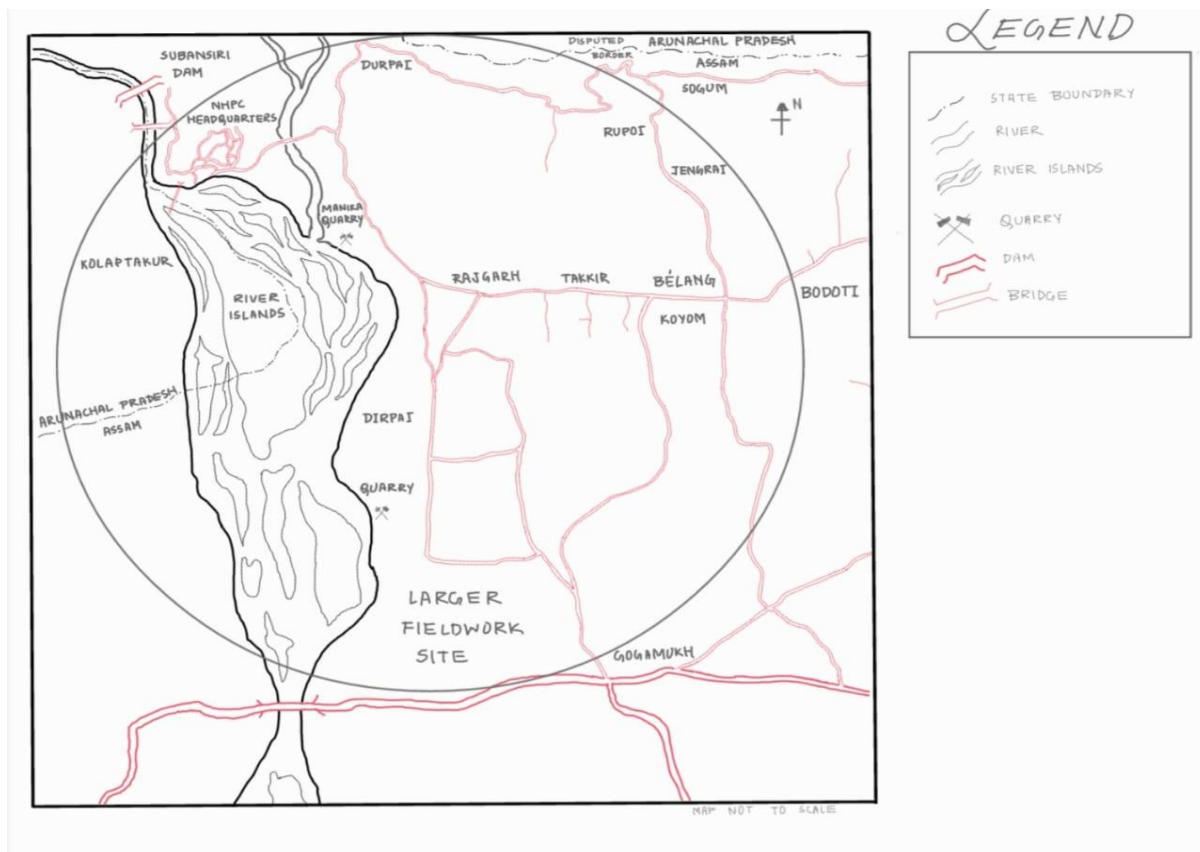


Figure 4: A map depicting the fieldwork sites (Sketched by Anidya Basak)

#### 4. Methodology

With these research objectives, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork for twelve months between 2021 and 2024 in an area downstream of the dam on the Obonori River in the Mingmang Panchayat, which falls under the Dhemaji district in its northwestern corner. The panchayat shares a boundary with the dam project and the Kamle district of Arunachal Pradesh to its west. Towards the north, it shares a border with the Lower Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh. Numerous communities, including the Misings, Assamese, Sonowals, and Nepalis, inhabit the downstream of Obonori. My thesis primarily focuses on the Mising tribe, which forms the majority in the area. The fieldwork area is where I belong, and it is my home. I belong to a village called Bélang of the

Mingmang panchayat, which became the centre of my fieldwork. While Bélang is the main village on which I based my arguments, I also considered interviewing and engaging with people from the larger Mingmang area to bring a more comprehensive, holistic, and nuanced perspective surrounding my research question. Moreover, the dam construction site, the Obonori River, and the hills bordering Arunachal Pradesh also became a site of fieldwork. Along with ethnography, I also indulged in other qualitative methods, such as unstructured interviews and group discussions with individuals and families who depend on the river as a source of income. Scholars refer to this fieldwork as ethnography at home, ‘native’ anthropology, or insider anthropology.<sup>130</sup> Although I officially completed a year of fieldwork, my engagement with the community continues. Each visit home offers a valuable opportunity to revisit and engage with fieldwork.

Having grown up in the area, I frequently reflect on the oral narratives shared by the elders, who spoke of a time when they had access to plentiful land and resources. This stands in stark contrast to the current situation, where individuals face significant challenges in meeting their social and economic needs. It contrasted the popular notion of Indigenous villages being self-reliant and relatively non-stratified societies. In a context where a large section of the villagers from the downstream were engaged in the dam construction work despite detesting the dam, in these

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<sup>130</sup> Esther R. Anderson, “Positionality, Privilege, and Possibility: The Ethnographer ‘at Home’ as an Uncomfortable Insider,” *Anthropology and Humanism* 46, no. 2 (2021): 212–25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anhu.12326>; Abby Forster, “We Are All Insider-Outsiders: A Review of Debates Surrounding Native Anthropology,” *Student Anthropologist* 3, no. 1 (2012): 13–26, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.sda2.20120301.0002>; Raymond Madden, “Home-town Anthropology,” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 10, no. 3 (1999): 259–70, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.1999.tb00024.x>; Kirin Narayan, “How Native Is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?,” *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (1993): 671–86, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1993.95.3.02a00070>.

contexts, some questions came to the forefront and needed to be answered. Why were people working there despite having a broad anti-dam consensus? What does this involvement indicate about the rural agrarian and job scenario? What does this engagement speak about our understanding of indigeneity and Indigenous peoples' relationship with development projects?

To gain insight into the present agrarian and job scenario, I was engaged in ethnography with construction workers at the dam and other construction sites. Most of my childhood friends, cousins, and relatives in the village are involved in construction work. I have traced their life histories. Primarily, I enquired about the land possession of their families and fragmentation within their families. Learning about individual possession of land gave me a clear idea about their dependence on agriculture and their ability to sustain themselves through it. Tracing their life history was important because it led to the general understanding of a shift from an agrarian-dependent family to one relying on informal wage labour, constantly looking for newer jobs. Extended observation of the construction workers was vital for comprehending the material transformations resulting from their participation in the dam project. This investigation also illuminated the intricate relationship the workers had with the dam, demonstrating that their stance was neither a simple acceptance nor an outright rejection of it as a symbol of development.

The life histories of the construction workers, who were teenagers and middle-aged in their forties and thirties, did not fully explain the present crisis. I started unravelling the past by engaging in group discussions and unstructured interviews with elders and enquiring about the socio-economic conditions of the past. I started revisiting the oral narratives of the past to inform the present.

Elders' oral narratives and perspectives became an important source to tell the stories of the past.<sup>131</sup>

I traced migration history to the present location from the banks of Obonori, where they had faced one of the deadliest floods after the big earthquake of the 1950s. In the present area, I explored the history of agrarian practices and landholding patterns, aiming to understand how the community has structured itself and formed its worldviews. My focus was on the transformations that occurred in the village after the 1950s and the factors that have contributed to the ongoing agrarian and employment crises.

While conversing about the past and tracing the life histories, the fieldwork led to newer fieldwork sites beyond the village, such as the Obonori River and the hills. This shift highlights the fact that people of the Mingmang panchayat, besides depending on farming, have primarily depended on off-farm income by procuring materials from the river and the hills in the last three decades. The Obonori River is a lifeline for a large population. I have conducted fieldwork with people dependent on river-based livelihood activities, ranging from herding cattle, fishing, collecting driftwood, and mining sand and boulders from the riverbed. Initially, my focus was on people's reactions to the under-construction dam and understanding the changes downstream of the river caused by the dam. I did participant observation, unstructured interviews and group discussions with the people involved in the river. I have regularly visited the islands and stayed in makeshift camps. Apart from learning about the dam's downstream impact, the fieldwork also led me to understand the importance of the river as a fallback in the context of people surviving on the income earned from the river-based livelihoods. I primarily traced the trajectories of a few families

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<sup>131</sup> See also Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 3rd ed (Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2021).

from my village who call the river their workplace. This set of understanding has led to tracing the area's changing socio-economic history and people's changing relationship with the river in a changing political economy. Eventually, this has led me to understand the lives of the people dependent on the river and the role of the larger political economy driving the people out of the river. Moreover, I have frequently visited the two sand and stone quarries along the river, conducted unstructured interviews with people working in those quarries, and tried to understand their vulnerabilities in the presence of wealthy actors involved in mining.

Likewise, the fieldwork shifted to the hills standing tall towards the north of the village bordering the state of Arunachal Pradesh. The lofty green hills are an integral part of the village's socio-economic existence and its people's imagination as people belonging to the area. These hills embody much more than a source of daily dependence for raw materials. People from the area have been engaged in manual logging and selling on an individual scale. Most of the middle-aged construction workers at present were manual loggers who made a living from a localised logging business. To understand the role of logging in supporting people's livelihoods, I have carried out group discussions and unstructured interviews with former loggers and sellers of the logs. This fieldwork with the loggers highlighted the importance of the hills in sustaining life during a crisis. Moreover, to understand the people's daily relationship with the hills and forest resources, I have also participated in communal labour, foraging for leaves and vegetables and gathering firewood.

The methodology of working at one's place or community poses a critique of the anthropological practices of portraying the natives as objects and opposing Eurocentric domination in academia.<sup>132</sup>

Driven by this idea of decolonising knowledge production and promoting a subject-subject

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<sup>132</sup> Forster, "We Are All Insider-Outsiders."

relationship between the researcher and the researched, I was engaged in dialogue with my fellow villagers, discussing land and labour issues amongst the communities. These collaborations were grounded in recognition that people are active subjects and integral to knowledge production.<sup>133</sup> Group discussions became an important methodology to reflect on the transition and the local history of the areas in which we belonged. In a dearth of local history, it has been an important exercise for some of us, unaware of the past. Most youths in their teenage and early twenties are unaware of the past. In these contexts, group discussions had been a practice of self-reflecting, remembering the past of how change had come to the area, and passing down the stories to the youth. It has also prompted us to recognise the problems pertaining to the village and think about ways to create a better future.

The fieldwork was constantly driven by reflexivity and self-evaluation as a researcher in telling the story of the area, the people and the tribe. My positionality as a research scholar from a relatively good socio-economic background became central to the narration. While I was exploring the position of my fellow villagers during the fieldwork, the fieldwork also made me realise my class position as a researcher conducting fieldwork with people I know. It was ironic to write about and explore the precarity and vulnerability of my friends and family in the village, whom I have known closely. In the process of exploring this precarity and vulnerability of my fellow villagers, I had to gather the courage to write about my position and how it differed from most of them. This manifested in terms of tracing my family's trajectory, which subsequently became a part of the thesis narrative to understand the process of internal differentiation in the village.

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<sup>133</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*; See also Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (Penguin Books, 2017).

Moreover, my position as a researcher and belonging to a particular family blurred my identity as an insider. While certain areas felt familiar to me, there were numerous unfamiliar encounters. Many ethnographers have found the neat categorisation of insider/outsider problematic.<sup>134</sup> An ethnographer's identity is shaped by gender, age, class and other socio-economic markers.<sup>135</sup> It also shapes their position in the field. Abby Forster stresses the fluidity of identity in a fieldwork site.<sup>136</sup> Drawing from arguments from native anthropologists on the fluidity of a researcher, she argues that every researcher is both an insider and an outsider.

Although I claim Bélang to be my home, the fieldwork made me realise there were many things I was unaware of. As much as there were familiar spaces, there were unfamiliar spaces too. I was always a visitor returning to the village for a vacation. I had difficulty starting up conversations with the villagers. I did not talk to many people in the village, and this also stems from my educational journey, which had placed me far away from my village since I was four. After I left for schooling, it was only during summer and winter vacations that I came home. There was a fragment of me that felt it could never belong to the village. The fieldwork back home gave me a chance to be a part of the community and allowed me to explore the unfamiliar side of the village. For instance, the imagination of the river Obonori never remained the same for me. It was a space for picnics and recreational activities for me. In contrast, Obonori was a space of competition ranging from the dam, the Forest Department (FD), contractors, *dalals* (intermediaries), and people

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<sup>134</sup> Narayan, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?"; Madden, "Home-town Anthropology"; Forster, "We Are All Insider-Outsiders."

<sup>135</sup> Narayan, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?"; Anderson, "Positionality, Privilege, and Possibility."

<sup>136</sup> Forster, "We Are All Insider-Outsiders."

who made a living. The place felt unfamiliar, and I initially needed my friends to accompany me to venture into the river. The unfamiliarity was similar in the context of the hills.

There were numerous instances where I felt a sense of discomfort and unease while doing fieldwork. In a movement led by the villagers to save the hills from being demarcated under the Arunachal Pradesh boundary, I found myself in an opposing camp against the movement. The movement erupted against a road built by the Arunachal Pradesh government along the hills.<sup>137</sup> The hills fell into an undemarcated territory between the state of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. This construction of the road is likely to strengthen the border between the two states, threatening their historical access to the hills. The protest, however, was not supported by several families within the village. This crack in consensus lies in the villagers' allegiance to different political parties. The movement was alleged to be led against the interest of the Mising nationalist organisations striving for ethnic solidarity with Tani groups (Adi, Galo, Tagin, Nyishi and Apatani) in Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>138</sup> Allegedly, the movement was portrayed as led by the Congress Party (a national-level political party in India), who have a history of opposing the cause raised by the Mising organisations for autonomy. The protestors were painted to be Congress sympathisers. I belonged to a family sharing solidarity with the Mising organisations that opposed the grassroots presence of the Congress party. Although I wanted to be a part of the movement, I was always

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<sup>137</sup> Debasish Hazarika and Ngamjahao Kipgen, "Can the Borderland Speak? Entangled Territoriality in the Foothills of Northeast India," *Political Geography* 121 (August 2025): 103358, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2025.103358>.

<sup>138</sup> Adi, Galo, Tagin, Nyishi, Mising, and Apatani are indigenous communities who claim to be the Tani people and descendants of the same ancestors. These communities claim to be from the same group on the basis of their shared languages, cultures and beliefs. They have formed many joint organisations to promote fraternity and brotherhood. Among them, Adi Mising Bané Kébang and Galo Mising Coordination Committee are popular.

looked at with suspicion by the protestors. A fellow researcher, who was an ‘outsider’ working in the same area, was more welcomed than I was. The women leading the movement were more eager to share their problems and discuss the internal dynamics with him. I was once asked about the whereabouts of the researcher by the protesting women so that they could make him write about them in the newspaper. Whereas I was a fellow villager who stood against the movement, I was held untrustworthy towards their cause and not considered capable of helping them in their cause. Nevertheless, doing fieldwork at home has put me in good hands with people whom I know. My home gave me a comfortable space throughout the fieldwork period. Several group discussions took place at my home when villagers turned up for rituals. Apart from my family, I had the support of my friends in the village, who accompanied me to these unfamiliar spaces. Unlike many other fellow researchers who struggle to build connections and have communication issues, I have always had the advantage of working at home. Engaging with the community and the area where I grew up was also a privilege. The research allowed me to self-reflect as an individual belonging to my family and society. The power of ethnographic fieldwork clarified some questions I grew up with - the gradual impoverishment of the Misings, and the disjuncture of how the village used to be and how it is now. This fieldwork opportunity has also led us to discuss ways to lead a better future. In one such discussion, we came to a decision to grow more plants for our future use in the backdrop of apprehending the depletion of forest resources surrounding the village. We have led a plantation drive, distributing plant saplings to families in the village.

In order to complement the proposed research, apart from the field insights, I was also engaged in conversations and interviews with grassroots leaders of the Takam Mising Porin Kébang (TMPK [All Mising Student Union]) and a few other anti-dam leaders on their stance on the dam. Besides consulting secondary sources, I consulted primary sources: colonial ethnographies, colonial

government policies, Assam legislative Assembly debates, district gazetteers, and census records. Further, I referred to news articles, collected memoranda and pamphlets of the organisations involved in the movement and the dam authorities' publications.

## **5. The Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis is situated within a broad literature of understanding Indigenous communities' relationship to development projects. In the last few decades, numerous studies on Indigenous communities highlight the entry of large extractive development projects, dispossessing them of their land. In these interactions, the writings on the Indigenous population often portray an antagonistic relationship with these projects. Further, there is a strong consensus that Indigenous people are strong defenders of *Jal*, *Jungle*, and *Jameen*. Against this backdrop, the thesis argues for a more complex understanding of Indigenous people's reactions to development projects. There is a new set of scholarship that pushes forward the idea that peasant and Indigenous populations might not always oppose development projects that threaten to dispossess their means of production, which is primarily land. Hence, drawing from critical scholarship that highlights capitalistic relationships within Indigenous communities, the thesis argues that the agrarian, ecological, and employment crises experienced in Mising villages in eastern Assam have led to the community's complex relationship with the SLHEP. People working on the dam reflect a paradoxical relationship in which they are faced with a dilemma between their disapproval of the dam and their need to work on it to improve their living conditions. I argue that this relationship, amidst a lack of active resistance against a backdrop of weakening of social movements in India, stems from the poor material conditions, lack of choice, and aspirations that have emerged from a conjuncture of state policies, ecological factors, and capitalistic relationships within the community in their history of engaging with the market economy. This contests a popular global

discourse that assumes Indigenous populations as defenders of their land when an outside force is challenging it. It also challenges the transnational Indigenous movements that place a burden of resistance on the Indigenous populations. Hence, it contributes to the existing works on social movement and Indigenous politics that go against a neat categorisation of people's reactions to development projects as binaries of resistance or acquiescence. It emphasises that it should be seen in the light of continuous negotiation with capital and people's aspirations for a better life. By exploring people's paradoxical relationships with the dam, the thesis underscores the importance of framing Indigenous issues of contemporary times within the political economy framework. However, I am not reducing it to a mode of enquiry that is rooted in the idea of economic determinism. Furthermore, the thesis aligns with what Tania Li emphasised: the future success of Indigenous movements or social movements hinges on comprehending these crises and contradictions deeply rooted in the larger political economy.<sup>139</sup>

The chapters in the thesis reflect on the process that leads to these contradictory positions in the face of a changing political economy and the coming of the dam. Besides this introductory chapter, the thesis has four core ethnographic chapters and a conclusion chapter. The second chapter, titled *Bélang in the 21st Century: Depending on Hajira*, gives an overview of the present socio-economic scenario of the area under study, where a large section of the people is involved in the informal wage labour economy, struggling for social reproduction. This is rooted in agriculture becoming unviable for sustaining a family in the wake of landlessness and land fragmentation. Hence, the chapter delves into the reasons for landlessness among the villagers. In the process of locating the landlessness, the chapter locates the agrarian change led by the new fiscal regime

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<sup>139</sup> Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

introduced by the British and the impetus of the villagers to improve their condition by becoming a part of the market economy. As much as a larger political economy plays a role in the crisis, the chapter stresses that factors such as their aspirations to become a part of a cash crop economy, increasing capitalist relations, and local ecological factors need to be considered in understanding the present crisis within Indigenous/tribal populations. Hence, the chapter questions the simplistic and ahistorical understanding of the Indigenous population as self-sufficient and homogeneous by situating them in a broader political economy. It highlights the increasing internal differentiation and capitalistic relations that arise amidst Indigenous communities, which are often overlooked. Moreover, it points to the mundane nature of the capitalistic transition, where there is no dispossession from direct external factors, but rather happens within the villagers.

The third chapter is titled *The Obonori and the Misings*. This chapter takes us to the Obonori River and to its islands, quarries, and the villages along it. It highlights the river's importance in the struggle of social reproduction. In the process, it historically situates the people's relationship with the river in the backdrop of powerful state and non-state actors trying to exploit and tame the river. In this milieu, the chapter locates the importance of the river in the backdrop of a crisis in a struggle for social reproduction. Historically, the river has served as a source of income, particularly as a route for timber businesses. Over the past two to three decades, owing to unemployment and agrarian crises, reliance on the river as an income source has significantly increased. Additionally, there has been an increase in the commodification and extraction of the river, driven by the demand for materials needed for concrete construction. However, the poor section of local communities is in the lowest strata in the extraction economy, facing competition from fellow wealthy members from the same community, business people from elsewhere, the quarry lessee and the FD. Amidst these unequal relations, their situation of struggle for social reproduction forces them to be part of

the extraction economy. However, in addition to these unequal relations, the chapter highlights the impact of the upcoming dam that has gradually dispossessed them of the little space they had carved out for themselves amidst these powerful actors. It implies that the gradual dispossession from the river has increased the precarity and vulnerability of the local communities, forcing them to depend on more insecure and informal wage labouring work. Alongside the material connections to the river, this chapter emphasises people's romantic attachment to it, showcasing a dynamic relationship that is threatened by the impending construction of the dam.

The fourth chapter is titled *The Hills: A Fallback*. The chapter examines the significance of the hills in the context of rising landlessness and fragmentation within the village community. In a context of being squeezed out of the agricultural production process and the Indian state's failure to induce the unemployed population, the hills became a fallback. Moreover, it provides insight into the thriving timber industry that once flourished in the NER, where affluent Misings became key participants, accumulating wealth that contributed to increased disparities within the village. As the wealthy segments of the population prospered as part of the larger political economy surrounding the timber trade, less fortunate members have engaged in localised timber enterprises since the 1990s. In light of the blanket ban on timber trade across India by the Supreme Court, these individuals have adapted by relying on an informal timber business to sustain their livelihoods, responding to a growing demand for timber in the nearby urban centres. The hills have been largely imagined as commons that could be used by anyone; however, with very few individuals holding. However, at present, due to overdependence leading to the depletion of timber, many of the manual loggers were forced out of the hills to find new sources of income. Apart from the commercial dependence, people depend on it for every basic necessity that helps to sustain their livelihoods, from depending on vegetables, firewood and other materials that sustain them

culturally and materially. Nevertheless, in recent years, the notion of the hills as commons has been gradually challenged by the incoming capital interest brought in by tourism promoted by the locals and by a road under construction in the foothills, rendering the hills investible, leading to speculation, selling, and reclamation of land in the hills. The hill becoming valuable has refashioned and reconfigured people's relationship with the hills, depending on different social locations and leading to clashes within the villagers and within kins to reclaim lands once used for jhum cultivation. For the poor section of the village, the land in the hills became a way to improve one's life or meet a family's emergency by selling it to wealthy buyers. On the other hand, for the wealthy actors, the road brought in opportunities to be explored in running a resort or starting a cash crop plantation. However, these situations seem to further the process of dispossession from the means of production and challenge the idea of the hills being held as commons.

The third and fourth chapters highlight the importance of the hills and the river as an important source in sustaining social reproduction in a context where agriculture and farming have become unviable. This access to the river and the hills means that people can choose to employ their labour at their own expense without working under insecure, informal and exploitative conditions. However, with the increasing dispossession, they are losing control over their labour. Additionally, these three chapters also highlight the people's continuous negotiations and their competing claims over land, forest and river, which fall under the control of the state. Within these competing claims, the villagers have continued to access these exclusive spaces, where human activities are prohibited. Furthermore, within these negotiations and claim-making, these three chapters indicate the gradual depletion of resources and the rise of powerful actors competing for extraction, even from within the community. Currently, the gradual depletion of resources and unviability of

agriculture has forced people to make a living solely on *hajira*, informal wage labour, always on footloose, looking for jobs.

The fifth chapter is titled *The Dam and the People*. Amid these crises and people's struggle in social reproduction, the chapter explores how the dam has reconfigured the people's social and material conditions. The chapter explores the contradictions between people's resistance and detestation against the dam and their need to find a job and secure a better livelihood by working in the dam. In a dearth of jobs, work on the dam seems to be suitable for the people surrounding the dam. People work under private labour contractors, where they are likely to be out of a job when a contractor's term ends. When a construction site is complete, they ought to look for other sites with new labour contractors. Although it is temporary, it is one of the 'best jobs' in the area despite the dangers of working on these sites. It provides them with a regular income for as long as they work in the dam. Evidently, working in the dam has improved people's material conditions in the area, and they have been able to fulfil their dreams and aspirations, such as buying a bike or building a house, among many others. Yet, there is an uneasiness about working in the dam, as one is aware of the negative impacts of the dam and its threat of wiping out the downstream population. This chapter highlights the complex realities of the Indigenous population that force them to negotiate with the force of a larger political economy, sometimes at the risk of their own lives.

Chapter six is the conclusion chapter. Examining the questions of how indigenous communities respond to a development project in the backdrop of agrarian and employment crises, the thesis critically examines the assumption that Indigenous people resist development projects that threaten to dispossess them of their lands. It posits that indigenous populations, often perceived as strong defenders of their land, may not always align with this image. The thesis concludes that people's relationship with the dam is contradictory and is rooted in their struggle to socially reproduce

themselves. This reveals a complex and dynamic relationship. Hence, the thesis highlights that these intricacies are influenced by a combination of historical capitalist agrarian change, ecological factors, landlessness, joblessness, aspirations, and growing capitalist relationships within the community. Hence, this research emphasises the necessity of contextualising Indigenous communities' experiences within historical and material conditions.

Moreover, in the backdrop of a large population in rural areas becoming a global reserve labour army, the thesis emphasises the need to look at the capitalist relations within indigenous communities. In this context, the thesis points out the newly emerging realities in these rural villages, where things are not significantly worse, but it is far from ideal. Moreover, the concluding chapter does not overlook the negotiation abilities of the tribes. Instead, it mentions the importance of considering diverse negotiation processes that take place under conditions of inequality, shaped by different social and community standings.

## Chapter 2

### Bélang in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

#### 1. Introduction

Susen and Pulpuli are a couple in their mid-thirties in Bélang. They have three children. Susen works as a *headmistry*;<sup>140</sup> However, the work is very irregular. When I met him in October 2022, he had been complaining about not finding any construction work for a few days. With his eldest child beginning higher secondary schooling in Gogamukh (the nearest urban centre to Bélang) in 2024, he is now pressured to find a regular income in construction wage work. He inherited five *bighas* (approximately 1.65 acres)<sup>141</sup> of land from his father, where he cultivates paddy that meets the family's consumption needs for the year. However, his dependence on agriculture and earnings from his irregular wage work are increasingly becoming insufficient to meet the family's growing needs, and he cannot be without regular wage work. Fortunately, he received a call for construction work in Pasighat, a major town in eastern Arunachal Pradesh. In addition, he also travels to Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh, as well as the nearby urban centre of Gogamukh and other neighbouring villages to work.

Many like Susen in the village, ranging from middle-aged men to teenagers, are engaged in informal and insecure wage work called *hajira* in Assamese. *Hajira* was almost non-existent in the early 2000s in Bélang. Within two decades, it has become one of the vital ways to earn a living for the majority of the villagers. While starting fieldwork towards the end of 2021, most of the

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<sup>140</sup> *Headmistry* is a term used for a mason who leads a construction.

<sup>141</sup> *Bigha* is a unit of measurement of land, which varies across India. In Assam, one bigha is equal to 0.33acre or 14,400 square feet.

villagers were engaged in the dam as construction workers. The rest of the villagers were involved in the masonry works. These works are insecure and irregular, and they are often forced to look for work after one is over. The work in the dam does not guarantee tenure. The labourers work under labour contractors and are bound to leave when a contractor's term is over or at the contractor's whim. Nevertheless, despite the existing informality and fear of the dam, it is one of the most desired wage labouring jobs. Working at the dam site ensures a regular income for the period they are engaged. When one is out of a job in the dam, they return to Susen's position, looking for *hajira*, primarily in the construction of concrete houses.

The villagers' situation highlights a struggle for social reproduction. It reflects a global phenomenon of becoming a reserve army of labour in rural areas, where selling and depending on one's labour has become one of the key ways to sustain a living, lacking a foothold.<sup>142</sup> Except for a few wealthy and landed families, the entire village depends on informal wage work. It is far from a self-subsistent and egalitarian imagery attached to Indigenous populations. In the village, out of 160 families, there are over 50 landless families, while the rest of the village population has highly fragmented lands, and hardly 15 families have large landholdings above 5 *puras* (6.6 acres). For the landless and the highly fragmented landholders, *hajira* is the sole way to fulfil one's family's needs. Morning scenes of people from the village rushing for work from the village *tiniali* are a real spectacle. It reminded me of the labour *chowks*<sup>143</sup> that I saw in cities like Delhi and Guwahati,

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<sup>142</sup> Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*; Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Tania Murray Li, "To Make Live or Let Die? Rural Dispossession and the Protection of Surplus Populations," *Antipode* 41, no. s1 (2010): 66–93, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00717.x>; Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

<sup>143</sup>Market area in a city where roads meet and serve as a junction.

where labourers wait for their turn to be picked up for the day's work. People working in the dam are the first batch to leave for work in the morning. As early as 6 AM, the village *tiniali* starts bustling with workers leaving for work and returning from their night shifts. The *tiniali* shops cater to their daily needs of cigarettes, tobacco, and betel-nuts. They wait in these shops for their personally hired pickup trucks to take them to the construction site. It is common to see trucks overloaded with standing workers with bright yellow helmets. Some go to work on their newly bought motorcycles from the money earned from the dam, sharing rides with their friends and family members. At around 8 AM, the next batch of workers departs. They are construction workers who go to the urban areas or neighbouring villages and engage in masonry and other construction activities. These labourers going to work are my friends, cousins, relatives, and acquaintances.

Looking at them, I realised that our lives had taken separate trajectories. I was born to a better-off family in the village with considerably large landholdings and with salaried individuals working as teachers in government schools, rooted in my grandparents' ability to bear the expense of education in the towns. Consequently, with my family's resources, my siblings and I had the opportunity to pursue higher education. I became aware of the class differences within the village at a young age. I grew up surrounded by many *haluwas*<sup>144</sup>, *ruwonis*<sup>145</sup>, *nébing*<sup>146</sup>, and *guwals*<sup>147</sup>, who came from poorer families in the village and stayed at our house. They worked in our house doing household and agricultural work. In contrast to my position, these labouring populations,

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<sup>144</sup> *Haluwa* literally translates to ploughman. They are male servants who help with household and agricultural work.

<sup>145</sup> *Ruwoni* are women who plants paddy. They also serve as servants who help with household and agricultural work.

<sup>146</sup> *Nébing*s are babysitters.

<sup>147</sup> *Guwals* are cattle herders, mostly young boys, who are yet to become *Haluwa*.

who form the majority in the village, constitute the gradually squeezed-out populations from the agricultural production process in the village. This points to an internal differentiation within Indigenous/tribal communities. There are numerous scholarly works that highlight the internal differentiation within Indigenous communities.<sup>148</sup> It is essential to understand the reasons behind this internal differentiation, which points to the diverse paths of capitalistic transition in societies. As informed by the work of Tania Li, these transformations are not drastic. It takes an undetected transition in a mundane way.<sup>149</sup> It does not reflect Marx's primitive accumulation or Polanyi's great transformation to capitalism.<sup>150</sup> This situation resonates with capitalist relations that arise within the community, where outsiders have not directly grabbed or dispossessed people from their lands, but it primarily happened among kin, relatives, and villagers.<sup>151</sup> Considering the new reality of *hajira*, the chapter delves into the village's history of transitioning to a *hajira*-dependent village. I delve into what these developments mean to an Indigenous community and, in such adversities, how people who are squeezed out of the agricultural production process try to reproduce themselves.

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<sup>148</sup> Khan, "Is Tribe a Homogeneous Category?"; Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*; Kikon and Karlsson, *Leaving the Land*; Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*; Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*.

<sup>149</sup> Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

<sup>150</sup> Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

<sup>151</sup> Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

## 2. The Present: Land, People and Relationships in BÉlang

### 2.1 Nostalgia and Regrets

Bélang was a village located on the banks of Obonori before the great earthquake of the 1950s. We have grown up knowing and listening to the stories shared by the elders of the unprecedented flood that followed the earthquake. Just after the earthquake, the river dried up because of landslides in the hills that blocked the river's flow. When the barrier broke, an unprecedented flood led to the erasure of many downstream villages.<sup>152</sup> Subsequently, the population was displaced to its current location. The stories of suffering and the rupture of their lives from the flood still reverberate among the elders. The present location of the village was part of the Subansiri Reserve Forest (SRF), almost 6 km east of the river, which the Assam government had de-reserved for these flood-affected populations.<sup>153</sup> Hence, following the flood, many of the affected villages on the bank of Obonori, such as Takkír, Bélang, Koyom and a few other downstream villages found relief in the government-allotted land. These villages have retained their old names in their present locations. My family, being from a neighbouring village along the river Obonori, came looking for land in the 1960s and became a part of Bélang through kinship ties. By the 1960s and 1970s, the area offered refuge to Mising populations seeking land further downstream from modern-day Majuli and from the confluence of the Obonori River and the Brahmaputra, who were affected by floods and riverbank erosion. Apart from the Misings, the Nepali population have also found refuge in it from the neighbouring districts.<sup>154</sup> In addition, the de-reserved forest offered

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<sup>152</sup> "Assam Legislative Assembly Debates," Assam Legislative Assembly Publications library, September 30, 1950, <http://aladigitallibrary.in/handle/123456789/1801>.

<sup>153</sup> "Assam Legislative Assembly Debates," September 30, 1950.

<sup>154</sup> Nepali populations were largely graziers who inhabited the riverine tracts for cattle rearing.

opportunities for families who would come for temporary cultivation, locally known as *Pam*<sup>155</sup>. Many families came for a few years and moved back to the villages they belonged to. Simultaneously, there were batches of Boros, Bengalis, Rabhas, Rajbongsis, and Hajongs who migrated from the districts of western Assam. Perhaps this migration from distant places reflected the historically increasing pressure on land owing to the increase in the East Bengali migrant population in western Assam.<sup>156</sup> The completion of the Meter Gauge Railway line connecting Rangiya to Murkongselek in the 1960s facilitated the movement of people, leading to the reclamation of land in the eastern corners of Assam.<sup>157</sup> With the increase in population, these batches of local and distant migrations have led to reclaiming land that fell under the rest of the reserved forest.

Over the years, the de-reserved lands have transformed from impenetrable jungles to settled villages and farmlands. However, a large portion of these settled villages and farmlands do not have legal land tenure but fall under the control of the state. For instance, the road that cuts across the villages in the Mingmang panchayat divides them into northern and southern parts. The area north of the road towards the hills of Arunachal Pradesh mostly falls under SRF, where people do not have formal legal claims over the land (See fig. 5). Likewise, the road cuts Béláng into two halves. Half of Béláng and two other villages that are located on the northern side towards the hills have residents who lack formal land tenure. This is due to the area being classified as SRF and

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<sup>155</sup> *Pam* is a local term for shifting cultivation.

<sup>156</sup> To have an understanding of land alienation due to demographic changes, see Sharma, “Tribal Land Alienation: Government’s Role”; Saikia, *A Century of Protests*.

<sup>157</sup> Shyam Bhandra Medhi, *Transport System and Economic Development in Assam* (Assam Prakashan Parishad, 1978); Jatin Mipun, *The Mishings (Miris) of Assam: Development of a New Lifestyle* (Gyan Publishing House, 2012).

overlapping land claims with the state of Arunachal Pradesh. These claims by the state's FD are part of a historical process since the colonial period that has been challenging people's claim to forest and territory, rendering them landless.<sup>158</sup> Recently, there has been a rise in border disputes between Assam and its neighbouring states. This is further contributing to the continuing historical trend of marginalising and diminishing communities' claims to land and resources in border areas.<sup>159</sup> Our family resides on the southern side, which falls within the de-reserved part of the village. The southern part underwent a cadastral survey by the state in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, most of the families, out of their landholding in the southern part, have a mix of land titles, *patta* (periodic leases) for certain parcels, *ekchaniya* (annual leases) for others, and some fall under *toujibahi* land (government land). During the fieldwork period, many families participated in converting government lands into periodic land titles under the Mission Basundhara initiative, launched by the state government.<sup>160</sup> The villages have taken the shape of what the colonial administrators had strived towards: 'individual, tax-paying, plough-using, plot-bound cultivators', making them revenue-paying citizens.<sup>161</sup> Historically, the Mising mobile *Jhum*

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<sup>158</sup> Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*.

<sup>159</sup> See Hazarika and Kipgen, "Can the Borderland Speak? Entangled Territoriality in the Foothills of Northeast India."

<sup>160</sup> Mission Basundhara is a process under which the state of Assam initiated a process of updating the pendency of land records. It is an effort to do cadastral surveys of non-cadastral areas and grant land titles and settlements of government lands to citizens, largely driven by the motive to promote an ease-of-doing-business environment in a land management ecosystem by the state. See <https://basundhara.assam.gov.in/about>.

<sup>161</sup> Bodhisattva Kar, "The Birth of the Ryot," in *Landscape, Culture, and Belonging: Writing the History of Northeast India*, ed. Neeladri Bhattacharya and Joy Pachuau (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 65. *Ryot* are individual tenants with land proprietorship under the colonial regime.

cultivators were transformed into settled populations with a sense of individual land ownership, increasing landlessness and land fragmentation within the community.<sup>162</sup>

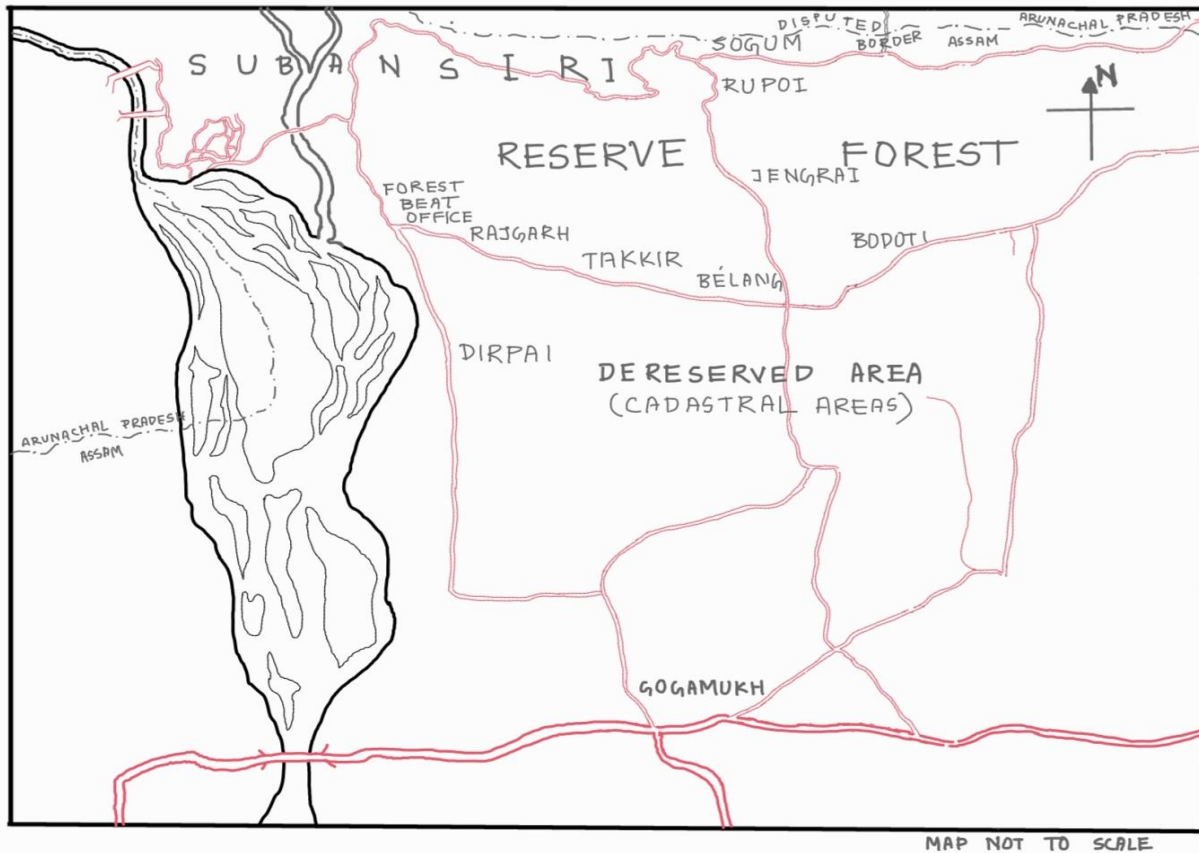


Figure 5: A sketch map depicting the reserved and de-reserved forest area (Sketched by Anindya Basak)

<sup>162</sup>A.J.Moffat Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 2nd ed. (Publication Board Assam, 1984). He highlighted the Misings as shifting cultivators along the floodplains of the rivers in eastern districts of Brahmaputra valley.



Figure 6: A photograph of the cadastral revenue map of the farmlands of the southern part of the road conducted in 1969-70 (Source: Author)

The elders of Bélang have several stories about what a Mising village looked like in the past. When it was resettled, life in this village was portrayed as ‘perfect’. Despite the painful stories of losing their villages to the flood, the narratives of the years that followed immediately after the resettlement depicted a different picture. Many elders I have encountered take pride in their agricultural past, which included access to land, abundant food and forest resources, and the absence of poverty. According to my father’s rough estimates, every family in Bélang had more than five *puras* of land in the past. I once conversed with a middle-aged man called Torun (pseudonym) whom I met in Dirpai, a village on the banks of Obonori. While sharing a betelnut in front of a shop, he took me through his journey from Dirpai to Itanagar. Due to the lack of a

regular income in his village, he was forced to look for opportunities elsewhere. He is now settled with his family in Itanagar (the capital of Arunachal Pradesh), around 100 km away, and engaged in petty businesses. When I met him, he had come to Dirpai to attend a family ritual. Although he did not have much land left in the village, he spoke of the area's past with conviction, pride and a sense of loss. He said,

You will not believe the abundance we had in the past. Everything was available near our house. We did not have to buy anything for the construction of the house. I never saw tin roofs. The thatch needed for roofs was plenty along the river. Besides, we did not have to buy food like meat and fish, except for clothes and other essentials.

He paused, sighed, and continued, 'Today, we do not get to eat and drink like in the past. That is why when I tell my children about the past, my children question if I speak the truth.'<sup>163</sup> It is common to encounter narratives of impoverishment that reflect a past of sufficient access to land and resources.

Several narratives like Torun's about the past reverberate nostalgia and a sense of regret for not being able to 'improve'. The *tinialis* of the villages became an important site for such conversations. These small village centres offered me the best spot for group discussions and to reflect on the past. In these *tinialis*, I met older men in groups passing their days, engaging in conversations, and playing board games and cards. After the harvesting months of December 2022, the *tiniali* in Bélang looked deserted. I was loitering in the *tiniali*, hopping from one shop to another, looking for company. Next to one of the village alcohol bars, I came across *Baboi*<sup>164</sup> Talom

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<sup>163</sup> Field notes, Dirpai, January 22, 2022.

<sup>164</sup> *Baboi* refers to an uncle who is younger than one's father and belongs to the same clan.

(pseudonym) and *Babatta*<sup>165</sup> Debo, middle-aged men in their sixties, engaged in a casual conversation. Talom, in the past, belonged to one of the wealthiest families in the village. When I meet people their age, I participate in group discussions, reflecting and recalling the past. This time, too, I jumped straight into asking them about how the village was in the past. Talom was the first to reply. After a brief sigh, he said, '*Sukkempé emangai* (Things were different in the past). We were all relatively self-sufficient and well-off.' Pondering over the current situation where one needs to buy everything for a living, he recalled the days when one could share food and resources. Talom, pointing at the road to the north, said, 'When labourers came to build the road through our village, we offered them enough food and vegetables. We did not hesitate to give to people. Now look at our condition; we have nothing to offer even to our neighbours.' Given his present condition, where he has less landholding, he said, 'My parents did not understand the value of land in the past. We had enough land. My parents had money, but did not prefer to buy land because they thought it was enough for us. We were not able to capitalise on our resources.' Pointing to some families in the village who bought land, he continued, 'Look at these families in the village. They have accumulated so much land in Gogamukh.' *Babatta* Debo, while listening to Talom, contributed to the conversation,

My father also could not retain the lands they cleared because they thought the land was sufficient. We had 50 *puras* of land for each of our families.<sup>166</sup> But controlling such swathes was impossible. People seeking land reclaimed the land that we left unused. We had many

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<sup>165</sup> *Babatta* refers to an uncle who is older than one's father and someone who belong to same clan.

<sup>166</sup> This includes my family, too.

buffalo and elephants that had died of disease. At this time, we should have been one of the wealthiest families in the area, but our family could not take advantage of our wealth.<sup>167</sup>

This conversation reminded me of my grandfather, who described the past as *Monbang jug*. *Monbang* is a term for a fool in Mising; *Jug* is an Assamese term that refers to an era. Hence, *Monbang jug* means ‘Fool’s era’. There is a sense of self-criticism among elders. Most older generations blame themselves for their present condition. They believe that in the past, they did not understand the changing value of land and did not take advantage of what social transformation had to offer, from access to schooling to market opportunities. These conversations about the past led to reflections on the conditions of the larger Mising community losing out in this transition. These conversations highlighted the increasing impoverishment of the Misings, and often, they would compare how *Mipags*<sup>168</sup> who are in a better position than they are. It is not only the *Mipags* whom they compare with, but with the emerging currents of socio-economic changes; a comparison with the neighbouring tribes of Arunachal Pradesh has also become common. This comparison stems from the people's understanding of material improvement in the border villages of Arunachal Pradesh near Bélang, where it is believed that poverty and landlessness do not exist, and people have control over their resources. Moreover, a large number of people from Bélang work in the dam under Arunachali contractors at the dam construction site. In recent years, many people from these Mising villages have migrated to Arunachal Pradesh for work in construction and logging under wealthy families of Arunachal. The ability to employ Mising labourers speaks volumes about the relatively wealthier position of the Arunachali tribes. Talom remarked on their

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<sup>167</sup> Field notes, Bélang *tiniali*, December 14, 2022.

<sup>168</sup> *Mipag* is a term that refers to non-Misings, especially referring to the caste Assamese population in Assam.

increasing wealth and said, ‘In the present day, we are supposed to call them *sahabs*<sup>169</sup> because they have become rich. They control their lands and resources, unlike us.’ Hence, compared with them, the elders of Bélang place themselves in a position of increasing precarity and vulnerability.<sup>170</sup>

## 2.2. Fragmentations, Landlessness and Feuds

In contrast to the past, the narratives of these elders depict the present as one marked by poverty, resourcelessness, landlessness and fragmentation of land in the village. I could not relate to the story of abundance that the elders spoke of with such passion and pride. However, in the recounting of the experiences of relatively sufficient resources enjoyed by a section of the people in Bélang, the experiences of another section of the villagers remain unspoken. In the passionate recollections of the past, what is left out are the people who spent many years working at other people’s houses within the village as *haluwa*, *ruwoni*, *nébing* or *guwal* for many decades under the patronage of affluent families. There is an indifference towards the internal differentiation within one’s community. From the late 1980s and early 2000s, many people from the village worked for my family and other affluent families. Most of these people possessed only homesteads and no farming lands. I will explore the reason behind the formation of these groups in the later sections. In the last few decades, the pressure on land has extended to every family in the village, and once affluent

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<sup>169</sup> *Sahab* is a term that refers to people in privileged and wealthy positions.

<sup>170</sup> To have a sense of Arunachali elites' capital accumulation in Arunachal Pradesh, see Barbara Harriss-White et al., “Capitalist Trajectories in Agrarian Mountain Societies of East and South-east Arunachal, India,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 22, no. 2 (2022): 223–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12454>; Barbara Harriss-White et al., “Institutional Diversity and Capitalist Transition: The Political Economy of Agrarian Change in Arunachal Pradesh, India,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 9, no. 4 (2009): 512–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0366.2009.00230.x>.

and landed families have also begun to face land fragmentation, leading to tussles amongst siblings and neighbours.

Tussles between kins and neighbours over land have become very common. Within a few months of fieldwork, I had already experienced tussles over land. In the first week of February 2022, the village was gearing up for *Ali-A:yé-Lígang*, an agrarian ritual of the Misings for a good harvest. Some of us were building the *murong ukum*<sup>171</sup>, a few days before the big day. While most villagers had already left for construction work, a few of us were left to prepare for the festival. While rushing to finish constructing the *murong*, a village youth leader approached us to request our presence in a meeting to settle a feud. He said there had been written requests to the village *kébang* (village council) to sort out the issues between two cousins, Ta:ken (pseudonym) and Rajiv (pseudonym), around their homestead land. The *kébang* does not have a fixed membership but is led by youths involved in grassroots politics from the village. Any villagers present in such disputes can become a part of the solving process. Although not acknowledged by the state, it serves as a local mechanism to address grievances within the village. In no time, as we gathered, the two cousins came with their families, forming two factions and making their case. After a while, several people who were passing by gathered around us to listen to their concerns. While the village youth leader asked them about their issues, everyone waited patiently to listen to them. Ta:ken, with anger, was the first one to reply,

I had let Rajiv build a house beside mine because his family did not have enough land for a homestead. Now, I want him out of my land. He has stolen many chickens, and the couple

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<sup>171</sup> Historically *Murong ukum* is the bachelor's dormitory of Misings. However, in contemporary times, its functions have changed. It is mainly used for celebrations of *Lígang* and for village meetings.

always fights. I cannot stand their nuisance. Even after numerous requests, he does not want to move away. I am afraid he will grab my land.

Rajiv replied, 'I agree that I stay on his land. How can I move at such short notice? We are not a nuisance, and I have not stolen your chickens.' Pointing fingers at Ta:ken and cursing, he continued, 'Can you prove I have stolen your chicken?' 'Yes, I can,' Ta:ken replied. Rajiv's wife then intervened, accusing Ta:ken, 'I know you want us to move out, but we are not a nuisance.' Seeing the escalating exchange, a middle-aged person attending the meeting had to calm them down. From behind Rajiv, his father voiced against Ta:ken's claims over the land, 'How can you claim the land where you are staying as yours? Your father was lost in migrating from here to there. I offered the piece of land to your father, which led to your father settling back in the village.' Ta:ken replied, 'I do not know about the past. But I have grown up in that land, and it belongs to me.'<sup>172</sup> We quietly listened to them with unease as the conversation continued. The youth leader and a few elders in the meeting took note of the issues and discussed them with us. Finally, the *kébang* gave Rajiv three months to leave the land. This is one of many family feuds over land in the village, which have become increasingly common today.

In another instance, there was an intense argument between two families in my neighbourhood. I saw Gamo (pseudonym) from our neighbourhood, who came in anger and yelled at another neighbour, accusing, 'Have you seen your fencing? It is not straight. You are trying to encroach upon my land. The fencing has moved beyond the boundary because of the bamboo groves. I have been observing it for years.'<sup>173</sup> In such land boundaries, tussles also escalate due to the overgrowth

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<sup>172</sup> Field notes, Bélang, February 12, 2022.

<sup>173</sup> Field notes, Bélang, December 20, 2021.

of plants. The tussle drew the attention of many neighbours, including me. One of the elders who was passing by remarked, ‘If you want to avoid arguments and fights over land, it is wise not to plant trees that expand over time.’ These tussles are also seen in the paddy fields. It is common to hear accusations against families for encroaching upon paddy fields. In recent times, these family feuds have also become evident in the village WhatsApp group, which I am a member of, and I often see images of letters requesting to solve family feuds over land. Such incidents have increased in the present times. Family feuds within kin can be traced to the idea of the transformation of land into a commodity since the 1990s. Accumulating land was a family rather than an individual process; however, with changing times and land becoming investible and commodified, it resulted in exclusion among kin. As Tania Li argues about land,

To turn it to productive use requires regimes of exclusion that distinguish legitimate from illegitimate uses and users, and the inscribing of boundaries through devices such as fences, title, deeds, lass, zones, regulations, landmarks and story-lines. Its very ‘resourceness’ is not an intrinsic or natural quality. It is an assemblage of materialities, relations, technologies and discourses that have to be pulled together and made to align. To render it investible, more work is needed.<sup>174</sup>

According to oral narratives of the Misings, the amount of land a family possessed depended on the number of members in a family; the whole family was the production unit. Drawing from his fieldwork among the Misings in the early 1970s, J.S. Bhandari argues that there was no individual

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<sup>174</sup> Tania Murray Li, “What Is Land? Assembling a Resource for Global Investment,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39, no. 4 (2014): 589, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12065>.

possession of land, and because of access to abundant land, it was not heritable.<sup>175</sup> The possession of land was under the head of the family. Thus, land possession was equivalent to the number of family members and the collective labour used to work on the land by the family. Moreover, he observes that there was no landlessness and no class of people who could be hired as labourers. Similarly, Mising scholars like Peter Pegu write that the Misings did not have the concept of ancestral land.<sup>176</sup> My grandfather's account of the past before the 1950s, when our family lived along the Obonori, testifies to these writings. One of the many things that he told me about the past is that there was no need for large landholdings, and farming was done in temporary patches of land. He told me that one *pura* of land would yield 300 *dangoris*<sup>177</sup>, enough for the whole family to sustain. Even when my grandfather sought land in Béláng, he came to clear land for the whole family. These narratives are an ideal portrayal of self-sufficient tribal communities with minimal market relations. However, Bhandari observed that the notion of land as an individual property was penetrating the Mising villages, and they were gradually becoming tenants under the annual lease granted by the state.<sup>178</sup> He indicates that in the 1970s, there were increasing cases of sons inheriting land from the father's leased land. Now, land is inherited from the older generations. It

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<sup>175</sup> J. S. Bhandari, *Kinship, Affinity, and Domestic Group: A Study among the Mishing of the Brahmaputra Valley* (Gyan Pub. House, 1992).

<sup>176</sup> Peter Pegu, *Economic History of the Miris* (Mishing Society of Mumbai, 2019).

<sup>177</sup> This is a term for paddy, which is tied together in a bundle to ease handling and measure the harvest of paddy fields. This bundling process helps transport and store the paddy in granaries easily.

<sup>178</sup> Bhandari, *Kinship, Affinity, and Domestic Group*.

has become a property that needs legitimate claims. The increase in family feuds stems from land becoming private property, where ownership must be asserted, maintained, and defended.<sup>179</sup>

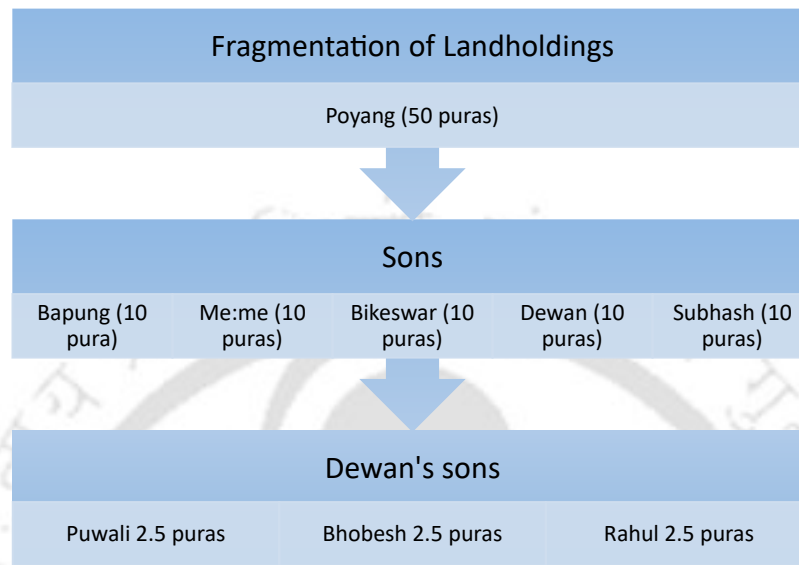


Figure 7: Chart depicting land fragmentation of a family

During a discussion with Rahul from Bélang, a friend and wage labourer at the dam, we talked about his family's landholdings. He revealed his family's land fragmentation. Poyang, Rahul's grandfather, had 50 *puras* of land, which they cleared when they came to the de-reserved land. Rahul's father has four other siblings. Amongst five male siblings, Rahul's father, Dewan, inherited ten *puras*. Rahul inherits 2.5 *puras* from the ten *puras* (See Fig.7). Now, Rahul's land will be divided among his two sons. Fragmentations of land also indicate the growth of the population in the village. Increasing pressure on land led people in Bélang to start claiming CPRs, such as grazing land in the village, which was on the northern side of the road. In the early 2000s, more

<sup>179</sup> Angela Kronenburg García and Han Van Dijk, "Towards a Theory of Claim Making: Bridging Access and Property Theory," *Society & Natural Resources* 33, no. 2 (2020): 167–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2018.1559381>.

people in the village who had branched out from the system of joint families also began to claim the village's *ago golung*, the cemetery. The Mising consider *ago golung* as a sacred place where the spirits of the dead reside. As a child, we were forbidden to point our fingers towards the *ago golung*. The old village cemetery has no sign of existence; it has been replaced by houses in the last two decades. The act of reclaiming the village cemetery came as an appalling truth. It reflected a situation of distress where landlessness had led to the exhumation of villager's remains from a space that was once considered uninhabitable.

The present condition of the people of Bélung reflects a situation where land has become scarce and a treasured resource. When my grandfather passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, we built a concrete tomb in the backyard of our house. At the funeral feast after his death, I overheard *Babatta Debo* saying to one of his friends that there is no point in building a concrete tomb at a time when people are undergoing a land crisis. He pointed out that once you build a tomb with concrete, the land cannot be used anymore. Once with enough land and resources to sustain their livelihood, Bélung is now witness to a rise in landlessness and fragmentation and the urge to make the best of every piece of land available to them. The conditions of the majority of the population in the village are far from ideal. How did this happen to an area of Indigenous population? To answer this question, in the next section, I explore deeper into the historical roots of the present situation of the village. Indigenous peoples are often portrayed as being frozen in time.<sup>180</sup> In reality, these communities are shaped by and have participated in various regimes and markets that significantly influence their present.<sup>181</sup> These processes often lead to the refashioning

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<sup>180</sup> Jairath, "Indigeneity as Assertion: Understanding Social Movements"; Khan, "Is Tribe a Homogeneous Category?"

<sup>181</sup> Li, "Indigeneity, Capitalism, and the Management of Dispossession."

of the notion of resources held by Indigenous communities.<sup>182</sup> Moreover, in a time when the Indigenous people's stewardship of the commons gained traction in the wake of the climate crisis, it has to be noted that these commons are already being taken over by capitalist interests rooted in broader capitalist trajectories.<sup>183</sup> In these contexts, the lived realities of Indigenous communities vary across the world depending on the historical and material contexts against a commonly held notion of Indigenous populations.<sup>184</sup>

### 3. Situating a Colonial Past

#### 3.1. The Path Towards Sedentarisation

Historians stress that an abrupt change occurred in Assam's agricultural economy since the British East India Company came to power in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>185</sup> Historian Arupjyoti Saikia describes the agrarian economy prior to the coming of the East India Company,

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<sup>182</sup> Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*; Jennifer C. Franco and Saturnino M. Borrás, "The Global Climate of Land Politics," *Globalizations* 18, no. 7 (2021): 1277–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2021.1979717>.

<sup>183</sup> Lorenza Arango Vásquez, "Indigenous Peoples, Commons and the Challenge of Sustaining Life amid Capitalist Land Grabs," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, December 9, 2024, 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2024.2431517>.

<sup>184</sup> Arango Vásquez, "Indigenous Peoples, Commons and the Challenge of Sustaining Life amid Capitalist Land Grabs"; Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

<sup>185</sup> Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam; 1826 - 1947*, Rev. ed (Tulika Books, 2006); Saikia, *A Century of Protests*. The British came to power after the Yandaboo Treaty in 1826, which led to the expulsion of Burmese rule in the regime. Prior to the Burmese occupation, the Ahom kingdom had ruled over a large tract of territory of the Brahmaputra valley and had a fluid revenue system. However, in the region, there were many independent tribal polities that were outside the control of the Ahom rule.

The histories of Assamese peasant society in the pre-colonial era are essentially narratives of exploitation, economic stratification, limited technological innovation, their ability to overcome the environment challenges, and finally a history of slow transition from a feudal economy.<sup>186</sup>

Likewise, scholars also state that the pre-colonial agrarian economy was characterised mainly by mobile and non-capitalistic agricultural practices.<sup>187</sup> Against these backdrops, the East India Company saw substantial economic prospects in the valley's large tracts of 'unclaimed' lands.<sup>188</sup> These tracts were christened as 'wastelands' on account of their lack of productivity.<sup>189</sup> The vast stretches of 'wastelands' deemed as unreclaimed led to the labelling of the valley's population as indolent or 'lazy natives'.<sup>190</sup> Since the British colonial regime took control of the region, the fluid revenue geographies were refashioned into consolidated ones.<sup>191</sup> New laws were introduced to increase 'productivity' to these lands. In 1838, the wasteland grant rules were introduced for planters to start tea plantations.<sup>192</sup> These laws that emerged with colonial understandings of land use and productivity challenged the existing notions around land and customary rights to

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<sup>186</sup> Saikia, *A Century of Protests*, 5.

<sup>187</sup> Debarshi Das and Arupjyoti Saikia, "Early Twentieth Century Agrarian Assam: A Brief and Preliminary Overview," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 41 (2011): 73–80; Kar, "The Birth of the Ryot."

<sup>188</sup> Saikia, *A Century of Protests*; Jayeeta Sharma, ed., *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India*, (Duke Univ. Press, 2011).

<sup>189</sup> Sarah Hilaly, "Imagining Colonial Assam: The Figuring of Wastelands in Its Making.," *Economic and Political Weekly* 51, no. 3 (2016): 55–62.

<sup>190</sup> Saikia, *A Century of Protests*; Sharma, *Empire's Garden*.

<sup>191</sup> Kar, "The Birth of the Ryot."

<sup>192</sup> Saikia, *A Century of Protests*.

resources.<sup>193</sup> In the following years, a *ryotwari* system of land tenure was introduced. This system of land settlement gave the proprietorship rights of the land to the individual in exchange for land revenue paid to the state, known as *ryot*. The refashioning was on the virtue of settled agriculture as a marker of civilisation and stable revenue generation.<sup>194</sup> Boddhisatva Kar writes about *ryot* as ‘surplus producing, plough using, gainful labouring, sedentary peasants, the *ryots* were routinely depicted as the evolutionary winners against the hand-to-mouth, slashing-and-burning, nomadic, almost pre-productive tribes.’<sup>195</sup> Moreover, the *ryots* were ‘touted as the real beneficiaries of civilisational progress under the imperial rule...’<sup>196</sup> These *ryots* became annual land leaseholders and paid taxes to the British government. The *ryotwari* system has been in place in Brahmaputra Valley districts since the 1860s.<sup>197</sup> By 1868, under the land regulation, there was a process of

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<sup>193</sup> Saikia, *A Century of Protests*.

<sup>194</sup> Sanjib Baruah, “Clash of Resource Use Regimes in Colonial Assam: A Nineteenth-century Puzzle Revisited,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 28, no. 3 (2001): 109–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150108438777>; Kar, “The Birth of the Ryot.”

<sup>195</sup> Kar, “The Birth of the Ryot,” 39.

<sup>196</sup> Kar, “The Birth of the Ryot,” 39.

<sup>197</sup> Baruah, “Clash of Resource Use Regimes in Colonial Assam”; Saikia, *A Century of Protests*. The *ryotwari* system was implemented in all the districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, except for Goalpara, which operated under a permanent settlement. In this settlement system, individuals did not have ownership rights over the land; instead, these rights were held by landlords. This type of settlement is also referred to as the zamindari system. See <https://dlrar.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/land-policies-during-british-rule>

handing over periodic leases and annual leases by the regime to the *ryots*, except for the *chaporis*<sup>198</sup> lands and land occupied by the tribals on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra.<sup>199</sup>

The *chaporis* are floodplains often prone to recurring flooding and riverbank erosion.<sup>200</sup> These flood-prone areas were largely inhabited by the Misings and the *Nodiyals*<sup>201</sup>. The census enumerators contrasted the Mising way of living with plain Assamese settlements, as,

...where they follow a system of migratory cultivation. Their principal crops are summer rice and mustard, maize and cotton, sown in clearances made by the axe and hoe in the forest or the jungle of reeds. Their villages, usually placed on or near the banks of a river, consist of a few houses built on platforms raised four or five feet above the naked surface of the plain, presenting a strong contrast to the ordinary Assamese village with its orchards of betel, palm, and plantain, and its embowering thicket of bamboos.<sup>202</sup>

Similarly, Moffat Mills writes about the Misings as, ‘They are industrious people; they reclaim lands, cultivate them for two or at the most three years, and then go to another place, where they employ themselves in a similar manner.’<sup>203</sup> Moreover, Mills states that this habit of migration

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<sup>198</sup> *Chapori* generally refers to the riverine tracts. Moreover, it also means the shifting of land masses along the banks or in the middle of the river. *Chaporis* changes its shapes and sizes depending on the ebbs and flows of rivers. These land masses serve as grazing and farming space for riverine populations

<sup>199</sup> Baruah, “Clash of Resource Use Regimes in Colonial Assam.”

<sup>200</sup> Saikia, *A Century of Protests*; Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

<sup>201</sup> *Nodiyals* are also known as *Kaibartas*, categorised as Scheduled Castes (SC) in the Indian Constitution. They are known to be engaged in the fish trade and often looked down upon within the caste system in Assam.

<sup>202</sup> *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881* (Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1883).

<sup>203</sup> Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 651.

might have led to the imposition of the Misings with a poll tax against the regular tax imposed on the Assamese *ryots*. The colonial regime introduced a poll tax per adult Mising male based on their fluid living condition and a sense of lack of land ownership. Since its introduction, there had been a gradual increase in the poll tax. In 1835, the poll tax per male adult was 8 annas(paise).<sup>204</sup> However, in the later decades of the 19th century, it increased to Rs. 3. However, for many years since the commencement of the policy of making the *ryot*, the tax on Misings had been undecided on whether to levy tax as a general *ryot*.<sup>205</sup>

Nonetheless, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the British administration gradually taxed the Misings as general *ryot*. The process coincided with the colonial regime gradually bringing the floodplains into settlement for agricultural purposes in the later decades of the 19th century and making it a more productive space.<sup>206</sup> Moreover, there was an increase in the permanent paddy agricultural practices in these riverine tracts by the Misings.<sup>207</sup> The administration gradually levied general taxation based on the consideration of the Misings' transition to permanent and extensive cultivation in the floodplains, thus becoming a *ryot* and

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<sup>204</sup> Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 649.

<sup>205</sup> "System of Assessing the Miris," Assam Revenue Proceeding, November 1877, Assam State Archive; "Petition from Bhakat Gam and Other Miris of North Lakhimpur against Their Assessment of Land Revenue in Addition to Poll Tax: Introduction of the System of Assessing the Miris in North Lakhimpur on Area under Cultivation," Assam Secretariate Proceedings, October 1897, Assam State Archive.

<sup>206</sup> Arupjyoti Saikia, "Jute in the Brahmaputra Valley: The Making of Flood Control in Twentieth-Century Assam," *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 5 (2015): 1405–41, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X14000201>.

<sup>207</sup> "System of Assessing the Miris"; "Petition from Bhakat Gam and Other Miris of North Lakhimpur against their Assessment of Land Revenue in Addition to Poll Tax: Introduction of the System of Assessing the Miris in North Lakhimpur on Area under Cultivation."

leaving the earlier habits of ‘uncivilised’ agricultural practice. The Misings in Majuli of the erstwhile Sibsagar district, who live along the Brahmaputra, became full-fledged *ryots* with permanent sedentary farms in the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>208</sup> Gradually, by 1908-1909, the Misings of the Northern banks of Dhemaji and Sissi Mauza were assessed under the general taxation rule, discarding the erstwhile taxation policy following a cadastral survey of the villages.<sup>209</sup> In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the floodplains that were earlier referred to as wasteland had become highly productive and came under permanent peasant cultivation.<sup>210</sup> Throughout these processes, the Misings and other communities in colonial Assam were gradually brought under taxation and settled permanently.

### 3.2. Negotiating with a Colonial State

This transition to the *ryotwari* system was not as smooth as expected by the colonial administrators. The agrarian history of the Brahmaputra valley reflects a complex transition. For instance, against the *ryotwari* system, the Assamese peasants continued to relinquish annual and periodic leases to avoid unnecessary taxation.<sup>211</sup> Amidst this introduction of land tenure, many

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<sup>208</sup> “Petition from Bhakat Gam and Other Miris of North Lakhimpur against their Assessment of Land Revenue in Addition to Poll Tax: Introduction of the System of Assessing the Miris in North Lakhimpur on Area under Cultivation.”

<sup>209</sup> “Survey and Settlement of the Miri Village near the Dijmur Guard- Lakhimpur,” Board of Revenue, 1910, Collection no. 2; File no.74, Assam State Archive.

<sup>210</sup> Arupjyoti Saikia, “Jute in the Brahmaputra Valley: The Making of Flood Control in Twentieth-Century Assam,” *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 5 (2015): 1405–41, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X14000201>.

<sup>211</sup> Saikia, *A Century of Protests*.

new taxes were introduced, such as the grazing tax in 1888.<sup>212</sup> Worsening the plight of the peasants and tribal communities, the Assam Forest Regulation stopped the shifting cultivation practices of the peasants, and there had been an increase in the introduction of reserve forests rooted in the motive of generating revenue from forest resources.<sup>213</sup> However, historical works highlight that peasants and tribal communities continued to negotiate with the fiscal and forest regime, and remained mobile and reclaimed forested tracts.<sup>214</sup>

In the NER, irrespective of hill and plain dwellers, there was a complex relationship with colonial capital. Works of Bhodhisattva Kar and Jelle Wouters point towards an intricate coexistence of the Indigenous communities and the colonial capital.<sup>215</sup> However, the literature on resistance and Indigenous populations, especially for the hilly regions, implies an antagonistic portrayal of Indigenous societies against modern state-making and institutions.<sup>216</sup> This line of understanding does not consider the intricate forms of co-existence. Tania Li points out her findings about an Indigenous community and writes, ‘Far-from rejecting “state-space” in favour of sustaining their

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<sup>212</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

<sup>213</sup> Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*.

<sup>214</sup> Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*; Saikia, *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900* (Routledge, 2014); Kar, “The Birth of the Ryot”; Kar, “Nomadic Capital and Speculative Tribes.”

<sup>215</sup> Kar, “Nomadic Capital and Speculative Tribes”; Jelle Wouters, “Keeping the Hill Tribes at Bay: A Critique from India’s Northeast of James C. Scott’s Paradigm of State Evasion,” *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 39 (2011): 41–65.

<sup>216</sup> James C. Scott, ed., *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale Agrarian Studies Series (Yale University Press, 2009).

autonomy, they welcomed incorporation.<sup>217</sup> The beginning of British rule was marked by negotiations between tribes and the new regime that came into power.<sup>218</sup> Bhodhisattva Kar describes this as a culture of contracts in which the colonial regime had struck arrangements with the chiefs of the communities. In addition, numerous tribal communities received money and salt as a form of *posa*<sup>219, 220</sup> In return, there were negotiations to take over territories, which the colonisers and planters considered profitable. In the case of the Misings, the Mising *Gam* (chiefs) played a significant role in legitimising the poll tax in the Mising habitats. Moffat Mills noted, ‘These Gaums collect the poll tax, receiving as remuneration a commission of 10 percent, very little, considering the trouble they have to collect, often, from a widely scattered community; however, they pay very well.’<sup>221</sup> Their involvement in tax collection indicates an arrangement of the chiefs with the new regime. This also further indicates that the families of *Gams* were becoming a part of the flourishing business in the region. Thus, one can argue that in the process of taxing

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<sup>217</sup> Li, *Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*, 13; See also Wouters, “Keeping the Hill Tribes at Bay: A Critique from India’s Northeast of James C. Scott’s Paradigm of State Evasion.”

<sup>218</sup> Kar, “Nomadic Capital and Speculative Tribes.”

<sup>219</sup> *Posa* was an arrangement between the Ahom kingdom and the neighbouring tribes such as Nagas, Abors, and Miris. This arrangement was based on the annual payment of tribute to these tribes in kind or cash. This was a way to keep the neighbouring tribes at bay from the plains of the Brahmaputra valley. This arrangement was continued by the British in the erstwhile districts of Lakhimpur and Darang, See Braj Narain Jha, “Politics of Posa : A Case Study of pre and post-independence scenario in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 57 (1996): 446–58; Wouters, “Keeping the Hill Tribes at Bay: A Critique from India’s Northeast of James C. Scott’s Paradigm of State Evasion.”

<sup>220</sup> Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*.

<sup>221</sup> Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 651.

the mobile population and in the historical process of the Misings becoming sedentary, the *Gams* played a significant role. Nevertheless, it was not a linear transition. A petition in 1897 from a *Gam* and 10 other people in North Lakhimpur to exempt them from taking leased land from the state and continue with poll tax to the Chief Commissioner of Assam highlights the tension and negotiations between the Misings and the state.<sup>222</sup> The petition reminded that the riparian tracts that they inhabit make it impossible for them to be fixed to a permanent settlement because of recurring floods that destroy their crops, which places them in a difficult position to pay taxes. Despite numerous efforts to fix the community, the Misings continued to challenge becoming a part of the fiscal regime, and they continued to be mobile. In the early decades of the twentieth century, British administrators were found to detest people's shifting and fluctuating nature and termed these groups of people as encroachers who had been defying the new fiscal rules introduced.<sup>223</sup> The forest laws and regulations were often violated by peasants who reclaimed forested lands. The ecological and forest history of the Assamese peasants demonstrates their ongoing negotiations and reclamation of land designated as government land.<sup>224</sup>

In the early decades of the twentieth century, newly emergent tribal leaders became involved in legislative politics and were vocal about various issues faced by the tribals. With the formation of the Tribal League in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the plain tribals in Assam were negotiating

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<sup>222</sup>“Petition from Bhakat Gam and Other Miris of North Lakhimpur against their Assessment of Land Revenue in Addition to Poll Tax: Introduction of the System of Assessing the Miris in North Lakhimpur on Area under Cultivation.”

<sup>223</sup> Biswajit Sarmah, “Park, People and Politics: An Environmental History of the Kaziranga National Park” (Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, 2021), <https://gyan.iitg.ac.in/handle/123456789/2496>.

<sup>224</sup> Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*.

with the colonial government to improve the lives of these communities.<sup>225</sup> Karka Chandra Doley, a Mising leader, became one of the vocal resistors against the government policies for the Mising inhabited areas.<sup>226</sup> He was vocal about the issues faced by the Misings on access to grazing lands and the relocation of the flood-affected populations. However, these negotiations between the tribal communities and the state need to be situated in the backdrop of a larger political economy and the social changes taking place within the society. These ideas of negotiations in these transitions, however, can obscure the internal differentiation that results from such negotiations that end certain sections' capability to negotiate with the larger political economy.

### **3.3. The Losers in Negotiations- Increasing Internal Differentiation**

Ritupan Goswami views these negotiations with the colonial state in a negative light of patronisation, bribery, and manipulation to control the region.<sup>227</sup> He argues that the state used force when bribery and manipulation did not work. Although the interaction between the Indigenous elites and the colonial state was not always cordial, he argues, 'Whether in the hills or in the valley, the colonial state successfully nurtured and protected an influential section from amongst the Indigenous communities who were instrumental in consolidating foreign rule in the region.'<sup>228</sup> The engagements must be understood as a process in which an influential section of Indigenous elites negotiated with the new regime. These negotiations have increased capitalist relations within tribal

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<sup>225</sup> Pathak, "Tribal Politics in the Assam-1933-1947."

<sup>226</sup> "Assam Legislative Assembly Debates," Assam Legislative Assembly Publications, August 7, 1937, <http://www.aladigitallibrary.in/handle/123456789/2030>.

<sup>227</sup> Ritupan Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries" (Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2010).

<sup>228</sup> Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries," 186.

communities and Assamese peasant societies. Hence, there is a need to locate the role of capital and new laws and how they moulded people's choices. In these contexts of such fiscal laws and negotiations, people also transitioned towards settled cash crop agriculture, replacing old patterns, perhaps to pay taxes as well as to make use of the opportunities to improve one's life from engaging in the market through the production of commercial cash crops. The process of making of a *ryot* was accompanied by large-scale production of crops like *Sali* (summer transplanted paddy variety), mustard, and black dal in the *chaporis*. There was a gradual change in the acreage of the *chaporis* and, in general, all over the Brahmaputra valley. B.C. Allen, observing the changes in Mising villages in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote,

... They are gradually settling down to the cultivation of the transplanted rice, in holdings which are kept on permanently from year to year, and when in any village the area under permanent cultivation is sufficiently extensive to render it profitable to assess it in the ordinary way, the poll tax is abolished and land revenue substituted in its place.<sup>229</sup>

The *chaporis* inhabited by the Misings and the *Nodiyals* were gradually turned into permanent land revenue areas. Historical works highlight the increase in acreage of paddy and mustard in the valley at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>230</sup> As opposed to an ahistorical understanding of tribes, the Misings increasingly engaged with the new agriculture system in a milieu of state policies of settling populations and cash cropping. Similarly, anthropological studies from across the globe reveal the history of tribal/Indigenous populations involved in capital-intensive agriculture and

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<sup>229</sup> B.C. Allen, "Assam District Gazetteers Lakhimpur Vol VIII," Gazetteers, Calcutta, 1905, 251, <https://indianculture.gov.in/gazettes/assam-district-gazetteers-lakhimpur-vol-viii>.

<sup>230</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

trade.<sup>231</sup> Scholars frame these changes in the capitalist motives among peasant and Indigenous communities as bottom-up capitalism.<sup>232</sup> There is often a refashioning of the landscape and its values with the entry of capital and new laws.<sup>233</sup> In this refashioning of the landscape, there is a change in the value of the land itself, and people are introduced to new realities. Studies indicate that this process of formalisation of land leads to sedentarisation and further leads to the commodification of land becoming a resource for global investment.<sup>234</sup> Within these new realities and negotiations, the benefits and losses depended on the existing social position of the actors, which shaped the resulting class relations within communities.

The new fiscal regime and the entrance of merchant capital gradually brought a transition from a ‘tribal economy structure’ to an agrarian structure, much like mainland India.<sup>235</sup> The presence of merchant capital, largely the Marwari<sup>236</sup> traders and the practice of cash crops increased usury in the Brahmaputra valley, which led to the selling and mortgaging of land, further leading to landlessness and poverty.<sup>237</sup> Debt became common across rural Assam in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Li, “Indigeneity, Capitalism, and the Management of Dispossession.”

<sup>232</sup> Hairong, “Bottom-up Capitalism as a Challenge for Social Movements: A Conversation with Tania Murray Li.”

<sup>233</sup> See also Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*.

<sup>234</sup> Franco and Borrás, “The Global Climate of Land Politics”; Tania Murray Li, “Rendering Land Investible: Five Notes on Time,” *Geoforum* 82 (June 2017): 276–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.04.004>.

<sup>235</sup> Das and Saikia, “Early Twentieth Century Agrarian Assam: A Brief and Preliminary Overview.”

<sup>236</sup> A business community that has its lineage to the Mewar region of western India. They are one of the proliferating business communities in India.

<sup>237</sup> Arupjyoti Saikia, “The Moneylenders and Indebtedness: Understanding the Peasant Economy of Colonial Assam, 1900–1950,” *Indian Historical Review* 37, no. 1 (2010): 63–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/037698361003700104>; Saikia, *A Century of Protests*.

century.<sup>238</sup> By the early 20th century, a large number of Misings of the Sissi Mauza in the erstwhile Lakhimpur district (now under Dhemaji district) were already in the cycle of capital-intensive crops like Mustard and were found to be under debt.<sup>239</sup> Against this increase changing agrarian economy in the Brahmaputra valley led to the formation of a local wealthy class known as *Mahajans*, who were mostly the upper caste and landed families.<sup>240</sup> These local *Mahajans* began to replace the Marwari merchants in rural corners.

There was increasing distaste towards this moneylending class in a situation of usury and land pressure.<sup>241</sup> Regarding the North Lakhimpur sub-division<sup>242</sup> riparian belt, a statement made by a Subdivisional Officer gives a sense of the Mising people's relation to Marwaris/*Kayas* and the need for cash crop cultivation, 'The people are prosperous, but they do not cultivate more than necessary for their annual needs. For clothes and payment of revenue, they borrow from the *Kayas* or sell mustard and pulses to the *Kayas*, who buy at their own prices.'<sup>243</sup> Peter Pegu, citing a memoir of a Mising person of a village along the Obonori, stresses that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Marwaris penetrated inaccessible Mising villages in the North Lakhimpur subdivision and Majuli.<sup>244</sup> The memoir underscores the Mising villages in the Obonori riparian belt involved in

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<sup>238</sup> Das and Saikia, "Early Twentieth Century Agrarian Assam: A Brief and Preliminary Overview"; Saikia, "The Moneylenders and Indebtedness"; Saikia, *A Century of Protests*.

<sup>239</sup> Saikia, "The Moneylenders and Indebtedness."

<sup>240</sup> Saikia, "The Moneylenders and Indebtedness."

<sup>241</sup> Saikia, "The Moneylenders and Indebtedness."

<sup>242</sup> The present area under study used to be part of North Lakhimpur Subdivision of the larger Lakhimpur district before the creation of Dhemaji district in the 1980s.

<sup>243</sup> G. T. Lloyd, *Census Of India 1921 Assam* (1923), Vol. 3, 14, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.55982>.

<sup>244</sup> Pegu, *Economic History of the Miris*.

unfair business transactions with the Marwaris. The Misings were trapped in debt and were forced to become dependent on the shops run by Marwaris. In addition, the Marwaris also monopolised the trade of *tapum gasor* (shawl made of silk), which stirred anger towards them.<sup>245</sup> Moreover, there was a price rise for essential goods such as salt. Grievances of the Misings led to the looting of shops and houses of the Marwaris in the Obonori riparian belt in 1918. The census of 1921 mentions the loot of 1918 following the high price of goods.<sup>246</sup> Peter Pegu translated the incident of looting from a memoir about the incident in 1918:

Baparam Doley, who was known for his courage and brave hearted personality, hailing from Patrichuk village in the Subansiri riparian belt, took the lead. His inspiring and assuring call took the crowd by the storm. Thousands of men and women came out to the street and willingly joined in the pitiless confrontations. First they attacked the key-marwari establishment of the Bebejia village and then proceeded to Ratanpur and some other villages in Upper Majuli, where the targeted community had their well-set establishment. The situation had gone out of hand. The protestors had destroyed large number of shops and markets and reportedly they had unmindfully looted huge quantum of provisions and valuable properties including cash, gold and silver.<sup>247</sup>

This story of the attack on the Marwaris of Bebejia (presently under the Dhakuakhana sub-division of North Lakhimpur district, Assam) is widespread in the oral narratives among the Misings of Obonori riparian tracts, christened as *loot-paat*. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, across Assam,

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<sup>245</sup> Pegu, *Economic History of the Miris*.

<sup>246</sup> Lloyd, *Census Of India 1921 Assam*, Vol 3,14.

<sup>247</sup> Pegu, *Economic History of the Miris*, 267–68.

historians highlight increasing clashes between the two sections in several valley districts.<sup>248</sup> By Indian independence, rural Assam saw a rise in peasants and strong communist movements against the landowning elites and the state government.

#### **4. Becoming Bélang Dolung after 1950: Aspirations, Ecological constraints, and Opium consumption**

##### **4.1. Accumulating Extensive Land holdings**

Alongside the introduction of fiscal laws and the entry of capital, it is evident from the above sections that the value the community assigned to land had begun to change. However, land did not become a commodity overnight. Land was continued to be shared, as will be evident in the following sections. Moreover, people along the rivers were prone to flooding and, hence, continued to be mobile even after numerous efforts by the state to settle them down. In this process of shift to permanent agrarian practices, ecological factors hindered the new agrarian system.<sup>249</sup> Arupjyoti Saikia points out that, in addition to the existing factors of usury and governance, ecological factors of flooding and soil erosion by the rivers in the valley increased the woes of the rural agrarian economy.<sup>250</sup> Moreover, he mentions that the earthquakes of 1897 and 1950 wreaked havoc on the agrarian economy. As for the families of Bélang, ecological factors have been one of the fundamental factors in understanding their agrarian change. *Yayo* (grandmother) Birmoti

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<sup>248</sup> Saikia, *A Century of Protests*. However, Saikia also mentions that along with the granting of proprietorship to the peasants, the ryotwari system was also fundamental in maintaining a neo-landlordism by offering *nisf-khiraj* (*Half-revenue*) and *la-khiraj* (*no-revenue*), which are large estates granted to the religious institutions and caste elites of the Assamese society.

<sup>249</sup> To understand capital's problem with nature, see Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*.

<sup>250</sup> Arupjyoti Saikia, *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*.

(pseudonym), one of the last surviving persons who experienced the flood, recalled the material condition of her natal family before the great floods of the 1950s erased her village. She said,

My village stood on the bank of Obonori. Our paddy fields were huge, we cultivated *Sali* (a transplanted variety of paddy), and we had numerous cows and buffaloes. My brothers were involved in the paddy business, and our family ran a shop that sold utensils, kerosene, salt, and also delved into the sale of *pera* (a wooden box meant for storing clothes and valuables). The floods destroyed everything we had in possession. We had nothing left. Our family had to move, seeking support from distant relatives for a few months. After that, we set out to clear the forest and restart our lives in this village.<sup>251</sup>

Birmoti belonged to an affluent Mising family of the time. Her family's capability to operate a shop that sold the above-mentioned items reveals the connections that a section of the Misings had with merchant capital during the colonial period. She also pointed out that her elders used to have *karbar* (business transactions) with the British planters from a nearby tea plantation.

As mentioned above, Bélang, at its present location, took its form a few years after the events of the 1950s. The flood victims were left to restart their livelihood and social reproduction afresh. Despite this, certain sections of the people were able to re-establish themselves within a few years. A few factors that helped the people to return to normalcy after a devastating experience could have been the strong kinship connections and the existing production process of collective family ownership of land and labour. Moreover, unclaimed tracts of forest at people's disposal brought relief to people restarting their lives after a rupture by flood. The process of resettlement in a reserve forest could also reflect the Assam political class's attitudes that saw the forest reserves

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<sup>251</sup> Field notes, Bélang, November 15, 2022.

as agrarian frontiers.<sup>252</sup>

Against this backdrop, people cleared large tracts of land for settling down and cultivation. However, this proved to be a daunting and tedious task. It required the collective workforce of the family and the community. Elders' narratives revealed it was easier for those who owned elephants to clear and enclose lands. To claim and mark a piece of forest land, people made elephants walk around it, creating a boundary with their footprints. Wealthy families like Birmoti's family had an upper hand in accumulating large land estates in the newly de-reserved forest frontier that was opened for resettlement. Birmoti's natal family settled in the present Bélang village in the mid-1950s. Her family became one of the highest land possessors in the village. Her family owned elephants, and due to their established connections with merchants, they could regain their status as one of the wealthiest families in the area. Apart from employing family labour, accumulating land also depended on the capability of employing extra labour. Oral narratives point towards the role of the *Sarok*<sup>253</sup> tribe, and runaway tea labourers were crucial in converting forests to cultivable lands. Likewise, my family had reached Bélang in the 1960s for more land. After experiencing the unprecedented flood, my family resettled in another village. However, concerned about potential land scarcity for his family in the future and aiming to enhance paddy production, my grandfather spearheaded the reclamation of land in Bélang. His family and another extended family set out for Bélang in search of cultivable land. They owned two elephants. With the support of elephants,

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<sup>252</sup> Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*. The attitude of the political class had drastically changed for conservation efforts, owing to the Forest Department's passing of new laws to challenge the expanding agrarian acreage in the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after Indian independence.

<sup>253</sup> *Sarok* is a Mising term for Hill Miris. At present, they have consolidated into the larger Nyishi identity in Arunachal Pradesh. They are settled in the upstream of Obonori.

family labour, and the ability to employ *Saroks* and runaway tea-garden labourers, each family could clear more than 50 *puras* of land and increase paddy production. In a casual conversation about the past, my father recalled the role of *Saroks*. He said to me,

The *Saroks* came in groups in winter. They come down from the hills to procure paddy and exchange goods in the plains. Moreover, they also rendered their labour to clear the forest to convert it into paddy fields. They would clear the jungles in exchange for goods and money. They would set up camps and clear the forest, and when they finished clearing, they would burn their camps and leave for their homes in the hills.<sup>254</sup>

The employment of labourers, in turn, depended on the ability of the families to pay for their labour. Families with money had higher chances of hiring the *Saroks* and clearing more land. Furthermore, the wealthy families employed the migrant population as *haluwas* and *ruwonis* from the districts of Lower Assam to increase their agricultural production. Many migrants chose to work for landed families because starting their own farms, clearing forests, and cultivating land was a challenging task. As a result, many of them found employment with these families and eventually moved on to establish their own farms after clearing land for themselves. Thus, while conversing about the agriculture scenario of the past during my fieldwork, it became clear that the *Mahajan* families in Bélang and neighbouring areas, and a few other landed families, employed an average of four people. This new addition of labour to the existing labour system fulfilled the need to cultivate large landholdings and to accumulate wealth. In this context, several Mising elders of the area express a sense of pride and hold a patronising view towards the migrants who settled around the area.

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<sup>254</sup> Field notes, Bélang, February 24, 2022.

However, with a few families clearing and owning vast tracts of land and increasing the paddy production by employing a large number of labourers, the internal differentiation among the villagers increased. On the one hand, a few families obtained land by using their resources; those who could not were left with less land. This process of clearing large landholdings after the floods should be historically located in their interest and aspirations to accumulate wealth by engaging in the paddy business.<sup>255</sup>

#### **4.2. Access to Unclaimed Lands and Having a Choice**

Although some families accumulated large tracts of land in the 1960s and 70s, we can draw from the above discussion that every family in the village had adequate access to land. The rise in landholdings reflects the increasing interest towards cultivating paddy as a cash crop. Merchant capital continued to play a significant role in changing the socioeconomic systems of the region. In the 1960s, according to oral narratives, Marwari merchants would come to the paddy fields and purchase the paddy from the villagers. However, in the mid-1970s, many Biharis (people who come from the state of Bihar) settled in these villages and acted as intermediaries between the villagers and the Marwari traders. The arrival of intermediaries in these villages in Assam may be linked to a collaboration between them and the Marwaris. Over time, the Marwari traders stopped coming to the villages because the Bihari intermediaries were engaged in the procurement process. Every village would have one Bihari intermediary until the first decade of the 21st century. It is possible that building connections with the Marwaris was considered an opportunity for those who wanted to start a business and accumulate wealth, as has been the case with several communities

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<sup>255</sup> To understand the role of aspirations that takes hold in Indigenous communities, see also Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*; Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*.

in the valley.<sup>256</sup> People began to become a part of the prospering cash crop economy.<sup>257</sup> With these changes, there was an increase in wealth amongst one section of the Misings, forming a new class of *Mahajans*. The Mising *Mahajans* also began to procure paddy from the villagers. They started to set up village shops and godowns to store paddy and sell it to the Marwaris in urban areas. Except for the ones owned by the Biharis, the rest were owned by the local *Mahajans* of the villages. During a conversation with a senior person about the past, he expressed pride in the wealth accumulation of the families in Bélang. He said,

Domestic elephants used to roam the village like domesticated cattle. In the village, including two other villages, there were more than 30 domesticated elephants. These elephants were used to clear the jungles, harvest, and thresh paddy. Apart from that, these elephants were used in the logging businesses that existed in the area.<sup>258</sup>

The village's possession of elephants and buffalo highlights wealth accumulation from cash cropping. Peter Pegu emphasises that a family's status increases with the number of elephants they possess.<sup>259</sup> J.S. Bhandari, based on fieldwork in the 1970s, writes that the Misings purchased elephants to increase their wealth by participating in the burgeoning logging industry in NER in the following decades of Indian independence.<sup>260</sup> The elephant owners engaged in logging in

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<sup>256</sup> Saikia, "The Moneylenders and Indebtedness."

<sup>257</sup> These intermediaries and Marwaris used to purchase paddy at a very low cost at an undetermined price.

<sup>258</sup> Field notes, Bélang, August 16, 2021.

<sup>259</sup> Pegu, *Economic History of the Miris*.

<sup>260</sup> Bhandari, *Kinship, Affinity, and Domestic Group*. To have a better understanding of the logging industry in the region, see Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*; Tiplut Nongbri, "Timber Ban in North-East India: Effects on Livelihood and

Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh (I explore this in Chapter 4). Buffaloes were bought not only for cultivation but also for the dairy business. In these numerous ways, the *Mahajan* families in the village expanded their wealth.

Amid these processes, the people of BÉlang continued to have access to the forest and unused land. Against this backdrop, although the value of land was changing gradually, people did share their land with those in need. These were the flood-affected people of the Brahmaputra and Obonori who came searching for land in these areas. Birmoti's family offered a share of their land to the villagers of Bekheli, located southeast of the village.<sup>261</sup> Elders of BÉlang often boast about helping needy populations that came in search of land. One day, I spoke to *Yayo* Pokpoli, my grandmother's friend, who had come to visit her in the morning. She said, 'The nearby village of Jengrai was established on the land we cleared. They requested some land, and since we had enough arable land available, we granted them the land.' While continuing the conversation, my grandmother proudly claimed, 'Our family had three paddy granaries. While the people of Jengrai were settling down, they depended on the paddy we offered them in the initial settling period.'<sup>262</sup> Furthermore, access to land and forests lends a sense of pride in the people for being independent and not working under anyone. The stories of rejecting lower-rung government jobs were prevalent in the past. Many felt that cultivation gave them better money than a job that paid less. The few school-educated youths always had chances to get a government job. For instance, my grandfather took

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Gender," *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 21 (2001): 1893–900; Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*.

<sup>261</sup> Bekheli was a village situated in Lower Majuli, erased by flood and riverbank erosion by the Brahmaputra River. A few families have found refuge near BÉlang, and some other families are in the Jorhat district.

<sup>262</sup> Field notes, BÉlang, October 15, 2022.

up cultivation, giving up his job as *Gram Sevak* (a village-level grassroots government official) in erstwhile Arunachal Pradesh in the late 1950s. He was a part of the state's effort to impart modern education and agricultural practices.<sup>263</sup> However, based on a small dispute, he left his job at Ziro in Arunachal Pradesh, which was his last posting. I encountered two similar stories from two older men, Jugen, whom I met on one of the islands of Obonori and Bordola at Dirpai village along the banks of Obonori. Both spoke about their rejection of lower-rung jobs that the Brahmaputra Flood Control Board offered when surveying the river Obonori for dam construction in the mid-1970s.<sup>264</sup> Jugen, with a sigh of regret, said, 'Many people who could not even sign their names got the jobs. Now, they are retired after making good money from their jobs. I was also offered the job but did not take it because we had enough land and cattle.'<sup>265</sup> Likewise, Bordola, recalling the reasons for his rejection of a job, said, 'The salary of Rs. 150 from the job was insufficient for my family, and I was earning more while farming and engaging in other logging businesses. Instead, when they were looking for labour, I helped the company by supplying labourers.'<sup>266</sup> Similarly, there are numerous stories of not taking up formalised jobs in Bélang.

In addition, people also had access to and claimed the nearby forest resources, although the FD did attempt to impose restrictions. Despite the pressure from the FD, the families of Bélang practised shifting cultivation in the nearby jungles that fell under the SRF for cash crops like

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<sup>263</sup> To further explore this process of imparting modern education in erstwhile Arunachal Pradesh, see Indira Miri, *NEFA and I*, (Sahitya Akademi, 2021).

<sup>264</sup> Brahmaputra Flood Control Board was assigned to conduct a survey on the river Obonori in the 1970s to build a dam to control floods in the Brahmaputra valley.

<sup>265</sup> Field notes, Obonori River Island, July 19, 2021

<sup>266</sup> Field notes, Dirpai, September 21, 2021.

mustard. Apart from the vast stretches of paddy fields, the entire foothills were dotted by *jhum* fields that belonged to the families of Bélang and other villages. Specifically, the area where the current entrance to the dam construction site and the administrative office of the dam is located was formerly marked by the *jhum* fields of many families in the village, including our own. My father has a vivid memory of cultivating mustard in these areas. In that period, several elders stated that around ten families from Bélang sold their lands and migrated to areas where the villagers practised *jhum* in the early years of the 1970s. People, thus, had a choice over their mobility and to resettle. This phase, marked by choice, is rooted in people's access to unclaimed lands, although not without contestation against the FD. Nevertheless, eight years later, a constant threat of eviction from the FD and erosion of the riverbanks forced these ten families to return to Bélang, rendering them landless within the village. This is one of the ways of becoming landless, where the role of the state is prominent. In addition to ongoing efforts to settle the population and control access to unclaimed lands by the state, ecological factors have also contributed to landlessness and increased poverty.

#### **4.3. Increasing Diseases and Land**

Amidst these stories of change in agricultural practices, diseases and ecological factors continued to pose significant barriers for those who aspired to participate in emergent business activities. The shift to cash cropping was expensive. As mentioned, the new production process, apart from requiring large patches of land, was also labour-intensive. Large numbers of cattle and labour were necessary to practice permanent paddy cultivation. Diseases that came along with the agrarian change greatly impacted the people. One fine morning in Bélang, I sat with Doken (pseudonym), Pokpoli, my father, grandmother, and mother to discuss the agrarian transition and the role of ecological factors in this transition at my home. Doken, a daily wage labourer and tenant

sharecropper, narrated his family's struggle to sustain themselves after the death of their buffaloes, which severely affected their agricultural production. He said, 'Our family had bought many buffaloes, and none lived. I have lost count of the number of buffaloes my parents had purchased. They needed to sell their lands to buy new buffaloes to compensate for the dying ones.' The death of buffaloes was a hurdle for the families in Bélang to farm. Pokpoli, joined the conversation and said, 'Oh my God! The whole village had seen a large number of deaths of buffaloes. There were no buffaloes to till the paddy fields. It was a tough time to manage tilling the land.' She then pointed to a space in the village where the dead buffaloes were disposed of. She described, 'It gives me nightmares when I remember the decaying buffaloes left for the vultures.' My father, a man in his sixties, was carefully listening to the conversation. He explained the reasons for the large-scale death of the buffalo. He said,

Buffaloes started dying since the year of 1970. The reason behind this is that the habitat of the buffaloes had decreased, and there was a huge ecological change in the area because of the clearing of forests. There was a flood that year caused by a small stream that flowed near the village. The sediments had covered the pastures for the buffaloes, and the water became muddy. The buffaloes died from diarrhoea because they ate in the muddy pastures and drank the muddy water. We lost all the buffaloes that we used to till our lands. The families with many buffaloes incurred the highest loss.

He further added, 'In addition to the death of buffaloes, the villages went through pest attacks in the paddy fields. Most of the paddy was destroyed in the village. There was a minimal government effort to control the pests, and in the same decade, we hardly subsisted on the remaining paddy.'

While adding to the conversation, Pokpoli said,

People were also not spared. Many died from smallpox. The disease had claimed the lives of half the village's population, affecting both the young and the old. The whole village cemetery had turned white because of the cotton clothes put over the tombs. We stopped going to other houses. There was no doctor. The urban areas were not easily accessible because there were no proper roads. Only through the help of rituals did people find hope.<sup>267</sup>

Against these increasing diseases affecting the agrarian production process, the intervention of the state was minimal. In the absence of government support, in these times of crisis, many families resorted to selling their lands to buy more cattle and sustain their families in those tough times. After selling and mortgaging their lands to purchase more cattle, Doken's family was left with a small parcel of farming land, not enough for meeting their ends. He began to work as a *Guwal* (cattle herder) for other families in the village at a minimal wage. Later, he went on to work as a *Mahout* (elephant herder) before he was engaged as a tenant sharecropper with my family. Like Doken, several families with sufficient holdings and cattle for subsistence faced a similar fate. Ecological factors furthered the process of commodification of land by seeing it as a fallback in times of crisis. Many families resorted to moving away from their villages to other areas in search of land. Due to diseases and ecological factors, more than thirty families moved to one of the last land frontiers in Sadiya in the Tinsukia district bordering Arunachal Pradesh in the 1980s. The time

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<sup>267</sup> Field notes, Bélang, January 22, 2022. Following this outbreak of smallpox, a malaria outbreak in the early years of the 1990s took a toll on the villages of Mingmang. However, according to oral narratives, it was not as fatal as the smallpox outbreak owing to medical intervention by the state. However, people still recall the deaths of many villagers even during this outbreak. My mother had almost lost her life during the outbreak. She still recalls that it took a long time to recover from the disease.

had come when people needed to migrate to distant places. The process of relocation and resettlement in this phase was difficult in nearby areas, as those lands had been claimed through several waves of migration, mentioned in previous sections.

Thus, relief for agriculture-related or other problems was sought by resorting to the sale of lands. It was transformed into a commodity that needs to be exchanged in monetary terms. This phenomenon has continued in the present, where the selling of land has become a means to tackle emergencies that demand money. For instance, people sell or mortgage their land in a medical emergency. In these situations, the *Mahajans* in the village purchase land from the villagers at throwaway prices. A few *Mising Mahajans* accumulated land in exchange for money to poorer families, who were prone to the death of domesticated animals and illness. One individual from a *Mahajan* family claimed,

Our family did not clear extensive lands, but we owned elephants and were involved in paddy businesses. Now, we have one of the most extensive landholdings in the village because we bought land from the people who migrated to Sadiya. We also accumulated land in Gogamukh, which we anticipated would become a town later.<sup>268</sup>

Several such people accumulated lands from those who became losers in the process of agrarian change and were left landless. As ecological factors had been significant in the process of agrarian change leading to the sale of land, there were other factors that increased the sale of land within some families in the village. In the next section, I discuss the other factors leading to the sale of land.

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<sup>268</sup> Field notes, Bélang, December 26, 2022.

#### 4.4. Opium Consumption and Landlessness

An impression of opium addiction described by my grandfather is still stuck in my mind. With a sense of antipathy, he used to describe opium addiction as ‘*Agér-atung kamang, longé lobudo kani ongém tila duda. Agér yogam.*’ The statement can be roughly translated to, ‘Leaving aside work, they were occupied in smoking opium. Most of them stopped working.’ Until recently, people in the village continued to consume opium as part of a ritual called *kani paan*, practised for the well-being of cattle. In this ritual, the head of the family smokes opium. I grew up witnessing *kani paan* even as close as fifteen years ago at my house, where I saw my grandfather, a non-smoker, smoking opium for the sake of the ritual. Currently, people do not consume opium. However, it was prevalent well into the end of the twentieth century in Bélang. Opium consumption was common in Assam across different classes, castes, and tribes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>269</sup> It was widely grown in the Brahmaputra valley by different communities. History records the Mising cultivators cultivating the crop, bartering with Assamese neighbours, and earning huge profits from the exchange.<sup>270</sup> However, cultivating opium was banned in the 1860s.<sup>271</sup> The British had often remarked that the locals were indolent and lazy because of the consumption of opium, resulting in no entrepreneurship.<sup>272</sup> The banning of local opium led to a reduction in its production and the incoming of *abkaree*<sup>273</sup> opium for revenue generation.<sup>274</sup> The institutionalisation of the sale of

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<sup>269</sup> Sharma, *Empire’s Garden*.

<sup>270</sup> William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account Of Asam* (1841), <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.279285>.

<sup>271</sup> Kawal Deep Kour, *A History of Intoxication: Opium in Assam, 1800-1959* (Manohar, 2019).

<sup>272</sup> Kour, *A History of Intoxication*.

<sup>273</sup> Abkaree means excise revenue collected from drugs and liquor.

<sup>274</sup> Sharma, *Empire’s Garden*.

opium led to the capital accumulation in the hands of Marwaris and the colonial regime.<sup>275</sup> The stigmatisation of the usage of opium and the crackdown on opium cultivation also increased the illegal sale of opium by the Marwaris and Nepali traders.<sup>276</sup> In this context, historians found that the lower-class population were forced to spend money on the product.<sup>277</sup> Thus, the ban on the cultivation of the crop led the larger population of Assam to buy opium from the state and illicit traders. With an increase in opium consumption over the years, the Assamese intelligentsia, British administrators, missionaries, and modern medical practitioners have vehemently opposed the usage of opium.<sup>278</sup> The eradication of opium consumption required a joint effort by the Assamese intelligentsia and the British administration, with the introduction of numerous legislations and measures. The anti-opium campaign became vital to the Assamese nationalist campaign against British rule and the making of the Assamese nation.<sup>279</sup> The gradual stigmatising and campaign against opium have succeeded in Assam. The state of Assam declared that by 1959, there was no use of opium.<sup>280</sup>

However, the illicit trade continued in the villages of the present Dhemaji district even after independence. A Mising writer, describing the scenario of opium addiction in his village in the

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<sup>275</sup> Kour, *A History of Intoxication*.

<sup>276</sup> Amlendu Guha, "Imperialism of Opium: Its Ugly Face in Assam (1773-1921)," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 37 (1976): 338–46.

<sup>277</sup> Guha, "Imperialism of Opium: Its Ugly Face in Assam (1773-1921)."

<sup>278</sup> Kour, *A History of Intoxication*; Sharma, *Empire's Garden*.

<sup>279</sup> Guha, "Imperialism of Opium: Its Ugly Face in Assam (1773-1921)"; Kour, *A History of Intoxication*; Sharma, *Empire's Garden*.

<sup>280</sup> Kour, *A History of Intoxication*.

1980s, writes that the addiction left the paddy granaries empty.<sup>281</sup> People sold their produce in exchange for opium, and it resulted in a food shortage by the end of the year. There were several groups of opium ‘addicts’ in these rural areas. In the context of the consumption of opium and people becoming sedentary, opium ‘addicts’ resorted to selling their land, cattle, or valuable belongings to consume opium. It led to an accumulation of capital or land in the hands of families who sold opium. In one of my conversations with one of the families who dealt in opium in the past, an old woman from the family, with much hesitation, said,

While we were involved in the opium business, people would pay in money, and we mostly accepted money. There was so much desperation among people with an addiction that they were ready to exchange their gold for opium. However, I insisted that my family not take gold because we believed it was a sin to take gold. There were instances of desperation where one man came to buy opium by keeping his shawl and umbrella as a mortgage.<sup>282</sup>

Stories of such desperation for opium and people selling their valuable properties were familiar tales. Several encounters with elders during fieldwork revealed it. While engaging in fieldwork on the islands of Obonori, I met Soilen (pseudonym), a man in his 70s who stays on one of the islands to rear his cattle. He is from a village called Ukhamati, neighbouring Bélang. While Soilen was a stranger to me, he had known my family for many years. He narrated his fate on the island in connection with his father’s opium addiction. I could see his facial expression showing intense disgust when he spoke about it. ‘We had elephants. However, my father sold the elephant for the consumption of opium. I was angry with my father’s deeds. That is why I moved away from my

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<sup>281</sup> Rameswar Medak, “Opium and The Misings,” *TMPK* 5 (2019): 33–38.

<sup>282</sup> Field notes, Bélang, January 19, 2022.

family, took a few cattle to this island, and started to make a living by animal husbandry.’ While the conversation continued, I was taken aback when he said,

Do you have any idea how your grandfather cleared so much land, if not for opium? I was a witness when your family was clearing forests and converting them into paddy fields. I saw many labourers engaged in it, and it surprised me. How were they capable of employing so many people if they were not involved in opium trading?<sup>283</sup>

Soilen’s words made me uncomfortable, and I was reminded that my family was also engaged in the trade. With that feeling of discomfort, I replied, ‘Yes, you are right. They might have been involved in it much before they migrated to Bélang. My grandfather was a *gram sevak* in North East Frontier Agency (NEFA)<sup>284</sup> and could employ the labourers with what he earned. However, his siblings must have been engaged in it then.’ Soilen seemed not to be convinced by my reply to him. He pointed at another family who came to the area, migrated from further downstream of Obonori, displaced by flood, and became owners of a large landholding in a few years without clearing forests by selling opium. He talked about a Doley (a clan name of the Mising tribe) family and said, ‘You know how that family accumulated so much land? They bought lands from the money earned by the business without even clearing the forest.’ The name was a familiar one.

On a recent visit to Bélang in the early months of 2025, I spoke with Lolen (pseudonym), whose farming lands were adjacent to ours. I met him by chance at a funeral feast in a neighbouring village. It was never my intention to talk about opium; however, our conversation circled back to the topic. Lolen too pointed at the same Doley family. He began to express his loathing for his

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<sup>283</sup> Field notes, Obonori river island, July 22, 2021.

<sup>284</sup> NEFA was the erstwhile name of the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

father and his exchanges with the Doley family. He said, ‘My father was an opium addict. He was a fool. He sold most of our lands that were beside your paddy fields. We hardly have two *puras* of land now. He exchanged one *katha* of land for one *sorati*<sup>285</sup> of opium with the Doley family. The rest of the land occupied by the Doley family next to your paddy field belonged to us.’<sup>286</sup> At present, Lolen manages to subsist on the land that he possesses. However, many families have been rendered landless in Bélang. Late Makken's (pseudonym) story is grim. Makken used to be from a landed family. His sister-in-law, who is still alive, told me his story,

During the smallpox phase, Makken lost his wife and three children. Grieving about their deaths led him to leave our house. He got addicted to opium during that time. He had a good share of land. He then started selling his agricultural land and his homestead land. Since he had sold his share of land, he became landless.<sup>287</sup>

In the 2000s, I witnessed him working for other families as a *haluwa* in his old age at a neighbouring village in Arunachal Pradesh. Like them, I have encountered a few more families who have become landless and, at present, dependent on *hajira* for everyday existence. This process of internal differentiation in the village results from conjunctures of varied factors, ranging from the influence of the larger political economy to ecological factors and the consumption of intoxicants. However, the deepening internal differentiation in the village did not happen dramatically, but in a mundane way. Gradually, people were squeezed out of the agricultural production process. In the absence of employment and poor connection to the urban centres in

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<sup>285</sup> A unit of measurement of opium used by the people. However, in the Indian context, it is generally used as a unit of measurement of gold. 1 sorati would be equivalent to 182 milligrams.

<sup>286</sup> Field notes, Bélang, January 28, 2025.

<sup>287</sup> Field notes, Bélang, January 17, 2022.

Assam, there was a period for these groups to work as *haluwa*, *ruwonis*, *guwals*, and *nébings* in the landed families in the 1980s, 1990s and early years of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 5. The Squeezed-Out Populations

### 5.1. Becoming *Haluwas* and *Ruwonis*

In Mising villages, villagers traditionally organise the need for labour according to the customary collective institutions of reciprocity known as *Rígbo* and *Daklék*.<sup>288</sup> *Rígbo* is a collective institution of labour used in several works, ranging from building houses to cultivating. *Daklék* refers to the collective labour institutions associated with harvesting crops. However, the Misings were predominantly a chief-based community where perhaps patron-client relationships were present. The Misings have words for people who worked for other families- *pagné* (female slave) and *pagbo* (male slave). Nevertheless, these collective institutions were the dominant system to organise labour in the villages. In the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was an increase in the new paternalistic relationships within the village known as *haluwas*, *ruwonis*, *nébings*, and *guwals*, catering for the changing socio-economic changes within the village. Such a tradition of working for other families as *haluwas* or *ruwonis* was rare amongst the Misings until the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, with the growing landlessness emerging from several factors as mentioned in the above sections, the subsequent decades of the 1980s and 1990s saw the Misings within the village working for the wealthy families. They were left with no land to work on but only their labour. The children of these landless families began to live with the landowning families in the village and grew up as *haluwas* and *ruwonis* with minimal monthly wages. Apart

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<sup>288</sup> See also Mipun, *The Mishings (Miris) of Assam: Development of a New Lifestyle*. These collective institutions have drastically reduced in the present times, however, it is still existent on a smaller scale.

from a monthly wage, they are given food and shelter in the same house as the landowning wealthy households. If a *haluwa* or *ruwoni* stays for a longer time in a family, in many instances, they are considered part of the family and some of them are given a small parcel of land or allowed to sharecrop. In many instances, the landed and *Mahajan* families help them to find eligible partners for marriage.



Figure 8: Villagers of Bélang performing *rigbo* to prepare *apong* (sacred rice alcohol) for a funeral feast (Source: Author)

As mentioned above, in the narratives about the past, these groups of workers are not talked about much. I grew up with Mising *haluwas* and *ruwonis*, who lived in my home in the 1990s. Among them, I was close to Julen (pseudonym) and Upen (pseudonym). Both came to our home as young children and left as adults. Julen came in the late 1980s when he was about seven/ eight years of

age as a *guwal*.<sup>289</sup> His family left Julen under my grandfather's care and engaged in sharecropping with my family. Julen's transformation into *haluwa* can be traced back to the eviction of his family from the riverbank in the 1970s. They were one of the families that had migrated from Bélang back to the Obonori riverbank (near the present dam project) and were forced to return. On the other hand, Upen came in the late 1990s when he was about ten years of age. I am told by one of the villagers that Upen's grandparents had sold their land because of opium consumption. Moreover, the decade of the 1980s and 90s was also a phase where reclaiming land in the nearby areas was no longer possible because the land was being reclaimed largely by batches of migrants from elsewhere. Not to mention, the introduction of the newer legislations, such as the Assam Forest Legislation Act of 1971 and subsequently the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, challenged the expansion of agrarian acreage to reserved forest lands in Assam. These laws were a strong enactment against the presence of humans, and the FD reserved the right to evict unauthorised occupation in forest reserves.<sup>290</sup> These laws hindered the squeezed-out population in their efforts to search for newer lands elsewhere, rendering them fixed to a village and landless.

Moreover, there was a failure of the state to generate jobs in Assam to absorb the squeezed-out population from the agrarian production process. Many people who were of working age in the

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<sup>289</sup> Many individuals before becoming *haluwa* starts doing the work of a *guwal*.

<sup>290</sup> Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*. Arupjyoti Saikia observed that the Assamese political class saw the forest as a future zone of agrarian expansion until the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This implies that although Forest reserve boundaries existed after the entry of the British regime, communities continued to clear forest lands with the support of the political class. However, the discourse on the understanding of the future zone of agrarian expansion has drastically changed in recent years. There is a fortress conservation model that has come into existence in recent times.

1990s described a lack of employment and how they would spend their days idly, except for the paddy cultivation and harvesting season. One of the common expressions to describe the jobless days is '*sukkémpé ager kamangai*', which translates to 'there was no place to work in the past.' The lack of work within the village could also be related to the continuing intricate co-existence of collective community labour like *Rigbo* and *Daklék*, which was strongly evident until the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Under these systems, people continued to engage in collective labour work and were unable to find wage-earning employment within the village.

Amidst these conditions, in a struggle to socially reproduce themselves, there was a diversification of work with the people engaging in petty manual logging in the hills for commercial purposes since the 1990s. Moreover, in the larger Mingmang area, there was a shift to engage in the river Obonori to collect and sell boulders and sands to fulfil the needs of upcoming urban areas. The later chapters will discuss these parts of engaging with the hills and the rivers. There was also a gradual transition towards *hajira* in the village. It was not until the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the decline of *haluwas* and *ruwonis* was seen. A person would earn a mere Rs. 1000 to Rs. 3000 for an entire month until a decade ago. *Hajira*, as a new form of work, helped the *haluwas* and *ruwonis* to move away from the 'masters.' It gave them a way to earn a daily wage. This shift also increased the masters' dependence on paying people for every kind of work, including household and agricultural work. Apart from the landless people, the offspring of landholding families have also become dependent on *hajira* because of the increase in the fragmentation of land. The men's *hajira* spans from working in many sites such as constructing concrete houses, mending fencing, and becoming agricultural labourers during the harvesting and cultivating season. On the other hand, women's *hajira* are confined to paddy harvesting, thrashing,

and planting. However, institutions of the collective labour system still exist amidst the increase of individualisation of labour, which will be evident as I move forward in the later sections.

## **5.2. Finding work in Concrete Dreams- Breaking the Patron-Client Relationship**

In the late 1990s, some unemployed individuals migrated to Indian metropolitan cities to work as security guards and perform other menial jobs. These groups of migrants were people who had studied beyond matriculation or class 10 of schooling, and they belonged to the landed families. However, most of them had returned home because they could not sustain themselves in the harsh environment of the metropolises. A few years after their return, the next generation of youth, who were my friends, began to feel the pressure and need for money. They searched for employment in the Delhi National Capital Region from 2010 to 2011. They recall how they moved from city to city around NCR, looking for jobs, and found work in a vehicle seat-making factory in Manesar, Haryana. However, they all returned in a few months, facing difficulty in sustaining themselves in these cities. Currently, only one person from Bélang works as a security guard in Bengaluru. In recent decades, migration from the NER to metropolitan areas for work has become a new phenomenon, particularly from the tribals in the hilly region, where tribal youths are finding employment in the growing hospitality industry across mainland India.<sup>291</sup> Migration to metropolitan cities in the hospitality industry reflects the soft skills of English-speaking migrants from the region. However, the migration of a tribal person from Bélang is significantly different from that of the hill tribes. They lack the skills to be part of India's rise in the global economy because of poor education and a lack of English and Hindi speaking skills. In contrast, jobs in the

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<sup>291</sup> Kikon and Karlsson, *Leaving the Land*.

agrarian sector, logging, and construction are the only remaining options available for most people in Béalang and nearby villages.

In this context of joblessness, the entry of concrete infrastructure (mostly concrete houses) has been a watershed moment for the unemployed and squeezed-out populations in the agrarian production process. Scholars argue that concrete reflects modernisation and breaking away from the past.<sup>292</sup> Against the increase of concrete infrastructures, these populations have begun to engage in masonry works amidst the rise of concrete dreams, where having a concrete house has become a desire and need for many. It has become a source of income for the people, irrespective of different classes of people within the village, former *haluwas*, or the offspring of landed families. Especially for the *haluwas*, the jobs created by concrete infrastructure replacing the traditional ones have aided in breaking the patron-client relationship. Being landless, Upen sustains his family by earning from his masonry job. I often see him riding his bicycle with his friends, travelling for work to nearby urban centres. Concrete has slowly crept into refashioning the existing structure of the village economy. Some of the earliest concrete infrastructures were school infrastructures, culverts and waiting sheds. Besides, twenty years ago, there were hardly any *pucca* houses in the village, except for those belonging to some elite families. Gradually, wealthy families increased the construction of *pucca* houses. However, there were frictions in the shift towards building concrete houses. There is still an ongoing discourse of celebrating a traditional Mising stilt house, *tayeng ukum*, which is made of bamboo and thatch, where people argue how it is superior in maintaining temperature in unforgiving summers. Moreover, a sense of security is attached to

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<sup>292</sup> Duncan McDuie-Ra, “Concrete and Culture in Northeast India,” *RAIOT*, February 14, 2018, <https://raiot.in/concrete-and-culture-in-northeast-india/>.

having *tayeng ukum* in times of an earthquake. There are stories of the resilience of *tayeng ukum* in its ability to withstand the big earthquake in the 1950s. A roofless extension of the stilt house, known as *Ka:ré*, serves as a haven during earthquakes, averting the risk of falling objects. It is also a space where people rest on warm summer evenings and nights. Nevertheless, concrete has found its way as a form of people's aspirations, reflecting wealth and status.<sup>293</sup> Furthermore, government housing schemes, alongside the depletion of forest resources needed for building traditional houses, have made the use of concrete unavoidable. Concrete houses also outlast houses built from bamboo. Currently, there are many Reinforced Cement Concrete (RCC) houses and concrete Assam-type<sup>294</sup> houses in the village. Bélang has a hardware store catering to the needs of neighbouring villages. In the last 10-15 years, there has been an increase in hardware shops that sell cement, rods, bricks, and tin roofs in the area. However, every family has a *tayeng ukum* beside the concrete houses. It has a new look and continues to symbolise the Mising identity. Posts of cement and rods have replaced the bamboo or wooden posts and tin roof for thatch. However, locally sourced raw materials like bamboo are used to build the stilt floor and the walls. A hybrid of locally sourced material and concrete is a familiar scene in the village, manifesting a new form of architecture with its essence of being Mising.

Moreover, building a concrete house is time-consuming and requires masonry expertise, unlike when *rigbos* were employed to build houses in a day or two. Now, building a house with a concrete

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<sup>293</sup> To have a better understanding of different ways in which concrete shows the status and power of communities and individuals, see McDuie-Ra, "Concrete and Culture in Northeast India".

<sup>294</sup> Assam-type house is constructed with light materials like bamboo and reed, which are known to be earthquake-resistant. However, at present, these naturally procured materials are replaced by cements and iron rods owing to the scarcity of resources.

structure provides a space of employment, replacing the collective institution employed in house construction. Susen, with very little landholding, has been sustaining his family with concrete work. He has been working with concrete for over a decade and has become a *headmistry*. As a *headmistry*, he earns more than Rs 500 per day. The daily wage of him as *headmistry* differs across areas. He earns less in the village and more in the urban areas where he works. According to his rough estimate, he earns around Rs. 15000–Rs. 20000 (170-220 USD) a month if his work is regular. However, getting regular work is difficult. That is when he sometimes goes to nearby urban areas for a longer time and stays away from his family. For many of those involved in construction work, the urban areas have become their preferred workplace destination.

Today, in the village, everyone has learned to work with concrete. Scholars write that one does not need intricate knowledge about concrete to have expertise working with concrete.<sup>295</sup> Even teenagers work under the *headmistry* for their expenses in a job crisis and later become a *headmistry*. It is a knowledge passed down by the elders and shared amongst the villagers. My friend Madhav (pseudonym) has become a *headmistry* in house construction in the area. He belongs to a family without any farming land. He left schooling after class 4 in dire need to sustain his family. After he left school, he was a *guwal* for a family. He has found a foothold in construction, where he started as a *jugali* (apprentice) under a *headmistry*. In less than ten years, nearly everyone in the village has become familiar with concrete work. There are also situations where kin and friends share each other's labour when one cannot hire labour. In one of the instances, I saw Upen help his sister and her husband build a house. His sister cannot afford to pay for labour to build a house. On a visit to Bélang in February 2025, I met Susen and one of his

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<sup>295</sup> McDuire-Ra, "Concrete and Culture in Northeast India."

associates and began conversing with them regarding work. They told me how they are attempting to bring *rigbo* in building concrete houses. Susen asserts the need for collective labour amongst the people who cannot pay for labour, ‘we are introducing the *rigbo* system at least in building the terrace of RCC houses. You must know the labour needed to build an RCC house's terrace. You are supposed to finish it in a day.’ I replied, ‘Yes, I have seen the number of labourers needed. So, are you telling me that when building a terrace of an RCC house, you all come together to help each other?’ His associate intervened, ‘Why not? These days, many in the village have started to build RCC structures. We have come to a decision that we will help each other. A family cannot afford to pay many labourers just for a day.’<sup>296</sup> This conversation with Susen and his friend intrigued me. What does this imply? I wondered why they were doing it when they were simultaneously complaining about a lack of work. However, the need to engage in collective labour can be viewed as a response to the uncertainty, where they are collectively experiencing a crisis of social reproduction within the village. This collective labour is only employed where its need is felt in the village. As reliance on the land for sustenance becomes more complex, communities are compelled to support one another within the village while also working individually, doing *hajira*.

### **5.3. Subsisting agriculture by wage labouring**

The increasing *hajira* work and people’s involvement with the construction sector reflects a transition from an agrarian work culture to an urban work culture. The people’s involvement in *hajira* to work as daily wage labour is what Jan Breman calls a ‘civilisational switch’ from peasant

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<sup>296</sup> Field notes, Bélang, February 20, 2025.

economies and societies to an urban-industrial mode of life and work.<sup>297</sup> However, due to the informal nature of work, labourers have never found a foothold in the informal wage economy. Scholars argue that there is a continuous labour circulation between the urban and the rural areas.<sup>298</sup> In this situation of labour circulation, agricultural activities are an important part of one's existence. However, it is important to acknowledge that with most people in the village becoming wage earners, the farming patterns and techniques in the area have changed over the years.

The village's farming process has changed significantly since I learned to plough with our sharecropping tenants as a teenager. When I was about age eleven or twelve in 2006-2007, I would accompany Métél, a *guwal*, to learn to plough. This was when cattle and mules were an essential part of the agricultural production process. I remember the names of a few bulls that we had. One was named Mipag since it was bought from a *Mipag* (non-mising) family. Another was called Mithun, derived from the famous Bollywood action star Mithun Chakraborty. Mithun was one of the best fighting bulls in the village. Métél would often take pride in Mithun and brag about it for being the best. It was around this time that the agrarian scenario began to shift towards the use of tractors. The first tractor was bought in 2007-2008 by one of the landed families with a subsidy granted by the state. It has been almost two decades since, and things have changed significantly. Tractors have replaced the agricultural production process for tilling and procuring. Currently, Bélang has six tractors, which were bought mainly with a subsidy offered by the district agricultural department. They are all owned by families who are active in grassroots politics. Apart from being involved in other work, these tractors are busiest during the paddy planting and

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<sup>297</sup> Jan Breman, *Outcast Labour in Asia: Circulation and Informalization of the Workforce at the Bottom of the Economy*, Oxford India Paperbacks (Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>298</sup> Breman, *Outcast Labour in Asia*.

harvesting season. The tractors are hired by families irrespective of the size of the landholdings. The *hajira*-dependent and the sharecropper families hire them to till their lands. With most of the village population involved in *hajira* almost throughout the year, holding cattle is an extra burden. Except for a few families, no one rears cattle anymore. There is a drastic change in the duration of tilling, planting, and harvesting paddy. The entire process of tilling the land and planting the paddy saplings has changed from 1 month to 1.5 months to just a few days, not extending to 10 days. Similarly, villagers harvest only for a few days. Thus, when the planting and harvesting season comes, everyone takes off from ongoing construction work and dedicates their labour and money for a few days towards their fields. They return to their construction work as soon as they are done. This demonstrates a scenario where people sustain agriculture from the income of informal and insecure *hajira* work and self-employment.<sup>299</sup>

Moreover, along with payment for the tractor and labourers in farming, the subsistence of agriculture also depends on the traditional collective work system and utilising paid agricultural labour. Collective work as an institution becomes ever relevant when the community is collectively experiencing a crisis. The plantation and harvesting season also becomes a time of feasting in the village when family members and kin gather for work in the fields. I would be invited to many neighbours' houses for the feast on the first day of their paddy plantation and harvesting, where they are bound to reciprocate the labour with food and drinks. However, the invocation of collective labour institutions mainly depends on people's economic status. A family with less income primarily depends on reciprocity. However, wealthy families depend on the sharecroppers and wage labourers.

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<sup>299</sup> Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*.

Amidst these agrarian changes, only a few families with large landholdings (non-fragmented lands because of fewer family members) can sell paddy in the village. In the times of land fragmentation, there is no more paddy surplus. In one of my numerous conversations with elders recalling the past about paddy production, one elderly woman said,

We used to have an abundance of paddy, which would rot in the *kumsung* (granary). At times, we could not sell the paddy because the price would be exceptionally low during harvesting. There would be no one to buy that paddy. Now, we do not have enough, so forget about selling it.<sup>300</sup>

I also witnessed, some 15-20 years ago, that many villagers' *kumsungs* used to be filled with paddy. The size of *kumsungs* was a sign of one's wealth. However, in recent years, *kumsungs* are rarely full. If one observes the granaries of the majority in the village, they are usually half-filled or empty. There is no surplus paddy to be sold. With no paddy to be sold in the market, the Bihari intermediaries have moved away from the villages in the last two decades. From enquiries about their whereabouts, I learned that most of them have moved from the villages to urban centres, and a few have returned to their *Desh* (home state where they belong). The last Bihari family in Bélang had moved to a nearby town. They are now engaged in the petty supply of goods and products to village shopkeepers. A logical explanation for their moving away from the villages would also be a shift in merchant capital interest towards other sectors from the agrarian economy in Assam. Simultaneously, their leaving reflects less paddy production because of fragmentation and increasing pressure on land.

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<sup>300</sup> Field notes, Bélang, July 22, 2022.

However, even though paddy production has declined due to increasing land pressure, people have not changed their farming patterns. Lands are left fallow for 6 months. People have not intensified farming. They solely engage in seasonal monocropping of the summer paddy. Moreover, fertilisers are not used. Elders' narratives speak of times 30-40 years ago, when people would cultivate other cash crops like mustard and black lentils. It leaves us questioning the region's local and larger agricultural scenario. The present agrarian scenario of the villages shows a confluence of factors of disinvestment, lack of state support, limited commercialisation, and lack of motivation and incentives in the agrarian sector in these rural parts of Assam.

In this backdrop, it is evident that farming has been confined to consumption needs for the majority, except for a few landed families. In the past, paddy businesses have led to the accumulation of wealth and even the education of their children in urban areas. At present, even wealthy families with land have not been able to profit from agriculture. People with land are left with marginal profit against the cost of the inputs they put into cultivating and harvesting paddy, especially the landed class. Upon meeting Gonsam (pseudonym), one of the members of a landed family, says,

The expense during harvesting, like employing *hajira* workers and hiring tractors to procure the paddy to thresh the paddy, involves money. When we sell the paddy to the mills, the price per quintal is only Rs 1200 or less than that. When we calculate the cost incurred while harvesting and while selling, we just get the money we spent in the entire process of procuring and harvesting. There is no point in being involved in the crop. Often, we are in loss rather than profit.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Field notes, Bélang, November 30, 2022.

My father also resonated with Gonsam. When I asked him about selling paddy grains, my father said it is not profitable. During harvesting season, my father would share the expenses incurred during the entire process. In one of these conversations within my family, my grandfather expressed his regret at holding a large landholding in the wake of the unviability of paddy production. I remember him saying, ‘What is the use of so much land when there is no price of paddy? Just sell the land when it is needed.’ This statement by my grandfather points to a sense of burden in farming. The sense of burden is also shared across different classes. However, wealthy families can sustain themselves without the income from agriculture. They derive their income from non-agrarian sources, such as holding government jobs and holding positions in grassroots politics.

During harvesting time last winter in November 2024, I received a call from Susen seeking money from me to pay the tractor owner to procure the paddy *dangoris*. He said, ‘I am short of money. I have to pay the tractor owner, and I also must treat the people who have come for work.’ I did not question him much; after a brief conversation about Pulpuli and their kids, I hung up and sent the money he requested. While visiting the village after the harvest season, I met Susen and the first question, after a brief exchange of pleasantries, was how many *dangoris* he could harvest this year. He replied, ‘I got around 200 *dangoris* this time.’ I asked, ‘How much did you spend on farming this year?’ ‘I think I spent around Rs. 20000 (approx. 220 USD), including planting and harvesting, with the money paid to tractor owners and some labour, and it also includes the food that was offered to the people who have come to help,’ He said, and continued, ‘*Laab kama ampigela* (There is no profit).’ He resonated with Gonsam, my father and grandfather. He said, ‘Imagine if I buy

rice worth Rs. 20000, I can sustain the family throughout the year. I do not need to cultivate.’<sup>302</sup>

In a previous meeting with Madhav, he shared a similar concern. He does not have farming land, yet he invests money as a tenant of a landed family by hiring tractors. When I asked Susen why he had not stopped cultivating, he did not have a clear answer to my question. After considering my question, he answered, ‘There is some security in farming. At least, on workless days, I do not need to buy rice for consumption.’ Despite the shared burden, when discussing farming, it somehow gives a sense of security and safety nets, even for a sharecropper like my friend Madhav. Susen’s and many wage workers’ social reproduction is characterised by the complex coexistence of dependence on informal wage labour and sustaining agriculture rather than solely sustaining on agriculture.<sup>303</sup> It also further reflects the failure of Susen to find a foothold in either agriculture or the informal wage economy, making them a surplus reserve army of labour in the global south, which reflects a broader structural condition of many nations of the global south.<sup>304</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The chapter has traced the transition of the people of Bélang towards becoming *hajira*-dependent. It has traced the transition of the villagers from having relatively enough access to land and forest resources that once generated wealth to becoming subsistence farmers. It points to the agrarian crisis of the present time, where agriculture has failed to sustain the Indigenous agrarian community. In this transition, besides the incoming of colonial and merchant capital, the chapter emphasises the importance of increasing capitalist relations within Indigenous communities.

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<sup>302</sup> Field notes, Bélang, January 28, 2025.

<sup>303</sup> Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*.

<sup>304</sup> Breman, *Outcast Labour in Asia*; Breman, *Footloose Labour*; Li, “To Make Live or Let Die?”

Reiterating Tania Li's position on capitalistic transition in Indigenous areas, the chapter highlights how the entry of capital has increased the internal differentiation within the village, amidst kins and acquaintances, driven by aspirations.<sup>305</sup> This transition to cash cropping has brought a situation of landlessness, and at present, the condition of the village challenges the simplistic, fixed and self-sufficient imagery of Indigenous villages. In this mundane capitalistic transition, the chapter also highlights the role of diseases and natural calamities in shaping people's relationships and squeezing out populations from the agricultural production process.

The chapter also points to the changing value assigned to land in this historical process. It has become an inherited individual property, bringing attributes of power of exclusion that must be managed and defended. It has also become a fallback in times of crisis, leading to the sale of land and rendering certain sections of the population landless. Engaging in cash cropping had created a labouring class, leading to a patron-client relationship between the landed class and poorer non-landed sections. Today, pressure on land is no longer confined to these groups. It is experienced by the larger population, regardless of the people who possess land, because of the increasing fragmentation in the village. With the increase of fragmentation and landlessness, people are forced out of agricultural dependence, making them heavily depend on off-farm income, which depends solely on their individual labour. In contrast, people uphold farming with money earned from off-farm activities. Doing *hajira* and depending on it has become the new normal. There is a lack of choice with unviable agriculture. Issues of unemployment among this Indigenous population have come to the forefront. The dependence on *hajira* reflects the existence of surplus populations that reflect the failure of the Indian state to provide secure jobs for the population forced out of the

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<sup>305</sup> Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

agrarian set-up. They are insecure and lack a foothold in doing *hajira* or paddy farming. Ironically, in this situation of insecurity, people squeezed out of the agricultural production process have found relief in the proliferation of concrete infrastructure, albeit in informal and insecure conditions. The situation is not one of extreme dismay; however, it is far from ideal. People negotiate with these insecurities and irregularities of jobs by creating avenues for employment for themselves.

The forest and river have been a fallback in times of agrarian crisis. However, this source of off-farm income at their disposal is gradually under unequal competition from the powerful extractive state and non-state actors. The forests and the rivers are under pressure from relentless extraction by various wealthy private actors and the state. The people dependent on these resources are not dispossessed drastically but gradually and slowly. The following chapters explore the role of the forest and the river in sustaining a population where agriculture has failed to sustain, and how, in contemporary times, the increase of extraction by powerful actors is jeopardising the future of the local communities' dependent on these resources.

## Chapter 3: The Obonori and the Misings

### 1. Introduction

The river Obonori was the first field site where I initiated my fieldwork. I was back in Bélang in the summer of 2021, and my first intention was to learn about people involved in making a livelihood from the river in the backdrop of the impact of the under-construction dam. It was mid-July, and the villages were done with their paddy plantation. The weather was extremely hot due to a lack of rainfall. There were no clouds, and the sky was at its bluest. It was unusual in July, which is the monsoon season. Concerned with the unbearable heat, the people of Bélang voiced their fear of paddy dying. I had a tough time going out for fieldwork. By then, I had made a few rounds to the riverbank, where I observed people's activities in the river. People of the villages along the river usually collect driftwood<sup>306</sup> for their daily consumption of firewood, and they also sell it as a source of income. Collecting and selling driftwood is one of the many activities that individuals engage in on the river to earn income during the monsoon. Among other activities during the summer is fishing for daily consumption and for sale. That year, whoever I asked about driftwood underscored the lack of rain and the dam's increasing height that had interrupted the driftwood's discharge from the river's upstream. I was also familiarised with people's complaints of a decreasing fish population.

During these early days of my fieldwork, I felt an urgent need to familiarise myself with the river and its inhabitants. I knew that Julen and his wife Sunu (pseudonym) lived on one of the islands in the river, but I was unable to find Julen's contact number to reach out to him for a visit. In addition to them, I was aware of a few others from nearby villages who stayed in the river islands

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<sup>306</sup> Driftwood are remains of wood found in rivers. It is one of the major sources of firewood for the people in the area.

of Obonori. However, the rest of the people I knew were back at their village and had not returned to the river. With no contact, I had to seek assistance from a neighbour who knew people who worked on the river. The next day, a neighbour agreed to go to the river with me. We accompanied Saab and Kamini, a couple in their late forties from a neighbouring village. After they had planted paddy that summer, they were returning to their makeshift camp on the river island. The morning showed some relief with a light shower. The light shower turned the road slushy. We drove our bikes towards the river. We passed the dam project's administrative office on the plains adjacent to the lofty hills before the road made its way to the hills where the dam was under construction. Before driving uphill, we took a sharp left from the main road towards the valley where the river Obonori hits the plains of Assam. The river flows into two main channels, creating a large island when it hits the plains. However, a few smaller channels from these two channels cut across the island, braiding the river course.

Saab's makeshift camp was on a small island. We had to stop our bikes on the banks of the river. To reach the island, we walked across the gravel bridge that was built by the company to supply sand and gravel for the dam construction from these islands. Our presence bothered Kamini. She was worried that they might be unable to dedicate their time wholly to fishing in our presence. After all, they needed to sell whatever they caught. With much hesitation, I asked Saab if he sold driftwood. He replied, 'Yes, we sell them.' Then I asked him, 'Since when are you engaged in the river?' He replied, 'I have been here for a long time. Only in these few years have I brought my wife along. I depended on the river by participating in the flourishing logging business in the past. The river has been a source of income for me.' Joining the conversation, Kamini expressed her attachment to the river, 'I was already bored back home. In this river, I always stay occupied doing this or that.' She paused, pointing at her body, 'I become thin when I return home. I was longing

to come back to the river. Everything tastes better here. Although the sun will tan me, I will be healthier.<sup>307</sup> By the time we continued our conversation about the nature of the work in the river, we had finally reached their camp after 20 minutes of walking. As soon as we arrived, the couple rushed to catch fish. Respecting their time constraint, we parted ways to see Julen. Many people like them in the area rely on the river for their livelihoods. It serves as a source of income for countless individuals willing to work on the river from across communities and villages along the river.

Julen and Sunu have also carved out a space to make a living on this island amidst landlessness. Moreover, Julen works as a construction worker on the dam project. The island serves him as the best place because the site where he worked was just a 20-minute walk, rather than commuting from Bélang, which is located a few kilometres from the dam. Sunu was surprised by our visit. Julen had not returned from work. Sunu offered us to come into their makeshift house and offered us *potika*<sup>308</sup> that she also sold to the people working around the island. She complained about the lack of rainfall when I asked her about driftwood. She said, 'Look, it's only raining today. This won't last long. There's a lack of driftwood due to the minimal rainfall. When it rains in the hills, it increases the likelihood of finding driftwood. Additionally, the rising water level of the dam prevents wood from drifting over from the other side of the river.' She went on, "The fish catch has also decreased this year.' While we were having a drink, a few other people passed by to buy *potika*. Apart from a few people we saw along the way to Saab's camp and those who purchased *potika*, we did not see many people. I asked her if it was always like this, and she said, 'No, this is

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<sup>307</sup> Field notes, Obonori River Island, July 17, 2021.

<sup>308</sup> Locally brewed liquor by distillation, mostly for sale. It is commonly known as *sulai* in Assamese.

nothing. People will return gradually from October to November. Most of them come for sand and gravel mining. Come back in winter. You will see how busy this area becomes.’ Highlighting the importance of the river as a source of income, she continued, ‘Every material from the river gives money. You can sell anything from wood fragments to specks of sand.’<sup>309</sup>

Upon speaking with elders, they revealed that in the past, there was no sand and stone quarry except for a timber *mahal*<sup>310</sup>. In the past, people of villages along the riverine tracts used to sell logs/timbers by floating on the river as a source of income. It was the only business people relied on to earn a living from the river. They sold in the further downstream areas that were deprived of timber. Floating logs in the river used to be a lucrative business since colonial times.<sup>311</sup> However, the Supreme Court ruling of 1996 against timber felling and transportation severely impacted a certain section of people who depended on selling timber.<sup>312</sup> Against this backdrop and the

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<sup>309</sup> Field notes, River Island, July 17, 2021.

<sup>310</sup> *Mahal* is a well-defined area where certain forest produce is sold. These *mahal* are leased to private contractors against a security deposit or royalty paid to the state forest department. These *mahal* serve as a checkpoint, where individuals who were engaged in the logging business were supposed to pay a money to conduct their business. See, Assam sale of forest produce, coupes and mahal rules, 1977. See, “Assam Sale of Forest Produce, Coupes and Mahals Rules, 1977,” Retrieved from:

[https://forest.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf\\_utility\\_folder/departments/pccf\\_lipl\\_in\\_oid\\_4/menu/document/sale\\_ofForestProduceCoupesandMahalsRules1977\\_0.pdf](https://forest.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/pccf_lipl_in_oid_4/menu/document/sale_ofForestProduceCoupesandMahalsRules1977_0.pdf)

<sup>311</sup> Saikia, *A Century of Protests*; Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

<sup>312</sup> Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*; Nicolas Laine, “Effects of the 1996 Timber Ban in Northeast India: The Case of the Khamtis of Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh,” in *Nature, Environment and Society: Conservation, Governance and Transformation in India*, ed. Nicolas Lainé and Tanka Bahadur Subba (Orient BlackSwan, 2012); Nongbri, “Timber Ban in North-East India.”

increase of concrete infrastructures in the region, mining sand and stone from the river has become an essential fallback since the last decade of the 20th century. A little downstream from the makeshift camps along the riverbank are two functioning sand and stone quarries, Manika Quarry and Tamuly Quarry, leased out by the Assam State FD. The rest of the river islands are dotted by quarrying activities leased out to the dam construction company by the FD.<sup>313</sup> The state has termed the gravel and sand of the rivers as minor minerals, and the Geology Department and the FD reserved the right to lease these quarries under the Assam Minor Mineral Concession Rules, 2013, against a payment of royalty and security deposits by any private actors.<sup>314</sup> These state-leased quarries and the dam constitute an extractive regime that functions with the logic of profit maximisation, depending on large-scale mechanised mining. It differs from how most villagers depend on the river, which is mainly a part of their various ways of social reproduction. Moreover, the local communities, especially the Misings, who are involved in river activity, revere and pay respect to the *Uis* (guardian deities) of the river every year by offering *apong* and sacrificing fowls for granting access to the river without harm.<sup>315</sup> Performing these rituals is part of their social reproduction that gives them the confidence to venture into the river, which can be dangerous.

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<sup>313</sup> See also, “Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India for the year ended 31 March. (2014),” Revenue Sector, Government of Assam, Report no 4 of 2014. Retrieved from: <https://cag.gov.in/en/audit-report/details/4392>

<sup>314</sup> See, The Assam Minor Mineral concession rules, 2013. Retrieved from: [https://dgm.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf\\_utility\\_folder/departments/dgm\\_medhassu\\_in\\_oid\\_4/portlet/level\\_1/files/assam\\_minor\\_mineral\\_concession\\_rules\\_2013\\_ammcr\\_2013.pdf](https://dgm.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/dgm_medhassu_in_oid_4/portlet/level_1/files/assam_minor_mineral_concession_rules_2013_ammcr_2013.pdf)

<sup>315</sup> *Ui/Uyu* means deities/spirits in mising language. *Ui* also refers to the ritual held to revere the deities. In these ritual pigs, fowl, fish, and *apong* (alcohol) are offered to the deities.

Over the past two decades, there has been an increase in the commodification of the river, which is evident from the coming of the dam and the increase in trucks, backhoes, and excavators frequenting the river, extracting sand and stones. Even during the slack mining season in July-August, a few trucks and backhoes remain functional. In the context of the numerous powerful actors involved, this chapter examines the implications of the dam and quarry for the many individuals who rely on the river for their livelihoods. It will explore how these extractive practices affect people's relationships with the river, as they increasingly displace populations that depend on it, heightening their precariousness.

## **2. River dwellers, State, and Recurring floods**

Rivers are often a popular theme in Assam's songs and literature. In every corner of Assam, rivers are spaces where people usually gather with their loved ones for recreational activities like picnics and enjoying the 'wilderness.' As such, rivers become a source of pleasure and aesthetics. Simultaneously, rivers are also associated with fear and suffering because of the destruction caused by flooding.<sup>316</sup> Writing on the Brahmaputra, Arupjyoti Saikia points out,

The Brahmaputra is thus still deeply embedded in the idea of wilderness and essentially remains a rural river. In contemporary popular narrative, the river and its environs are seen as one of the last bastions of nature. But this is partly true: an environmental history of the

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<sup>316</sup> See, Mitul Baruah, "Political Ecology of an Environmental Crisis in the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam," *Ecology, Economy and Society—the INSEE Journal* 6, no. 2 (2023): 121–45, <https://doi.org/10.37773/ees.v6i2.1054>; Mitul Baruah, *Slow Disaster: Political Ecology of Hazards and Everyday Life in the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam*, Routledge Studies in Hazards, Disaster Risk and Climate Change (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023); Mitul Baruah, "Forgotten People, False Promises: Stories of Riverbank Erosion in Assam," *Dialogue Earth*, January 11, 2023, <https://dialogue.earth/en/justice/forgotten-people-false-promises-riverbank-erosion-assam/>.

Brahmaputra would uncover a different history. It will be a never-ending narrative of indiscernible environmental transformations of the river, the surrounding landscape, and life therein.<sup>317</sup>

Beyond this idea of rivers as a romantic entity and simultaneously a source of worry, continuing power dynamics amongst multiple powerful actors have increasingly turned rivers into spaces of contestation. Rivers are a political space. Historians such as Arupjyoti Saikia and Ritupan Goswami argue that rivers are spaces where the state has consistently attempted to tame and control them.<sup>318</sup> Ritupan Goswami states that historically productive activities like agriculture, pottery, catching drifting wood, cattle rearing, and fishing were deeply rooted in rivers.<sup>319</sup> In the people's everyday interaction with the river, he argues that one must pay attention to how people from different classes shape the river and how the river shapes them. Goswami's argument on unequal power relations in controlling rivers is highly relevant to understanding rivers and people's access to them. Historically, the Brahmaputra and its tributaries have been under manipulation by the Ahoms, the British, and the Indian state. Arupjyoti Saikia writes that the Ahoms controlled the river for permanent settlement, which led to building embankments in their regime to control the floodplains.<sup>320</sup> Controlling the river led to higher rice production and, thus, higher state revenues. By the eighteenth century, the territory had become highly productive by building more embankments, hence making the territory highly taxable. Simultaneously, rivers were considered spaces for procuring gold, especially in the region's eastern part. According to Saikia, these gold-

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<sup>317</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*, XXI–XXII.

<sup>318</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*; Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries."

<sup>319</sup> Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries."

<sup>320</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

washing activities were a significant revenue source for the Ahom kingdom.<sup>321</sup> After the Ahom Kingdom's fall, the British advent to the valley intensified the control of the rivers. British control over the valley led to taxing every activity on the river. Driven by the motive of collecting revenues, the British administration levied taxes on gold washers, driftwood catchers, loggers, and fisherfolk.<sup>322</sup> British administrators frequently complained about the fishing practices of various communities, as these activities were not subject to taxation. There was also a proposal to make the river spaces into a fish sanctuary with the motivation to conserve fish.<sup>323</sup> These processes of levying taxation and controlling river activities led to the oppression of the river-dwelling communities' dependent on the river.<sup>324</sup>

Besides the gradual incursions made by the colonial authority to control the river, the *ryotwari* land system led to the sedentarisation of the Misings in the floodplains, even though the floodplains were deemed uninhabitable and hazardous. One of the documents related to assessing tax on the Misings highlights the new land tenure regime forcing the Misings to the *chaporis*, denying them the right to cultivate in *rupit* lands (term for land tracts for permanent cultivation).<sup>325</sup> According to Ritupan Goswami, *rupit* lands were most suitable for permanent paddy cultivation and fell into a geographical area safe from recurring floods.<sup>326</sup> The Brahmaputra valley could be divided into three distinct geographical regions: the submontane, riverine, and *rupit* tracts. He writes that the

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<sup>321</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

<sup>322</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*; Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries."

<sup>323</sup> Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries."

<sup>324</sup> Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries."

<sup>325</sup> "System of Assessing the Miris."

<sup>326</sup> Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries."

*rupit* tracts between the sub-montane and the riverine tracts were the most affluent areas of the Brahmaputra valley occupied by the upper-class and caste Assamese populations. On the other hand, the submontane and the riverine tracts were inhabited by the lower caste and the tribal populations. The riverine tracts faced regular and increased flooding and erosion of arable lands since the colonial period up to the present.<sup>327</sup> Increasing floods in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century affected the British in terms of loss of revenue.<sup>328</sup> The increase in floods was associated with rising riverbeds because of the earthquake in 1897.<sup>329</sup> The floods of 1900 and 1916 were among the worst floods following the earthquake. Goswami states that the valley's people suffered more from floods in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in the previous century. Owing to the plight of Mising populations because of increasing floods, Karka Chandra Doley, a Mising political leader, in his speech in the second session of the legislative assembly held on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1937, highlighted land erosion and regular flooding as significant problems of the Misings.<sup>330</sup> These problems of erosion and recurrent flooding along the riverine tracts have forced the Mising population to migrate, rendering them homeless and landless. In the same speech, he also mentioned that the increasing precarity of the community is due to the struggle to resettle, because whenever they migrated to a safe space, they found themselves on land that is claimed by the state. Along with fixing the Mising population to a riverine tract and levying tax as *ryot*, one must remember the other categories of land that exist alongside it, like forest reserves, grazing reserves, and many more. Thus, when floods led people

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<sup>327</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*; Baruah, "Political Ecology of an Environmental Crisis in the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam"; Baruah, *Slow Disaster*; Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries."

<sup>328</sup> Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries."

<sup>329</sup> Goswami, "Rivers and History: 0. Valley in the Last Two Centuries."

<sup>330</sup> "Assam Legislative Assembly Debates," August 7, 1937.

to move, these land classifications have primarily hindered the displaced populations looking for land, and even if they settled in, they faced eviction or the threat of eviction.<sup>331</sup> Karka Chandra Doley highlighted that there have been multiple instances of Mising people being evicted from settling on such lands since the early 20th century. These conjunctures of land systems of fixing community as revenue-paying plot-bound individuals and instances of recurring flood and erosion have increased the community's vulnerability, leading to gradual impoverishment. In the early 20th century, the destruction of permanent agriculture due to floods attracted administrative attention, resulting in a famine-like situation in Assam during the 1940s.<sup>332</sup> By the mid-20th century, rivers in Assam were associated with sorrow and suffering.<sup>333</sup>

Subsequently, the earthquake of the 1950s raised the riverbeds and increased the intensity of the flood.<sup>334</sup> Numerous studies on the river state that the rivers have become braided rather than flowing in a single channel. In 1952 and 1954, Assam faced severe flooding, increasing the loss of habitats and agricultural lands.<sup>335</sup> The impact of the flood after the 1950s is evident in my paternal grandmother's natal family and the villages located in the easternmost part of Majuli. They were not impacted by the unprecedented floods that affected the Obonori villages, but were affected by the Brahmaputra's increasingly braided nature after the earthquake. They faced a gradual and slow process of flooding and erosion, wiping out the traces of their village. That is

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<sup>331</sup> "Settlement of Grazing Land with Miri Rayots," Revenue Department, 1938, Collection no. VIII, File no. 22, Assam State Archive.

<sup>332</sup> Saikia, "Jute in the Brahmaputra Valley."

<sup>333</sup> Saikia, "Jute in the Brahmaputra Valley."

<sup>334</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*; Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries."

<sup>335</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

why, in the decades after the 1950s, her family started looking for free land to reclaim. Therefore, her family and her extended family are spread out across the easternmost part of the Dhemaji district in the subdivision of Jonai. Likewise, there is much unrecorded internal displacement from these riparian belts in search of safe areas. Riverbank erosion and recurring floods have increased and impoverished most of the Misings.<sup>336</sup> It is evident from the work of Mitul Baruah that people continue to face the twin processes of flooding and erosion, and the number of these cases has increased.<sup>337</sup> These twin processes have led to the shrinking of Majuli island from 1255 square kilometres to 421 square kilometres in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading 10000 people to become homeless and displacing them from their habitats.<sup>338</sup> It is estimated that in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Assam, there was a 7.5% loss of land due to land erosion, which is 4000 square kilometres.<sup>339</sup> A geological study on the changing course and erosion of Obonori found that the total area eroded from 1920 to 1970 and from 1970 to 1990 is 107.90 and 57.50 square kilometres.<sup>340</sup> According to recent studies on the erosion of Obonori from 1989 to 2017, it is measured to be about 103 square

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<sup>336</sup> Bhasker Pegu and Manoranjan Pegu, *The Conservation Discourse in Assam Must Consider a Sustainable Rehabilitation Plan for the Mising Tribe* | *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 11, 2018, <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/conservation-discourse-in-assam-must-consider-sustainable-rehabilitation-plan-for-mising-tribe>.

<sup>337</sup> Baruah, “Political Ecology of an Environmental Crisis in the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam”; Baruah, *Slow Disaster*.

<sup>338</sup> Baruah, “Forgotten People, False Promises.”

<sup>339</sup> Baruah, “Forgotten People, False Promises.”

<sup>340</sup> Uttam Goswami et al., “River Channel Changes of the Subansiri in Assam, India,” *Geomorphology* 30, no. 3 (1999): 227–44, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0169-555X\(99\)00032-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0169-555X(99)00032-X).

kilometres.<sup>341</sup> It is common to come across news every year about floods and riverbank erosion, rendering people landless and homeless. Recent erosion and flooding continue to displace the 12000 Mising people from the villages of Laika and Dhodiya, located within the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park. These villagers have become landless and homeless, reflecting the precarity of settling along fluid spaces and conservation projects in contemporary times.<sup>342</sup> Bhasker Pegu and Manoranjan Pegu summarizes the precarity of Misings in contemporary times,

The Misings in upper Assam continue to lose most of their arable territory to constant floods, forcing the affected people to look for alternate living spaces. Often, they find themselves occupying land in protected forest areas, leading to conflict and opposition, both from conservation groups and the local population of the region.<sup>343</sup>

However, the narratives of suffering from floods and being forced to migrate do not match the associated imageries of the Misings, who are recognised as resilient and capable of adapting to a riverine lifestyle. Against these historical sufferings, there is increasing scholarship on the Misings as ‘resilient’ for mastering the perceived art of living and coexisting with floods.<sup>344</sup> Mising stilt

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<sup>341</sup> Kusumbor Bordoloi et al., “Assessment of Riverbank Erosion and Erosion Probability Using Geospatial Approach: A Case Study of the Subansiri River, Assam, India,” *Applied Geomatics* 12, no. 3 (2020): 265–80, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12518-019-00296-1>.

<sup>342</sup> Vasundhara Jairath, “Land as Private Property and Its Critique from Below: Notes from Assam, India,” *Journal of South Asian Development*, July 13, 2025, 09731741251355385, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09731741251355385>.

<sup>343</sup> Pegu and Pegu, *The Conservation Discourse in Assam Must Consider a Sustainable Rehabilitation Plan for the Mising Tribe* | *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1.

<sup>344</sup> Ngamjahao Kipgen and Dhiraj Pegu, “Floods, Ecology and Cultural Adaptation in Lakhimpur District, Assam,” in *Development and Disaster Management*, ed. Amita Singh et al. (Springer Singapore, 2018); Bikash Chetry, “Living

houses are celebrated as infrastructure that withstands and adapts to regular flooding. When floods hit Assam during the monsoon season in recent years, Misings, as a community fighting and living with floods, have been highlighted in numerous news reports. They also stress the need to adapt to the Mising way of life and adjust to the increasing flood situations in Assam. At the same time, these discourses also acknowledge that the Misings, resilient due to increasing floods and erosion, are losing their ability to cope with increasing floods, turning them into landless and homeless.

Here, it becomes essential to probe into the state's historical role in attempts to control the rivers, which have forced the Misings to live in a volatile space. Except for a few scholarly works,<sup>345</sup> the scholarly understanding of people facing floods has isolated and naturalised historical processes and sufferings by attributing floods as a natural disaster and erasing the state's role in contributing to floods. Mitul Baruah dubbed the twin processes of increasing flooding and erosion as slow disasters.<sup>346</sup> Although he has contextualised the slow disaster in Majuli, the notion of slow disaster can be extended to the floodplains of the Brahmaputra valley. The twin process is not a drastic event and unfolds slowly over time. He further argues that due to its slow onset nature, the precarity of the people often gets overlooked by the state, with a lack of urgency. According to Staupe-

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with Floods: Community-Based Coping and Resilience Mechanism of Mising from Floods; A Study of Majuli District of Assam,” in *Challenges of Disasters in Asia*, ed. Haroon Sajjad et al., Springer Natural Hazards (Springer Nature Singapore, 2022). Tapan Pegu, “‘Living with Floods’: An Analysis of Floods Adaptation of Mising Community—A Case Study of Jiadhah River,” in *Development and Disaster Management*, ed. Amita Singh et al. (Springer Singapore, 2018).

<sup>345</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*; Goswami, “Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries”; Baruah, *Slow Disaster*.

<sup>346</sup> Baruah, “Political Ecology of an Environmental Crisis in the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam”; Baruah, *Slow Disaster*.

Delgado, resilience is a community's capability to deal with vulnerability based on social capital, adaptability, and coping capability.<sup>347</sup> Moreover, in the context of slow disaster, Delgado argues that the notion of community resilience fails to make sense and is not the right way to understand a community facing a slow disaster. Similarly, the imageries associated with the Misings as resilience fail to capture the massive internal migration of the Misings against the backdrop of people failing to adapt to the changing river courses. This process of slow disaster is not a natural phenomenon but lies in the 'historical context of colonial transformations of nature and production of vulnerability.'<sup>348</sup> Mitul Baruah argues that environmental transformations have taken a disastrous shape because of state interventions of building embankments dating back to colonial times.<sup>349</sup> Several scholars have noted that measures to control floods in Assam have, in turn, led to unprecedented disasters and irreversible ecological damage and have led to landlessness and homelessness of a large floodplain population.<sup>350</sup>

Along with embankments, dams were considered to control floods and bring development to an underdeveloped region. It was an aspiration and the need of the regional ruling class in the face of increasing floods.<sup>351</sup> Nevertheless, dams, which had legitimacy in the Nehruvian period as a

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<sup>347</sup> Reidar Staue-Delgado, *Disasters and Life in Anticipation of Slow Calamity: Perspectives from the Colombian Andes*, Routledge Studies in Hazards, Disaster Risk and Climate Change (Routledge, 2022).

<sup>348</sup> Baruah, *Slow Disaster*, 9.

<sup>349</sup> Baruah, *Slow Disaster*.

<sup>350</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*; Baruah, "Political Ecology of an Environmental Crisis in the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam"; Baruah, *Slow Disaster*; Émilie Crémin, "Entre Mobilité et Sédentarité : Les Mising, 'Peuple Du Fleuve', Face à l'endiguement Du Brahmapoutre (Assam, Inde Du Nord-Est)" (These de doctorat, Paris 8, 2014), <https://theses.fr/2014PA080018>; Saikia, "Jute in the Brahmaputra Valley."

<sup>351</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

symbol of progress and development, have lost their legitimacy owing to the history of anti-dam protests in India. By the turn of the 21st century, when the GOI proposed many large dams in the NER, the dams were seen as inducers of floods based on the experience of unprecedented floods in the Brahmaputra valley caused by the already existing dams in the hilly areas of the region.<sup>352</sup> Dam increases the precarity of these populations, already suffering from flooding and erosion in the downstream areas. Moreover, it threatens to dispossess them of their river-based livelihoods, inevitable after the dam is built.<sup>353</sup>

### 3. Being a Mising- Suffering, and access to resources along a river

Amidst recurrent floods and increasing development intervention in the region's rivers, it is pertinent to understand people's relationships and their perceptions of rivers. Water shapes people's relationships and perceptions about it.<sup>354</sup> Obonori's characteristics have continued to

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<sup>352</sup> Sharma, "Dam, 'Development' and Popular Resistance in Northeast India."

<sup>353</sup> There is a bulk of literature on the downstream impact of dams in the Mekong River in Southeast Asia. Dams have significantly impacted river-based livelihoods downstream from fishing and farming. It has also increased the unprecedented nature of floods downstream, see Ian G. Baird et al., "The People and Their River, the World Bank and Its Dam: Revisiting the Xe Bang Fai River in Laos," *Development and Change* 46, no. 5 (2015): 1080–105, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12186>; Baruah, "Whose River Is It Anyway?"; Karen Bakker, "The Politics of Hydropower: Developing the Mekong," *Political Geography* 18, no. 2 (1999): 209–32, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298\(98\)00085-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(98)00085-7); Andrew Alan Johnson, "Power and the River Lords," *Environmental Humanities* 16, no. 3 (2024): 709–24, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-11327420>; Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams* (Zed Books, 1996); Akarath Soukhaphon et al., "The Impacts of Hydropower Dams in the Mekong River Basin: A Review," *Water* 13, no. 3 (2021): 265, <https://doi.org/10.3390/w13030265>.

<sup>354</sup> Karen Bakker, "Water: Political, Biopolitical, Material," *Social Studies of Science* 42, no. 4 (2012): 616–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312712441396>.

shape people's narratives about the river. From the narratives of many elders, the river resonates with suffering and access to abundant natural resources. In one of the numerous visits to the river, I went out with my friend Gopal, planning to stay for a longer time on an island to have a closer understanding of people's relationship with the river. His father, Gojen, stays in one of the makeshift houses near Julen's house. Gojen had not returned to the camp after he had returned to Bélang to plant paddy. Hence, Gopal offered to help by accompanying me and letting me stay in the makeshift house that belonged to his father. The first house on the island belonged to Gopal's father. It was built on stilts and could hardly fit two people. The house's roof was covered with tarpaulin sheets, and the wall of the house was made of reeds. It was underneath a tree on the edge between one channel of the river and a pool created from mining for gravel by the dam-building company. From their camp, Julen's camp is just a two-minute walk. While we had planned to sleep at my friend's camp, Sunu offered to prepare meals for us at their camp. During our stay on the island, Julen and Sunu's place became more than a place for meals. It became a place for discussion with them, and I got to know the passersbys who came to the river. Their house primarily catered to older men who came to set up fish traps on the island.

One evening, we were all sitting around the hearth, cooking. Gopal was roasting fish while Sunu was cutting some vegetables. Julen had just returned from his work. Meanwhile, Jugen, an older man in his eighties, came into the kitchen. He had come from a village called Takkír to set up fish traps, and said he would stay the night with the couple. The couple did not hesitate to let him stay. As I learned, Jugen has been a regular visitor to this island. A few years back, while he was younger, he used to be involved in farming, fishing, and herding cattle on these islands. Now that he is old, he just comes to the island to set up traps to catch fish. While Julen enquired whether he could catch any fish, I heard him replying in frustration about not being able to trap fish in good

quantity. I took the opportunity to converse with Jugen while introducing myself. He knew about my ancestors, my grandfather and his brothers, and my father's cousin. Jugen's familiarity with my family is a reflection of the elders' knowledge of different clans in villages along the Obonori. My conversation with Jugen lasted almost two hours. We discussed how the river was in the past and what it has become in the present. He passionately portrayed two contrasting stories of people's relationship with the river—one where there is a sense of loss of resources and suffering from floods, and another where people were drawn to live along the rivers, celebrating the abundance of access to resources. The conversation portrayed a larger picture of the Mising population suffering along the riverine tracts of Assam. While we were discussing rivers and people's relationship with the river, he sang a song lamenting the historical condition of the Misings, '*Pékam Oua, Kamdang oua, Sulli lok du:ne' Mising oua,*'. The song translates to 'O dear *Pékam* (female water crow), O dear *Kamdang* (male water crow), O dear Misings who live on *sulli* (sand).'<sup>355</sup> Living on the sand here holds an embedded meaning of barrenness and impoverishment for a larger Mising population. Jugen and his family were also victims of the flood of the 1950s. At that time, he was a school student. He recalled how their families went out to look for newer places to settle and settled in present-day Takkír around 1956. The conversation straightaway took me back to the stories told by my paternal grandfather. I vividly remember his experience of the flood. He said that after the big earthquake in 1950, the flow of the Obonori had drastically reduced. They learned that erosion in the hills had blocked the river. A few days had passed after the earthquake. It was dark and rainy. The earthquake's aftershock had not disappeared. My grandfather was walking at night while his family was asleep. He heard the deafening cries of animals and birds from a distance and the sound of the river's flow. He immediately rushed back

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<sup>355</sup> Field notes, Obonori River Island, July 19, 2021

to their house and shouted to evacuate the house. However, his grandparents were old, so they immediately made a hole in the house's roof and made them stay there. While with his brother, he climbed the bamboo groves beside their house. His parents had also come to take refuge with them. When the water reached, it was flowing below the house's roof. He exclaimed that their grandparents had escaped death; a big log the same size as their house had eroded away half of their house. He would tell us how difficult it was to access food and water after the flood. He narrated that due to the lack of relief in the initial aftermath of the flood, they had to dig out paddy buried in sediments and roast it to eat. He portrayed the struggle to find potable drinking water and the high mortality rate of the people affected by floods because of waterborne diseases. They had to look for newer places and take refuge in the houses of distant relatives.

There are numerous painful stories of the flash floods of 1950, and only a few who have experienced the event are alive. After my grandfather died, there were only two *yayos* (grandmothers) alive in Bélang who experienced the tremor. One of them was Birmoti. Conversing with her, she grieved with dread when she recalled the day of the unprecedented flood. She said, 'I have never seen floods like that. The water was as high as the sky. Our village was one of the first to be affected because our village was the first village in the plains, where the Obonori hit the plains of Assam from the hills.' She took a long pause and grieved,

You cannot imagine the fury of the river. The river carried numerous logs and debris. We could merely watch from the highland we managed to reach quickly. You cannot picture the pain of losing loved ones. I lost my little brother; the flood washed him away from the back of my elder brother. My sister and sister-in-law could not reach the highland while taking their belongings. Right now, I do not even remember the number of people our village lost. Forget about the loss of our house, paddy fields and cattle. I hope such pain

does not come to anyone.<sup>356</sup>

When asked about the episode of the flood to the older generation, the stories of the loss of family members and property loss continue to haunt them. They also recall it as an episode where it led animals and humans to share the same spaces. Arupjyoti Saikia writes that after tea, Assam had been renowned for floods in the 20th century.<sup>357</sup> Against the backdrop of settling along rivers facing recurrent floods and erosion, often many elders blame their previous generations, calling them *monbang* (fools). Jugen, reiterating the same, reminded me, ‘See the news, every time you turn on the news in the monsoon; it is the Mising that suffers from floods every year.’ I asked him, ‘Why did people stay along the river?’ He replied, ‘In the past, people valued the abundance of fish, animals, and fertile soil that the riverine tract bestowed.’ He goes on to reminisce about the river Obonori,

We filled our boats with fish by throwing our casting nets twice or thrice. In January-February, we go out to the river to fish. We catch fish by observing the fish's movements. If the fish is in deep water, we wait until it reaches the shallow part of the river. After the fish come to the shallow water, we need two to three throws of our casting nets to fill our boats. If one is greedy, one can fish until it fills the boat's brim. At times, the weight of the fish would almost drown our boats. We had to leave by making up our minds that it was enough because we could not carry back the number of fish caught.<sup>358</sup>

Similarly, when I met Soilen, a man in his seventies, on the same island, he associated the rivers with eating healthy and tasty food. He described his intimate attachment to the river, ‘Nothing

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<sup>356</sup> Field notes, Bélang, January 21, 2022.

<sup>357</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

<sup>358</sup> Field notes, River Island, July 19, 2021.

feels tastier than the food that we get from the river. The river is so fresh, and the fish is tasty. Even salt becomes tastier with the food that we get here. That is why I always came back to the river.’

He continued,

That is why we Misings continue to live along the river. Even after seasonal flooding and the big flood of the 1950s, we continue to live near the river. Our fathers told us they could eat turtles and fish if they stayed near the river. They said that fish came to their porches and could be caught easily. Although their children were against living near the river. Yet, they settled there against their will.<sup>359</sup>

The river continues to be associated with access to food and its taste. Likewise, when I met Gojen in the winter in his makeshift camp, he bragged about the fish and said, ‘We get the tastiest fish in the Obonori. I have tasted fish from the Brahmaputra and Sido Sikang, but it cannot match the taste of the fish in our river.’<sup>360</sup> Many people who stay on those islands share the same thoughts. However, the river has many other values for the people. The river is also a space for people to stay healthy and happy. People often express that they like to stay away from the village. Soilen believes that if he stays in the village, he will age quickly, whereas they remain active and healthy in the river by residing amidst nature and eating fresh fish. Soilen adds, ‘In every respect, the river is better than the village. If I stay in the river, I feel alive.’ Jugen still comes to the river to catch fish. Although the fish population has decreased, he does not give up the hope of catching fish. Jugen’s regular visits to the island speak volumes about the intricate and intimate relationship he has with the river.

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<sup>359</sup> Field notes, River Island, July 20, 2021.

<sup>360</sup> Field notes, River Island, October 29, 2022.

Against the backdrop of recurrent floods, the question of why they continue to live near rivers despite floods came up in my conversations with those I met. The stories of Jugen and Soilen provide insight into their access to resources and the suffering they endure. The floodplains were home to numerous species of plants and animals. However, the suffering and displacement of the population also engulf it. Moreover, these understandings of rivers as access to abundant resources are challenged by their precarious existence in the present time. In these narratives of the Mising elders, the state's role in fixing the community to the river continues to be overlooked in shaping the community's present relationship with the river. The relationship between the Misings and the rivers is one of simultaneous contentment and sorrow, and cannot be understood without locating the role of states that have historically led to permanently settling people in a fluid landscape. It is evident from the previous section and the previous chapter that the internal displacement and people becoming homeless and landless lie in the state's revenue-generating efforts to refashion the valley's fluid landscape. Moreover, it also lies in the increase of numerous categorisations of land, like forest reserves, grazing land, which have hindered the flood-affected population looking for a safer place to rehabilitate. The refashioning of riverine tracts has continued and accelerated with the state's efforts to control floods and optimise the region's supposed hydropower potential. The dam is built on a seismic zone and an ecologically fragile ecosystem, making people live precarious lives and affecting the river-based livelihoods.

#### **4. Competing claims over the river**

Against a historically ambivalent relationship of the people with the rivers, Obonori continues to harbour people like Jugen, Soilen, Gojen, Julen, Saab, Sunu, and Kamini, and numerous others living along the riverbank. In the context of unviable agriculture and unemployment, working on

the river is one of the means for hundreds of people along the river to socially reproduce themselves. There has been a notable increase in reliance on the river over the past two to three decades to escape poverty and unemployment. Striking a conversation with Bahadur, a middle-aged man in one village *tiniali*, he spoke about the increasing dependence on the river. He said,

Except for using the river as a route to transport logs, people never sold stone, sand and driftwood from the river until the 1990s. There was a drought in this area, and the land became unfavourable for paddy cultivation. There was no source of income, and people began to look for alternative means by engaging in the selling of boulders, stone and sand from the river.<sup>361</sup>

The logging and sale of timber along the river have been ongoing since colonial times. Upon meeting Bordola, a man in his seventies from Dirpai, he reiterated the same as Bahadur; he told me,

We were unaware that one day, we would depend on the money from mining boulders, stones, sand, driftwood, and fish. No one imagined we would buy and sell them for a living. There was no need to buy gravel and sand because there were hardly any concrete houses or infrastructure. Driftwood used to lie abundantly; no one even bothered to accumulate more than one's need. It is the same story about the fish; we did not feel the need to sell fish to make a living. Fish was sold only by poorer communities, but not the Misings.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Field notes, Rajgarh Tiniali, March 8, 2022.

<sup>362</sup> Field notes, Dirpai, September 29, 2021.

Earning from the river has become a means to make a living, especially for the poorer sections. A woman named Kangkan from Dirpai, whom I met on the same day as meeting Bordola, highlighted the importance of the river for their family's existence in the absence of farming lands. She said,

We only had homestead land. My husband started working on the river in the late 1990s. He used to be occupied to make a living by catching logs in summer, and in winter, he extracted boulders. That is how we earned money and have been able to stay away from poverty and not beg from anyone. We could also raise our children well. After working for over twenty years, my husband has left the river work and drives a tempo we bought with our hard-earned money.<sup>363</sup>

Although these individuals have relied heavily on the river for their livelihoods, their way of life is threatened by exploitative actors and state control over the river. Conflicts are common among those who depend on the river for resources. Competition for access to these river resources has intensified, particularly from wealthy businesspeople, including some from the Mising community and mostly non-Mising contractors, who operate under the auspices of the state. Thus, people's dependence on and access to the river must be located against the backdrop of the Assam FD's claims over the river. The river, where it reaches the plains of Assam, falls under the jurisdiction of the district FD of Dhemaji. The FD has legal claims over the area where Gojen, Julen, and Soilen stay. The presence of FD has challenged people's claims over the space and their access to the river. However, within these overlapping and competing claims between the FD and the people who work on the river, people have found a way to access the river.

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<sup>363</sup> Field notes, Dirpai, September 29, 2021.

Access is defined as people's ability to benefit from a thing.<sup>364</sup> The relationship between people and the FD is not a neat tussle but a complex coexistence. In many conversations, people upheld the river as a common property of people, and they asserted that they can access it whenever possible. People's claim towards the space where they stay is legitimised through what Garcia and Dijk term 'grounding claims and talking claims.'<sup>365</sup> They describe grounding claims as 'a practice of inscribing or altering the landscape with visible markers that are socially understood as conveying the notion of individual or collective property.'<sup>366</sup> On the other hand, talking claims are claims 'when speech is used strategically to make, justify and contest property and access claims.'<sup>367</sup> The people living on the river have transformed the islands into a lively space throughout the year by working on the river, carving out a space to build makeshift houses. Moreover, talking claims has been one of the most important tools for claiming over space. Many, like Jugen, Gojen, and Julen, claim they were originally from the river before the 1950s flood displaced them and had the right to the space. They also assert their Mising identity as a riverine tribe to claim over the river.

However, against a strong presence of the FD, the river did not result in the formation of individual properties of the resources. The FD holds the legal and formal power to exclude in these claim-making processes. In an interview with the Forest Beat officer on the riverbank, he said, 'We let them work in the river. It falls under our jurisdiction. We also understand that people will suffer

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<sup>364</sup> Nancy Lee Peluso and Jesse Ribot, "Postscript: A Theory of Access Revisited," *Society & Natural Resources* 33, no. 2 (2020): 300–306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2019.1709929>.

<sup>365</sup> Kronenburg García and Van Dijk, "Towards a Theory of Claim Making."

<sup>366</sup> Kronenburg García and Van Dijk, "Towards a Theory of Claim Making," 173.

<sup>367</sup> Kronenburg García and Van Dijk, "Towards a Theory of Claim Making," 173.

from poverty if we do not let them work. Most of the people are already poor.<sup>368</sup> However, the control of the FD is strict against logging and cutting trees from the forest and the hills adjacent to where Obonori meets the plains of Assam. The FD office had numerous seized logs decaying around the office, making it evident that logging from the forest is monitored. However, people can collect driftwood and mine sand and stone from the river. The reason behind this will be explored further in the following sections.

In this context of overlapping claims and control over access, the squeezed-out populations have found access to earn a livelihood in the river's existing political economy. As such, we are aware from the work of Nancy Lee Peluso and Jesse Ribot that controlling and maintaining access is rooted in social hierarchies and is relational and bound to change.<sup>369</sup> Besides the overlapping claims, the upcoming dam threatens existing access by disrupting the normal flow and increasing river sedimentation, threatening people's dependence on fish, driftwood, and the best-quality sand and gravel. The dam, though not yet commissioned, is approaching completion and is beginning to have an impact on the communities downstream that rely on the river for their livelihoods. The downstream enclosure is gradual, displacing people from their river-based livelihoods and forcing the population to live a life of anticipation, uncertainty and vulnerability. It is evident from a range of literature from across the world that highlights the negative socio-ecological impact on the river and populations dependent on rivers.<sup>370</sup> In recent years, there has also been an increase in scholarly

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<sup>368</sup> Field notes, Forest Beat Office, December 10, 2022.

<sup>369</sup> Peluso and Ribot, "Postscript."

<sup>370</sup> Baird et al., "The People and Their River, the World Bank and Its Dam"; Bakker, "The Politics of Hydropower"; Baruah, "Whose River Is It Anyway?"; Johnson, "Power and the River Lords"; McCully, *Silenced Rivers*; Soukhaphon et al., "The Impacts of Hydropower Dams in the Mekong River Basin."

work highlighting the dam's downstream impacts. A downstream study of a dam in Laos by Baird et al. points to a negative impact on the river-based livelihoods.<sup>371</sup> They found that dams increase floods downstream, leading to an adverse impact on wet rice cultivation. Moreover, they argue that it has adversely impacted fisheries and other aquatic resources, water quality, and seasonal winter vegetable farming along the riverbank in winter because of low water discharge. They further argue that the poorest populations in the downstream who depend on rivers as common natural resources are severely impacted. Similarly, the dam on Obonori is drastically altering people's perception and their dependence on the river. Since day one of my fieldwork, I have listened to their changing perception and imagination of the river in their declining access to logs, driftwood, fish, sand and gravel because of the under-construction dam. Moreover, people live in fear because of the dam construction in a seismically active area. The following sections will highlight how access to the river has been increasingly restricted by larger and more powerful entities, such as the FD, the dam, quarries, and private contractors, both from outside and within the community. This situation poses a challenge for the majority of the poorer local population that relies on the river for social reproduction.

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<sup>371</sup> Baird et al., "The People and Their River, the World Bank and Its Dam."



Figure 9: A stilt house on the island (Source: Author)



Figure 10: An under-constructed makeshift house on one of the small islands (Source: Author)

## 5. Enclosing the pathway of the floating logs and driftwood

Historically, the rivers in Assam served as the path for selling floating timber.<sup>372</sup> Saikia writes, ‘Until well into the middle of the nineteenth century, the Brahmaputra was a major carrier of timber and dead wood. The honeymoon between the river and the timber trade continued into the twentieth century.’<sup>373</sup> He writes that the timber trade came to prominence in upper Assam in the second half of the nineteenth century. With the increase in timber trade across the region, the colonial FD had set up revenue stations to check the trade flow. It also led to the formulation of the Assam River Rules in 1880 to control the private interest in the timber business.<sup>374</sup> As Saikia states, the timber business existed in large volume until the mid-20th century. However, floating timber has been a source of income for many people along the riparian tracts of Obonori, even after independence. This involvement in the timber business was prominent until the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the nationwide timber ban implemented in 1996 significantly impacted trade along the river, particularly affecting transportation to distant downstream areas. The trade still continues on a small scale in local areas. Upon meeting Bordola in Dirpai, he narrated his experience of selling logs on the river with his friends,

You see the reserve today (referring to the hill upstream of the river where the dam is built); we would pull the logs with elephants to the river. I am talking about the time before 1970, when we were in the logging business. We would pull out the logs and float them to the lower part of the river because there was no one here who would buy them due to the

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<sup>372</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

<sup>373</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*, 134.

<sup>374</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

availability of logs. People downstream of the river were deprived of valuable timber, which served to build houses. From here, we would take the timber downstream to the areas where the Obonori meets the Brahmaputra and sell for Rupees 1.50 or 2 per KB<sup>375</sup>.<sup>376</sup>

Aside from cutting down trees, most of the former loggers I spoke to relied on logs that originated from erosion in the hills of the river's upper catchment area. Heavy rainfall often leads to landslides in these regions, which means that for many loggers, the task is to wait for logs to wash down when the monsoon arrives. Upon another meeting with an ex-logger from Dirpai, he recalled his trade,

I used to earn a lot of money from floating logs, supplying them to downstream towns like Jorhat. I also supplied timber to the Gattani Plywood Industries located in Jorhat town. However, the ban on timber felling and transportation in 1996 forced us to stop supplying to the plywood industry in this business. Later, after the ban, the trade was confined to only nearby downstream areas. Furthermore, the dam's construction in the 2000s and its increasing height have drastically affected these trades by blocking the flow of the logs.

The stories narrated by Bordola and the ex-logger are in a context of the presence of the FD and the timber *mahal* (revenue checkpoints) along the river. However, they always found a way to escape these checkpoints. Floating logs were one of the safest ways to escape the clutches of the FD and state authorities.<sup>377</sup> Apart from the need to sell, people from downstream come to the hills

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<sup>375</sup> KB is a unit of measurement of timber. KB stands for thousand broad foot. 1 KB is equal to 1 feet cube.

<sup>376</sup> Field notes, Dirpai, September 29, 2021.

<sup>377</sup> See also Saikia, *The Unquiet River*. He writes that there was a failure to check the flourishing log business on the river despite efforts to control it by the British administration.

rowing their boats to procure timber to build houses. When I returned home from the river, I mentioned to my family over dinner what I had learned about logging. Recalling her natal family, my mother mentioned how her brothers were involved in procuring logs from the hills. Her natal house was built from the timber that her brothers floated through the Obonori river to their village.

At present, the dam's construction has drastically reduced access to logs and its business in the downstream areas. The business is confined to local areas. While I was living at Gojen's makeshift house, a group of loggers were camping on the river to catch the drifting logs. I could see their makeshift camps in the middle of the river on a small gravel island a little downstream from Gojen's camp. One of the camps had a yellow tarpaulin as its roof, which made it stand out and visible from at least a kilometre. I wanted to meet them, so I walked downstream and took help from a person collecting driftwood to take us to the camps on his boat. In one of these camps, I met Ménam, a middle-aged man, and his son, who was studying in the eleventh grade. He has come from a downstream village called Korok, which faces recurring floods and land erosion. He informed me that he cultivates in a small patch of land, and the rest of the land that he possesses was eroded by the river Obonori. While many in the area were occupied with planting paddy, he was waiting for logs which flowed beyond the tunnel of the under-construction dam. He had been waiting for floating logs with his 18-year-old son since the advent of the monsoon in April-May, and eagerly waited until mid-July in his makeshift camp. It has been a seasonal income for him and his family when the river swells in the monsoon season. I learned that he knew Jugen and most of the older people working on the river, showing his years of experience working there. When I asked if they could catch logs, he sighed, 'We have not been able to get a single log this year.' When I asked, 'What changed this year?' He replied,

Logs have gradually decreased over the years. This year, it is because of the lack of rainfall and the increasing height of the dam that is gradually blocking the river. Now the river is allowed to flow only through a tunnel. We are just depending on our luck to catch one good-quality log.

Meanwhile, an older man from the next camp listened to our conversation, and he could not resist speaking his thoughts about what the river had given them in the past. He said, 'I have been involved in the timber business since 1965. In the past, timber prices were very low. However, due to easy access to a large quantity of logs in the river, we could earn handsomely in a season to make our year-end.' Pointing at remnants of a concrete bridge just beside Gojen's makeshift house, he said, 'When the NHPC company came, they built a low concrete bridge connecting the other side of the river. Logs carried by the river broke that bridge.' He reminisced about the abundance of logs in the past. He said, 'Sometimes, when we floated logs to our villages along the river, people along the riverbank were awed by the large size of the logs that we caught. Right now, see, we have not been able to catch one. The dam has drastically changed our fate.' There were other groups camped beside them, whose fate had been the same as Ménam and the older man. The older man, feeling powerless, continued, 'We were all praying for extreme rainfall and swelling of the river so that the river would open. Only then would the blocked logs be flushed out beyond the under-construction dam.'<sup>378</sup> This section of people waits and expects nature to do its work. Perhaps, it is their weapon in a situation of powerlessness and precarity.

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<sup>378</sup> Field notes, Obonori river, July 20, 2021.



Figure 11: Accumulated driftwood in the river Obonori (Source: Author)



Figure 12: Driftwood lying along the river shores and a boat loaded with wood planks converted from collected logs from the river (Source: Author)

Contemporary forms of small-scale timber business in the area are now undertaken with the help of chainsaws. Since the first day I set foot on this island, I have encountered two to three groups of loggers with chainsaws. Frequently, the buzzing sound of chainsaws engulf the island every day. It has replaced the handsaw, which was used earlier by all sections. Ménam and the old man are not in possession of a chainsaw, and it has hindered their logging activities. They are in unequal competition with a section of better-off loggers with chainsaws from nearby Mising villages. In comparison to Ménam, these loggers have an upper hand in investing in a machine that costs around fifty thousand rupees. They also have funds available, enabling them to purchase logs caught by islanders. However, these individuals with chainsaws are not wealthy businesspeople, nor do they belong to the *Mahajan* families. Petty logging in the downstream areas of the dam is not deemed a profitable business for the local wealthy population. Ménam mentioned that he could not afford to buy a chainsaw as it would cost him a lot of money. He contrasted their position against these chainsaw loggers,

They are in a better position than us. They can cut the timbers in a day or two, which takes us weeks with our hand saws. They have also started buying the logs caught by residents of the islands and selling them. We do not have money; how will we buy logs caught by someone else? Our income from logging entirely depends on our luck in catching them ourselves.<sup>379</sup>

In this situation, the better-off loggers fare better. After a few days, I encountered another logger with a chainsaw. He was around the islands, asking people if they had caught any logs. Mostly, the islanders would call these groups of loggers to sell their logs. When asked about their income, he

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<sup>379</sup> Field notes, Obonori River, July 19, 2021.

replied with an estimate, ‘If we get excellent quality logs, I get more than 1 lakh in a day or two.’ Further, he tells me he had already earned seventy thousand a few days back. In light of the dam obstructing the passage of timber flow, the presence of chainsaw loggers on the river increases the vulnerability of hand-saw loggers’ access to their livelihood in the river.

Along with logs, catching driftwood (deadwood) is part of daily activities for the daily firewood needs, and a source of income from selling it. Driftwood collection is one of the many activities an individual indulges in on the river. During the monsoon, the river flushes out driftwood, which can be found along the shores of the river. When the rivers and streams swell and cause floods in these areas, I have always observed the enthusiasm of the people in the village as they collect driftwood and fish. The driftwood collected during such floods provides firewood year-round. These are some of the characteristics of floods that bring enthusiasm to people. Historically, driftwood has been a source of firewood in the Brahmaputra valley. In colonial times, in the upcoming urban centres in the Brahmaputra valley, driftwoods were sold to the town dwellers. In that context, the state introduced a regulation in 1898 against the sale of driftwood except for household consumption.<sup>380</sup> Although people were taxed for these riverine activities or criminalised for not adhering to the laws, Ritupan Goswami holds that the state could not prohibit these activities.<sup>381</sup> Communities, particularly those from lower castes, as well as peasant and tribal populations who rely on riverine activities, have consistently sought to challenge oppressive laws

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<sup>380</sup> Goswami, “Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries”; Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

<sup>381</sup> Goswami, “Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries.”

through petitions. Goswami argues that they have demonstrated resilience and shrewdness in navigating and circumventing these restrictive regulations.<sup>382</sup>

Against the historical prevalence of the sale of driftwood in the urban areas in other areas across Assam, according to oral testimonies of elders, driftwood did not have a market until recently in these areas. Testimonies of the past reveal driftwood lying along the shores of the river Obonori in abundance. About 20 years ago, in the early years of the 2000s, I have fond memories of going to the sandy shores of Obonori to collect driftwood with my family. When we felt the shortage of firewood for the winter, we went to the Obonori to stock up on firewood. We would ride on our mule cart and return after we had filled the cart. Today, tractors have replaced animal-pulled carts, so there is an increase in the accumulation and sales with the ease of transportation. Unlike in the past, during winter, it is hard to find any driftwood lying on the river shores. The business of driftwood for sale as firewood has increased over the past two decades. Nevertheless, just like the logging scene, the driftwood does not attract major wealthy business people, and it has escaped the interest of the FD in implementing existing laws to tax on driftwood.

In recent years, there has been an increasing competition in accumulating driftwood between people with capital to invest and those who depend solely on labour. In numerous visits to the river, my attention was drawn towards the stockpile of driftwood in different spots along the river. Moreover, the accumulation of driftwood is no longer confined to the riverbank. I often saw unfamiliar scenes of large amounts of accumulated driftwood in the courtyard of some people in the villages. I spoke with a man in a neighbouring village, who had accumulated driftwood. He told me about his motive to sell when the price of firewood increases in winter. He said, ‘I am

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<sup>382</sup> Goswami, “Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries.”

investing and collecting this driftwood for sale, and I am accumulating this for sale in the off-season. I buy from people who collect driftwood, and I hire people to collect it.<sup>383</sup> On several occasions, I saw multiple tractors loaded with driftwood pass by. When I inquired about them, most were for sale in the villages, and the rest were for household usage. People with tractors have the upper hand in controlling the driftwood market. The accumulated stockpiles of driftwood are stored until the price rises in the winter. In the summer season, a tractor of driftwood would cost around Rs 3500, but in the winter, it goes up to Rs 5000. In the absence of major businesspeople involved in the business, an unequal competition emerges within the local communities, mostly among the Misings. Undue competition within the community and the soon-to-be-completed dam present uncertainties for poorer sections of the community, hindering their means of livelihood and social reproduction.

## **6. The declining fish population**

Fishing is a daily activity for people living in the rural part of the region, especially along the riverine tracts. It is an essential part of the diet. However, oral testimonies and my experience of growing up in the area point towards a decrease in fish populations over the years. In this context of decreasing fish population, one can listen to the elders' past memories of having a variety of fish laden with fat and of catching fish as big as a human. These fish stories also highlight the knowledge of people about fish habitat, techniques of fishing and the best seasons to eat different kinds of fish. Furthermore, it was customary to share fish with neighbours when an individual made a particularly large catch. Moreover, fishing as an activity is more than just consumption; it is a part of living in these rural areas. It is also a community activity. In many fishing trips I have

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<sup>383</sup> Field notes, Borola village, September 21, 2021.

gone on in the past, I have experienced that it is the enthusiasm for fishing that drives people to fish in scorching sun and chilly winters. People from BÉlang and the neighbouring villages still take long trips to the remaining wetlands, which are around twenty kilometres from the village. In the past, we travelled on foot and by bicycle, leaving early in the morning. Although I was not an expert in fishing. I would accompany my elder sister walking long distances just to assist her in carrying her catch. At present, with the increasing number of vehicles in the villages, people form groups and they hire tempos to catch fish in these faraway wetlands. These fishing trips are seldom for sale; instead, they are for consumption, allowing families and friends to share the catch and prepare *namsing* (fermented fish stored in bamboo container tubes) for future use. In Assam, fishing is intertwined with seasonal festivals, particularly Magh Bihu. Magh Bihu is a harvest festival celebrated in January by various communities in Assam. This festival is closely associated with feasting. During Magh Bihu, villages participate in community fishing in the wetlands as part of the celebration. It is common to see scenes of community fishing broadcast on television and featured in newspapers. Additionally, there is a trend of showcasing the largest fish caught on news channels and in print media.

At present, access to fish for daily consumption is a thing of the past. For daily consumption, the villagers must depend on the small fish shops in the *tinialis* of the area. These shops mostly sell fish that is imported from other states in India or urban centres within Assam. Locally sourced fish from nearby rivers and streams are rare and only available in small quantities. In a conversation on fishing with one of the older ladies in BÉlang boasted about their past, saying, ‘We never sold

fish. Selling and buying fish was not necessary. Only the *Doms*<sup>384</sup> sold fish in the past.<sup>385</sup> In Assam, selling fish was associated with a lower caste occupation dominated by the *Nodiyals* and hence, the community was looked down upon and ostracised in the caste Assamese society.<sup>386</sup> Arupjyoti Saikia states that these fish communities continued to face social ostracisation until the last decades of the twentieth century.<sup>387</sup> Perhaps, influenced by this caste discrimination leading to ostracisation of the fishing community, many other communities might not have been involved in the fish business until recently.

The buying and selling of fish is a very recent development in these villages. In BÉlang, there were no fish shops two decades ago. Currently, there are three shops in the *tiniali*. This increase in the sale of fish in the village stands against the self-sufficient image of rural and Indigenous villages. Moreover, it depicts the loss of biodiversity that supports fish. In BÉlang and nearby villages, wetlands amid the paddy fields that were once fishing grounds have disappeared. Apart from big rivers, the paddy fields, the wetlands, and the streams used to be significant sources of fish for the villagers. The village's paddy fields used to be a popular fishing ground for us and neighbouring villages. However, today, it no longer holds fish like it once did. These fishing grounds have

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<sup>384</sup> *Dom* is a term that refers to a fishing community that largely inhabited the riverine tracts of the Brahmaputra. However, they refused to identify themselves as *Dom*, which was associated with social degradation within the caste Assamese society. They preferred to be called as *Nadiyals* or *Kaibartas*. See, Sharma, *Empire's Garden*; Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries."

<sup>385</sup> Field notes, BÉlang village, January 21, 2022.

<sup>386</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*; Goswami, "Rivers and History: Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries"; Sharma, *Empire's Garden*.

<sup>387</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

gradually vanished over the past three decades. The decline in fish population and the disappearance of fishing grounds in the village could be connected to the increase in sedimentation of the streams that flowed beside the villages and the paddy fields. A stream from the hills flows east of Bélang and flows through the paddy fields. Two decades ago, the stream ran deep between its banks. The riverbeds have risen drastically over the last twenty years, and now they change their course every monsoon, flooding the paddy fields and depositing heavy amounts of sediments. We see a similar scenario of heavy sedimentation in other streams across the area. The gradual sedimentation over the years has led to the loss of habitat for the fish. One main reason for the increase in sedimentation was the clearing of forests along the riverbanks and converting them into cultivable lands. The other reason is the increased felling of trees in the hills where the streams originate. Increasing deforestation along the stream in the hills often leads to erosion, and heavy rainfall washes down the sediments when the monsoon comes, turning the paddy fields and the wetlands sandy and barren. The village also has numerous rain-fed channels that run like arteries during the monsoon, which are gradually obstructed by the villagers. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that this area is ecologically fragile, where nature gradually reshapes the landscape over time.

In the context of the gradual depletion of fishing grounds, one notable outcome has been a rise in fish sales. Simultaneously, selling fish is one of the diverse ways of supplementing one's livelihood for many whom I met in the river Obonori. Therefore, in such circumstances in the villages, the river becomes a site for earning an income. Previously, Gojen would fish in the river mainly to meet their consumption needs and enjoy the savour of Obonori fish. He used to accompany his father, a regular who would come to fish only for consumption. Winter is the most popular season for fishing, as fish are believed to become tastier and fatter during this time. Thus, I had set out to

Obonori on a bright winter day in November 2021 to meet Gojen, learning that he was back at the river. Upon reaching the camp, I saw Gojen and his neighbours mending their *langis* (gill nets) under the tree beside his makeshift house. The camp had not changed much since I left the island, except for the torn blue plastic tarpaulin needing replacement. They were getting ready for the afternoon and evening fishing shifts by mending their nets. While they continued to mend, one of them had set out to set the *langi* to catch fish for lunch and told Gojen to start making the curry by boiling the *sompa* (elephant apple). The person set his gill net in the shallow part of the river just beside the camp. After a few minutes, he brought back the fish trapped in the net and asked for my help to pull out the trapped fish. While cooking, Gojen tells me, 'Fishing is what I do. I have been selling fish for over a decade. These days, I earn around Rs. 500 a day. Although it depends entirely on the catch, I earn more if I am lucky.'<sup>388</sup>

After a while, the curry was ready, and I had a delicious meal with them. They were prepared to go for their afternoon shift of fishing. Two boats were made ready, and two people rowed upstream towards the dam. I followed them, walking along the riverbank, where I could only reach a certain point. After reaching the dam, they started to drift their net, holding one end with their hands and the other with a floating object and rowing downstream. When they returned to the camp with almost half a bucket of fish, it was already evening. The catch relies on luck and their knowledge about the right fishing time. After their evening shifts, they would sleep early, wake up at 2 a.m. in the chilly morning, and head out to fish. That is the time when they find it easier to catch fish. They continue until it is 8-9 in the morning. After they return, they keep some of it for consumption and sell the rest to a local fish seller who comes to buy their catch. However, in the summer, the

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<sup>388</sup> Field notes, River Island, November 16, 2021.

process is different; they depend on traps and set the nets in designated areas. *Dirdang*, a kind of fish trap, is set in the strong currents of water, and the *Langis* are set for the night in water with lesser currents.

However, the dam's presence has worried the fisherfolk. It is evident from much scholarly work that dam building harms the fish population and affects people's food security and their source of nutrients.<sup>389</sup> It has increased the decline of the fish population in the area, Gojen angrily complained, 'The dam is destroying our way of life. The dam is destroying our souls and happiness.'<sup>390</sup> Recent work on Obonori highlights the decrease in the fish population in the river.<sup>391</sup> Gojen pointed at a shallow part of the river and said, 'This was an *ongo toli* (a fish habitat).' Pointing towards the other parts, Gojen says,

There's no more gravel on the riverbed because of increasing siltation. Even those parts were *ongo toli*. Those *ongo tolis* are gone, and we cannot fish like we used to. In the past, people could ask about their fish choices and catch whichever fish they wanted. If one asks

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<sup>389</sup> Baruah, "Whose River Is It Anyway?"; McCully, *Silenced Rivers*; Soukhaphon et al., "The Impacts of Hydropower Dams in the Mekong River Basin."

<sup>390</sup> Field notes, River Island, November 16, 2021.

<sup>391</sup> Kangkan Sarma et al., "Status of Endemic Freshwater Ichthyofauna of Lower Subansiri River Under the Threats of Dam Construction and Anthropogenic Disturbances: An Assessment," in *Aquaculture and Conservation of Inland Coldwater Fishes*, ed. Debajit Sarma et al. (Springer Nature Singapore, 2024).

for *Ngomug*<sup>392</sup>, we caught *Ngomug*, and if you needed *Ngorang*<sup>393</sup>, we could get *Ngorang*.  
Fish populations have decreased drastically, and it is because of the activities of the dam.<sup>394</sup>



Figure 13: A Person holding a *Dirdang* (Source: Author)

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<sup>392</sup> A fresh river water carp. Its scientific name is *Kuria labeo*.

<sup>393</sup> A riverine catfish. Its scientific name is *Bagarius bagarius*

<sup>394</sup> Field notes, River Island, November 16, 2021.

In a context of general fish decline in the area, Gojen continued his detestation of the dam. While narrating, he was worried about the future and the changing bio-physical characteristics of the river, ‘We will not get any fish after a few years, even for medicinal use. The sand and gravel are covered with sediments. The sand of this river used to shine; when the sun rays fell on it, it was difficult to look at with bare eyes. However, it is no longer a Subansiri but a *balisiri*<sup>395</sup>.<sup>396</sup> The term *balisiri* suggests that the river is gradually losing its ability to sustain itself, resulting in a significant decline of fish, driftwood, sand, and stones.



Figure 14: A fisherman pulling out fish from the gill net (Source: Author)

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<sup>395</sup> *Balisiri* is an Assamese word that could be translated to the river turning barren and becoming a sandy patch.

Whereas, the Assamese meaning of Subansiri is that it is a golden river.

<sup>396</sup> Field notes, River Island, November 16, 2021.

Likewise, numerous people voiced their concerns about the increase in sedimentation of the river. In a group discussion in Dirpai, one man who works at the dam complained,

The riverbed is rising yearly. The river is becoming increasingly shallow because of the coffer dams<sup>397</sup> built around the construction site to build the dam. Every year, the coffer dams get eroded when the water swells in the monsoon. Moreover, the sand gets deposited downstream of the river. If they want to build the dam, why can't they make it without a cofferdam?<sup>398</sup>

Similarly, Jugen, with his extensive experience on the river, noticed the increasing sedimentation. He said, 'Rapids like *Gayu Gagori*<sup>399</sup> and the *Gandi Tula Gagori* have vanished from the river.' He further shared his insights on why the fish population is decreasing,

There are no more stones downstream because of the increase in sedimentation. That might be the reason why the fish population has drastically reduced. Fish like *Ngopi*<sup>400</sup> and *Tingir*<sup>401</sup> lick the algae-covered stones as food. Since the rocks are covered with sand, how will the fish survive in the river? Moreover, the river is becoming contaminated due to oil spills, cement, and other polluting agents.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> Cofferdam is a temporary water-tight enclosure built around a construction site to facilitate smooth construction.

See- <https://www.britannica.com/technology/cofferdam>

<sup>398</sup> Field notes, Dirpai, January 29, 2022.

<sup>399</sup> *Gagori* is a Mising term for water rapids.

<sup>400</sup> A riverine carp. Its scientific name is *Bangana dero*.

<sup>401</sup> A kind of riverine carp fish. Its scientific name is *Garra gotyla*.

<sup>402</sup> Field notes, River Island, July 19, 2021

As the construction of the dam increased, people who once cherished the taste of Obonori's fish now complain that they find the river's fish tasteless. Jugen was one of them. He said, 'The dam had blocked the routes for the fish to travel upstream and downstream. How will these river fish be tasty when they cannot migrate?' In an encounter with a person in Bélang in October 2024, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the taste of the fish. I know him as someone who enjoys fishing, especially for seasonal fish during the winter. He mentioned, 'By October, the fish in Obonori usually start to taste good. However, what I had a few days ago tasted like tasteless meat.' When I asked him why he thought that was the case, he replied, 'I do not understand.' After a moment of thought, he added, 'I think it might be because of the dam.'<sup>403</sup>

Furthermore, the dam has created a barrier preventing people from moving from downstream Mising villages to areas upstream of the dam. They can row their boats only as far as the dam, but not beyond it. However, people from Assam who frequented the river in the past claimed that the river deep into the hills, amidst counterclaims by the communities of Arunachal Pradesh. According to numerous narratives, the claims on the river have always created minor tussles. Nevertheless, communities accessed the river from both states. Scholars argue that water boundaries differ from how we understand land boundaries and are a gray zone.<sup>404</sup> The ebbs and flows of the river change according to season, and it flows across villages, cities, and countries. Jibon (pseudonym) from Dirpai, whom I met in a group discussion, expressed his disdain for the dam, highlighting the difficulties faced in accessing upstream fishing. He said, 'Today, the dam is

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<sup>403</sup> Field notes, Bélang, October 29, 2024.

<sup>404</sup> Johnson, "Power and the River Lords."

a boundary between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.’ He further recalls their access to the upstream of the dam and said,

Whenever we had a *Ui* (a ritual revering deities) at home, we would row our boats upstream to catch the fish needed for the ceremony. The area where we used to fish is now located beyond the construction site of a dam. To reach our fishing grounds, we would row against the current of the river. On our way back downstream, we would chase the fish and catch them with our nets until we arrived back at our village. By the time we reached home, we had usually caught enough fish for the ritual. Nowadays, rowing upstream involves undergoing security checks, and the dam serves as a boundary that has hindered our movement on the river.<sup>405</sup>

The construction of the dam has significantly restricted access for downstream communities, effectively denying their established claims to the water body and obstructing their access to upstream resources.

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<sup>405</sup> Field notes, Dirpai, January 29, 2022.

## 7. The Manual miners, the Quarry, and the Dam



Figure 15: An old couple manually extracting stones from the Obonori riverbed (Source: Author)



Figure 16: Accumulated sands by manual miners (Source: Author)

‘Obonori's sand and stone are the best. There is no other river that can beat its quality.’ This is a common expression from the people from the villages downstream about the river. People take pride in describing the quality of the materials. Gojen would say, ‘The stone and the sand are so clear, the sand shines like silver when sun rays fall on it.’ I am uncertain whether this should serve as the standard for assessing the quality of sand and stone. Nevertheless, the clear, clean, shiny sand and stones are what the people claim to be the best for construction. Over these two to three decades, the demand for sand and gravel has increased because of the drastic concretisation of societies. The materials from the river fulfil the dreams of building a *pucca* (concrete) house for many families and aid the construction of mega-infrastructures like dams and bridges in this part of the region. During my stay in the field, two quarries were functioning on the river: the Manika and the Tamuly quarry (named after a lessee). The quarries buzz throughout the year except for a few months in the monsoon. At each entrance of the quarries lies the *Mahaldar*<sup>406</sup> checkpoint, which collects money from passing trucks and tractors that procure sand and gravel.

In addition, the islands claimed by the local communities are leased out by the state to the dam company to extract sand and stone needed to build the dam. The company's mining has led to the formation of deep dug-out pits across the islands. This led to the drowning of several cattle and a human, leading to detestation by the islanders. Apart from the two designated quarries, some families from villages along the riverbank called Rajgarh, Takkir, Ajar Guri, and Borola have claimed the first right of access to these plots of land since the time they started working as miners in the area adjacent to the Manika quarry. In the 1970s and 80s, the present Manika quarry area

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<sup>406</sup> *Mahaldar* is the gate keeper of the quarry. Since, the *Mahaldar* is the quarry lessee, they have right to collect money from every passing vehicle that comes to load river materials.

used to be home to ten families, who came from Bélang. In addition, the area was a *jhum* field for other families from Bélang and other neighbouring villages. However, as mentioned earlier, due to the threat from the FD and riverbank erosion, people have retreated from the river. The erosion had braided the river into many channels. In the decades of 1990s, the braided river shores and river bed became the mining area, which is today called the Manika quarry area. At present, the villages that claim the first right to mine claim these parts of the river. They based their claims on their shared history of mining and as families who came first to mine. However, these personal quarries are not visible until these braided channels dry up in the winter. There are no visible boundaries that demarcate these familial claims to the river shores. Only in winter, the boundaries become visible when families come back to reclaim the river shores and riverbeds by working in these plots. Putting labour into one's quarry is one of the ways to assert their right of access. However, these are not formal legal claims as the river falls under the control of the FD. In this process, claims of family quarries along the river have created tussles among those who claim the river as common property. It has denied access to mine to some sections within the community from the neighbouring villages.

One day, I struck up a conversation with Missong at Manika, who is from a village along the riverbank. He catches fish and collects driftwood and scrap metals that the river washes away from the dam construction site. The camp where he lived along the river was built with many scrap tin sheets, iron pipes, and other metals, showing his involvement and dependence on scrap metal. His deal with scrap metals reflects the impoverished condition of his family. By doing these varied activities, he is struggling to keep his family afloat. His trajectory to working as a manual miner is rooted in their village's inability to sustain itself from agriculture and being from a family with a highly fragmented farmland. In this context, the river became a fallback for Missong and most of

his fellow villagers. Nevertheless, they have not been able to claim a permanent spot for themselves to assert their first right of access to the sand and stones of the river despite working for many years. He protested, saying,

I have worked on this river for over 20 years. We had started to work on the river as manual miners. We continue to mine manually. However, the riverbank and the *chaporis* have overlapping claims by different actors. Individual families from the other villages along the river have claimed the first right to extract the best quality sand and stones. They had divided the river shores and the river beds amongst themselves without our consultation.

I interrupted him while he was speaking and asked him a question, ‘How did it happen? Where were you at the time they claimed over those plots?’ He replied,

When we first began mining, we did not work in this area. Instead, we mined along a small stream. This stream meets the Obonori River in the Manika area. It was only after the FD banned mining in that stream that we moved to Manika. By that time, it was already too late, as the riverbanks and riverbed had already been claimed by others.

He paused for a while and said,

The river is not their father's property but belongs to one who works on it. They sell excellent quality sand and gravel when the mining season comes. We can venture into their plots only after they have extracted the best sand and gravel. We work a lot harder. There is no guarantee that the things you mine would be yours. There have been tussles between

these families and us because we happened to mine in their plot without permission. In the past, there were instances where we were forced to return the materials we had mined.<sup>407</sup>

The tussle over resources has increased in the present times. In many cases, the people who claim over plots on the river get challenged by others driven by the idea that the river belongs to everyone. Although a form of intra-community tussle is shaped with these competing claims, the larger population working in the river faces the might of the two quarries, the dam, and wealthy businesspeople (few from the local area and mostly from other places) engaged in the extraction of materials from the river, equipped with modern earthmovers. Moreover, along with the FD, the quarry lessee and the wealthy people involved in the business stake claims over the material in the river beyond the granted mining area of 4.9 hectares in Manika Quarry.<sup>408</sup> In both quarries, the designated mining area is significantly smaller than the actual mining area in which these quarries operate. Thus, there have been recurring contests over the river between these groups of people. In these overlapping claims, as indicated by an interview with a forest officer, the FD holds the formal and legal claim over the river. Although on a small scale, the FD and the quarry lessee depend on the people's labour to create revenue from the quarry. A conversation with the Mahaldar

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<sup>407</sup> Field notes, Manika Quarry, October 5, 2021.

<sup>408</sup> According to the document that granted the quarry to the lessee, the allotted area is just 4.9 hectares and the allowed mining depth is just 3 metres. See- "Mining Plan and Progressive Mine Closure Plan for Upper Subansiri, Manika Sand and Gravel Mineral Concession Assam (Rev. Portion)". Retrieved from: <https://environmentclearance.nic.in/DownloadPfdFile.aspx?FileName=tonZTd+3xT5ImdCmuXe30gydGIGJSBa78NaaCA3OeWZlvBaKKtIBqM6G9A0ZZnANFaHd/I0UyQAs3FD/DcnLz8kVPZeiOvb5oR05not2RBphL8COFgj/O8tzAGGh6Tj&FilePath=93ZZBm8LWEXfg+HAIQix2fE2t8z/pgnoBhDIYdZCxzUIDadBGU7t8v4JoQvNU6UBISmL0YQ7WQYaxkvlQvexKO==>

of the Manika Quarry reified this point. He said, ‘In this quarry, we are all dependent on each other. The FD, people, and we work together. We are sharing the workload of extracting sand and stones. Thereby making us all earn money from the river.’<sup>409</sup>

However, in these two decades, there has been a drastic increase in modern earth-moving vehicles. Two decades ago, trucks were smaller and depended on human labour to load materials. In the early 2000s, the entire mining industry depended on manual labour. There were hardly any excavators. Today, backhoes and excavators have replaced the need for human labour to mine and load these trucks. For the *Mahaldar* and the FD, more vehicles arriving at the quarry benefits them by increasing their income. The *Mahaldar* said,

It is best if more trucks come to procure materials from the river because we earn money from every passing truck and tractor. We charge Rs. 250 for tractors, and for trucks, we charge Rs. 700. Part of it goes to the Forest Department.<sup>410</sup>

The river is open for mining, and any rich businesspeople equipped with trucks and backhoes are permitted to collect materials of their choice, provided they pay the requisite fee at the entrance. This accumulation reflects how the rich businesspeople stock up stones and sand across the riverbank and nearby villages to sell them throughout the year, despite the FD rules prohibiting it. Moreover, mining more than 3 meters deep is prohibited according to the FD's rules.<sup>411</sup> However, miners violate the prescribed law of the FD. Having a conversation with a driver of an excavator

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<sup>409</sup> Field notes, Manika, October 10, 2021.

<sup>410</sup> Field notes, Manika, January 20, 2022.

<sup>411</sup> “Mining Plan and Progressive Mine Closure Plan for Upper Subansiri, Manika Sand and Gravel Mineral Concession Assam (Rev. Portion).”

reveals the violation of the law. He confided in me, ‘I know what we are doing is illegal. Without bribing the official, these things would not have continued. I know instances where journalists are bribed not to write about the extraction process. They are not allowed to reach the quarry for investigation.’<sup>412</sup> There is a bribing economy at play. In this process of illegality, people have found a space to sell materials from the river. However, the setback is that the more affluent participants in the industry accumulate the river’s resources intended for future use, gradually dispossessing the poorer sections of the villages.



Figure 17: A scene of machine mining on the dried riverbed of Obonori in winter (Source: Author)

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<sup>412</sup> Field notes, Tamuly quarry, January 28, 2023.



Figure 18: The central stone crusher that supplies gravel for the dam construction, located on the river island (Source: Author)

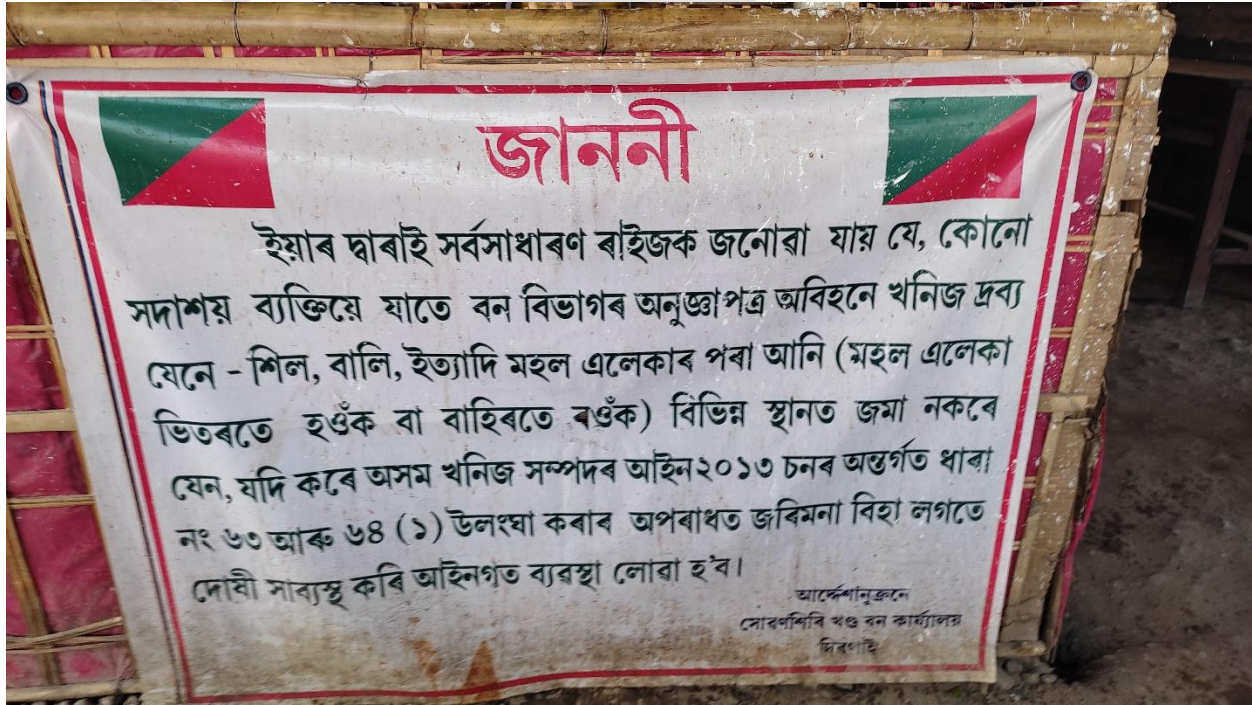


Figure 19: A poster of the FD that strictly prohibits stocking materials mined from the river (Source: Author)

During a subsequent visit to the Manika quarry during the mining season, the inequitable competition encountered by economically disadvantaged miners became increasingly evident. It was peak mining season, and the number of backhoes, excavators, and trucks had increased, creating a cloud of dust over the quarry area. The trucks traveled back and forth, making the road to the quarry particularly dusty. Moreover, as a result of the rising number of earth-moving vehicles, the main road leading to Gogamukh was also covered in dust. The number of shops that cater to the rivergoers' needs has risen to five. The bustling nature of the quarrying season has begun and continues until the monsoon comes. An increase in the mechanisation of mining stood in contrast to people who do manual mining with their labour. There are mountains of sand and gravel stacked by the mechanised miners against the small pile of boulders by the manual labourers. The villagers along the riverbank have been setting up their makeshift mining camp, and they have been reclaiming the stretch of lands that belong to them. Families claiming the first right to extract materials have started to pile up the boulders. While walking beyond the quarry area in Manika, I met London Pegu and his wife resting in the shade of a *Bogori* (jujube) tree after lunch. I could see their accumulated gravel beside the riverbank. I asked if they were able to sell their accumulated stones. London replied,

Right now, we cannot sell whatever we have mined because the buyers buy from backhoe owners, since they can sell it cheaper than we can. This year, I have not sold even once. We are waiting for the buyers to buy from us, but they say our stuff is expensive. Moreover, the backhoes come and mine beyond the boundary of the quarry. They mine our plots when we are not here. There have been many cases where we could not save our plots. Look at that edge near the river's main course. They have dug many pools there. They have also destroyed

the grazing grounds for the cattle. Gradually, because of machine mining, the erosion of the river increased.<sup>413</sup>

Similarly, Ascar, a man in his thirties, whom I met a month later, reiterated the issues London raised. I have been acquainted with Ascar because he is a friend's friend. He is involved in deep river boulder mining with the help of boats. While he was returning from the river, I asked him if everything was all right at work. With a sigh, he said, 'Nothing is going our way. They do not want to buy the boulders we extract, but prefer buying from the people with excavators. They are willing to sell them at lower prices than us.'<sup>414</sup> Many people have been unable to sell their accumulated stones, which are left in several small piles in the plots they claim. A decade ago, oral testimonies indicate that people could sell according to their wishes. The people of Dirpai worked on the river and supplied sand and stones elsewhere. It was their wish, and they had control over their supply networks. Many would hire trucks or tempos to supply sand and gravel to other areas. For instance, Missong proudly stated, 'We provided boulders for the construction of the Bogibeel Bridge, one of the longest bridges on the Brahmaputra River.'<sup>415</sup> Likewise, there were many manual miners who reminisced about their independent days of supplying material from the river to other areas.

Besides the increase in machines, there is a presence of *dalals* (intermediaries) in the river, which has taken away their independent functioning. These *dalals* are not outsiders, but they are mostly from the same villages along the riverbanks, who are from relatively wealthy families and from the same community. They have larger plots of claimed areas in the river than the rest of the people

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<sup>413</sup> Field notes, Manika, January 20, 2022.

<sup>414</sup> Field notes, Mohoricamp, February 22, 2022.

<sup>415</sup> Field notes, Manika, October 5, 2021.

working there. Moreover, the manual miners informed that they are likely to lease out their property to a rich person in business who wants to be engaged in mining. The *dalals* have the connection to sell the people's extract soon. Now, poorer sections of the community are bound to function through the *dalals*. The precariousness of depending on the river for a daily wage forces the people to sell their produce rather than stock up for days. *Dalals* are accused of buying their produce at lower prices and selling it to buyers at higher prices. The price fluctuates according to the wishes of the *dalals*. Potoi, a middle-aged man from a village along the river sitting at his makeshift camp a few metres from where I met London. He said, 'They want to buy stone for Rs. 2000 for a truck. Some are willing to buy for Rs. 2500, and some for Rs. 2200. Whom should we believe? We do not want to sell the stones at those prices.' The people's businesses depend on the intermediaries' whims. Potoi continued to express the sad state of the affairs of the manual miners. He said,

We do not get any profit after so much hard work. The people who have connections can easily reap the profits. It is like I work for them rather than working for myself. They earn more money than us even after sitting idle. They have money. That is how they dominate us. We must depend on them; otherwise, our extracts will remain unsold.<sup>416</sup>

The discussions I had with the people on the river often reminded me of a past where they had control over their supply. Within an intricate co-existence, the poorer section has been making a living by engaging and protesting the more prominent actors. Many manual miners told me that they have always stood against the incoming machines. Although they have not been quite successful in denying the incursion of the machine, they have constantly pressured these newer

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<sup>416</sup> Field notes, Manika, January 20, 2022.

actors with the support of local-level Mising organisations like TMPK and village-level organisations. However, the dam is nearing completion, which has a significant impact on the availability of sand and stones in the area. Many residents have expressed concerns about how they will cope with the loss once the dam becomes operational. They believe that the substantial increase in machine mining by the quarry and dam company in recent years has already drastically reduced the available sand and stones. Recently, people have stated that with the news of the completion of the dam, there will soon be no sand and stones suitable for sale, leading to the potential displacement of residents. The construction of the dam has intensified resource competition, greatly affecting local communities, dispossessing them of their source of livelihood. Missong grieved, saying,

With this income from the river, we are making a living. However, the quality of sand and stones is deteriorating because of the dam, and it has also become less because of mechanised mining. No fresh stones and sand will be left after the river stops flowing at its current pace. It will all be useless sediments rather than sand and stone that could be sold.

Where will we work after the river is gone?<sup>417</sup>

The shiny and clear sand and stone reproduced with the river's flow are drastically reduced due to the blockage of the river's natural flow. Several people working on the river have pointed out the deteriorating quality of sand and stones covered with sediments. The dam directly impacts the longevity of the river's ability to support the population along the river, driving the people to more insecure informal wage labour. People are gradually moving away from the river, and this retreat is accelerating because the dam significantly reduces the river's ability to sustain the community.

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<sup>417</sup> Field notes, Manika, October 5, 2021.

## 8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have laid out the position of the Misings as a 'riverine tribe' and their dynamic relationship with the rivers. The chapter attempts to understand how rivers shape relationships and perceptions about them. Rivers have been a source of suffering and access to enough resources to sustain riverine populations, especially for the Misings. The first part of the chapter locates the historical background of state efforts to control the river and the riverine populations to generate revenue. Besides the state's control and commodification of the river, the people also become a part of it and have been involved in businesses that have flourished in these riverine tracts historically. Bringing together the various past and present narratives, the chapter illustrates the gradual process of enclosing the river by different powerful stakeholders claiming their right over it in extracting the resources from the river.

Amidst the presence of powerful actors, the river has become a space for earning a livelihood and fighting poverty for villagers in a crisis of social reproduction. The presence of different powerful actors has constantly challenged the existence of the poorer sections along the river up to the present day. Besides the presence of the state and wealthy businesspeople, the competition also comes from fellow community members, which is rooted in the internal differentiation in society. However, amidst these competing claims, people have found a space to earn in an unequal term. Against this backdrop of unequal competition, the entry of the dam has drastically increased the vulnerability and uncertainty of the river-based livelihoods. The dam not only challenges the social reproduction of this area's population based on river-based livelihoods but also the reproduction capabilities of the river itself. This drastic enclosure by the dam challenges the little space people

have negotiated in the river space. Consequently, the population that is already facing uncertainties is being driven further into greater uncertainty.



## Chapter 4

### The Hills: A Fallback

#### 1. Introduction

‘I am amazed how your village sustains itself without engaging in agriculture throughout the year,’ a friend remarked when he learned about how B élang sustains itself. People of B élang and the larger Mingmang area cultivate just once a year. For the rest of the year, they leave their agricultural land fallow. In comparison, my friend's village cultivates crops throughout the year. They are away from the hills in a village further downstream of Obonori. In response to his curiosity, I said, ‘See, we have the hills. The hills provide support to the people, especially for the poor and landless population.’<sup>418</sup> The hills are around 1.5 km north of B élang. It is located within the overlapping claimed area of the SRF and Arunachal Pradesh, although there is no clearly defined boundary line between the two states (See Fig.5). Since the 1990s, many people who cannot rely solely on farming have turned to the hills as their workspace and source of income, despite being in the SRF and the undemarcated border. Against the backdrop of unviable agricultural practices, land fragmentation, unemployment, and a lack of opportunities for migration to reclaim new land, the forest resources in the hills have all the more become a vital means of sustenance for many Mising villages situated along the foothills. A majority of the village population of these foothill villages has been dependent on the sale of timber procured from the hills. For instance, Susen also worked as a logger in the hills, making a living in the early 2000s

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<sup>418</sup> Field notes, Gogamukh, October 29, 2021.

before he became a *headmistry*. This reflects the overlapping claims on the reserved forest and historical negotiations with the state in accessing these enclosed spaces.<sup>419</sup>

The increase in dependence on the hills also lies in the permanent agrarian expansion that depleted the forest resources around the village. People in the village have reclaimed every inch of the de-reserved forest. In light of the scarcity of forest resources in the immediate surroundings of the village, the hills have become essential. They serve not only as a source of income but also as a means to meet daily consumption needs, providing food, firewood, materials for building houses, and raw materials that support their cultural and ritual practices. However, currently, Susen and many elders in the village reminded me about the depletion of the valuable timber in the hills due to logging over three decades. The phrase ‘there is nothing in the hills anymore’ is a common expression. Over-dependence on the forest as a source of income and for daily consumption has gradually depleted its resources in the last few years. The degradation is not necessarily done by larger actors or wealthy families from the village, but by the people who have been dependent on the hills to fulfil the increasing demands of social reproduction. These types of ecological degradations are often attributed to local people's failure to adopt sustainable practices. However, Piers Blaikie points to the fact that these ecological degradations are not in isolation but lie in a variety of factors such as internal differentiation, land regimes and larger political economy.<sup>420</sup>

Despite narratives of degradation, the hills remain a source of income for those dependent on logging, as well as providing raw materials such as food and firewood for consumption. However,

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<sup>419</sup> See also, Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*.

<sup>420</sup> Piers M. Blaikie, *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*, Longman Development Studies (Longman, 1985).

in recent years, the undemarcated interstate border of Assam- Arunachal Pradesh has threatened people's access to the hills. In this region, redrawing of boundaries between states has created tussles between communities along the borders, leading to disputes over resources.<sup>421</sup> Hence, the majority of people dependent on the hills from Béalang and neighbouring areas from Assam have been protesting a road built along the hills from east to west connecting two villages of Lower Siang District in Arunachal Pradesh, Likabali, and Durpai, along the foothills.<sup>422</sup> The proposed road is anticipated to delineate an ambiguous boundary between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, potentially restricting access for villagers from Assam to the hills and affecting their claims over these areas. In these contexts of overlapping claims by different actors and stakeholders, the chapter draws attention to the people's assertions of the forest resources as a CPR. Moreover, the chapter tries to delve into how this new infrastructure reconfigures their relationship with the hills and their lives amidst agrarian crises and joblessness.

## **2. If it were not for the hills**

For the villagers of Béalang and other neighbouring villages, the hills had served as ground for shifting cultivation since their resettlement from the river in the 1950s. This practice had resulted in many families from the village claiming the lands that fell under SRF. However, many families did not retain the land they cleared in the hills due to its infertility and its location in a reserve forest. Apart from the individual claim to lands in the hills, a large part of the hills was left as commons for the Mising villages along the border. They have also retained some part of the hills

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<sup>421</sup> Hazarika and Kipgen, "Can the Borderland Speak?"

<sup>422</sup> Likabali serves as the headquarters of the Lower Siang district, located in the foothills near the Assam border. Durpai is the westernmost village in the district, situated along this border. The road connects the villages of Lower Siang District along the foothills, stretching from Likabali to Durpai.

as a common grazing tract for the village. However, the claim over the hills as commons has an overlapping claim with a village called Sogum and other villages that belong to Arunachal Pradesh. Both villages, along with a few neighbouring villages, claim the hills based on their settlement after migrating to the area in the 1950s. The villages belonging to Arunachal Pradesh along the foothills acknowledge the claim of the Mising villages based on their history of migrating to the space when the state borders were not well-defined. However, in this foothill region, this type of overlapping claims might not exist where the border is well defined. The news of the rural road built across the hills in 2019 had brought resentment to the Mising villages of the Mingmang panchayat from Assam along the border. The Mising villages feared that the Arunachal Pradesh state's infrastructure presence in these borders would curtail their right to access the forest resources, which have been an important supplement of income and raw materials for the villages.<sup>423</sup> However, during fieldwork in 2021, the protest had been confined to only two villages, Bélang and its neighbouring village called Bodoti. Furthermore, even in these villages, a certain section of the population within the village opposed the protest against the road. There has been detestation and distrust within families and kin within the two villages, which will be explored in the later sections.

Amidst the ongoing protest, in a *Ui* (a ritual to revere local deities) held at my home, I found an opportunity to talk with the people gathered for the ritual about the hills in the backdrop of the ongoing protest against the road built by the Arunachal Pradesh government along the hills. I asked the group of people, 'What are the hills to us?' This question became more significant than ever

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<sup>423</sup> Amar Sagno, "Assam, Arunachal Sign Historic MoU to Settle Boundary Issue | The Arunachal Times," *The Arunachal Times*, April 22, 2023, <https://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2023/04/22/assam-arunachal-sign-historic-mou-to-settle-boundary-issue/>.

when the hills accessed and claimed by the Misings of Assam were about to fall under the state of Arunachal Pradesh. The eldest one of them, named Dupor, said, '*Adi témamilo ngoluk tani singap yai,*' which translates to: our people would have died if the hills had not existed. He added, 'A decade back, even I depended on petty logging to sustain my family.' He confirmed his statements with the people beside him by asking them, 'Is there anyone in the village who is not dependent on the hills?' One of them said, 'It is true.'<sup>424</sup> The hills have supported the population in sustaining the livelihoods of poorer sections of the village at a time of unemployment, increasing landlessness, and fragmentation of land.

Moreover, the increasing dependence on the hills also depicts the gradual depletion of resources in the village that are required for daily consumption and housebuilding raw materials. Villagers have reclaimed the forested spaces around the village over the years due to population increase and land pressure. There has been a drastic change in the village landscape over the past 70 years since its settlement after the 1950s flood. Oral testimonies by the village elders from Bélang hint at the change from an impenetrable rainforest with an abundance of flora and fauna to becoming a settled village practising permanent agriculture, depleting the forest resources. Until two decades ago, there were forested patches of land in the village. One day, I struck up a conversation with *Yayo Pokpoli*, who had come to visit my grandmother. Along with her, my grandmother and father was also involved in the discussion. This discussion led to talking about the past and how things have changed over the years. Their imagination of the past resonates with an impenetrable forest and an inaccessible past of the village. Pokpoli said, 'When I married into this village, no one could leave our houses in the evening because of wild animals. It is not like now. When the

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<sup>424</sup> Field notes, Bélang, January 21, 2022.

darkness falls, there will be dead silence in the village.’ She further added, ‘There were no proper roads. It would take us a whole day to visit and come back from Gogamukh, which is just 10 kilometres away.’ Listening to her narratives, my grandmother recalls, ‘Forget about going out. I used to be scared of wild boars that ran below the stilts of our houses at night. Sometimes I used to have sleepless nights.’ My father then intervened, describing the dense forest and their belief in the presence of deities in these forests, ‘At night, we could listen to *époms* merrymaking in the jungles near our houses. They used to have fun like us humans.’<sup>425</sup> According to Mising beliefs, *époms* are spirits that live in the tallest trees near villages. They are believed to take away young children and mould them into becoming *mibus* (shamans).<sup>426</sup> *Mibus* can chant the *Abangs* (rhapsodic chants about the past and creation of the universe) and possess unique powers that could see the root causes of sickness and issues in society.<sup>427</sup> They can also connect to the *Ui a:mong*, the realm of spirits. Currently, there is no room for *époms* in the village; perhaps one can assume there are no more *Mibus* in Mising villages across Assam. Moreover, the decline of *Mibus* within the Misings could be contextualised in the proselytisation of the Misings by the Neo-Vashnavite satras. However, pursuing the decline of *mibus* is beyond the scope of this chapter.

While turning our attention to the transformation of the village, at present, as evident from the earlier chapters, it has settled and increasing numbers of families have reclaimed every inch of the land. In two decades, the village, which was surrounded by some forest, has been cleared for paddy fields. The depletion of forest resources in the village is alarming. In recent years, the residents of Béléang have encountered significant challenges in sourcing adequate bamboo from the village for

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<sup>425</sup> Field notes, Béléang, October 10, 2021.

<sup>426</sup> Tabu Taid, ed., *Mising Folk Tales*, Indian Literature in Oral Languages (Sahitya Akademi, 2013).

<sup>427</sup> Taid, *Mising Folk Tales*.

the construction of their *murong ukum* (community hall). Each year, the village reconstructs the *murong* during the *Ali-A:yé-Lígang* festival. During the reconstruction, they must obtain raw materials from the hills, while any materials not available in the hills are purchased from other places.

Currently, the only remaining forested areas in the village are found in the backyards of individual households, which are fenced off. There are no longer any forest areas in the village that can be accessed or claimed as common property. In this reclamation of land, the only forested spaces remaining are in the hills. Pokpoli thus recalls that they could avail themselves of most of the resources needed for their existence from around the village. Today, for the squeezed-out population, supplementing one's livelihood depends on materials procured from the hills. Largely, the majority of the villagers go to the hills for varied purposes - collecting medicinal herbs, foraging for food, collecting firewood, and commercial logging on an individual scale. Moreover, when paddy cultivation depletes the pastures during the planting season, the hills become a harbour for cattle grazing. While other villages away from the hills face a shortage of pasture for cattle, Bélang and its neighbouring villages along the foothills have ample grazing land available. Historically, fixing a community as a *ryot*, while denying access to forested space, highlights that a village cannot be self-sufficient. People must rely on forest resources that are under forest classified as reserve forest and that fall on a disputed border between two states.

Apart from the daily dependence on the hills, forests are essential in sustaining people's cultural and spiritual beliefs. The hills play a significant role in the preparation for feasts and rituals like *dodgang*. It is an occasion when a family bids farewell to the spirits of the deceased. The feast lasts three days and takes a long time to prepare. For families with limited resources, meeting the financial needs of the *dodgang* can take years. Aside from saving money, people need to depend

on the hills to fulfil various needs for the ritual. In these rituals, people rely on the hills for foraging herbs for making *épop* (yeast), gathering *Kamro ékkam* (phrynium pubinerve),<sup>428</sup> collecting vegetables and procuring firewood.



Figure 20: Fresh yeast (Source: Author)

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<sup>428</sup> *Kamro ékkam* is a missing name of leaves called *Phrynium pubinerve* (scientific name), also commonly known as packing leaves in English. Apart from daily usages, the leaves have a cultural significance for the Misings and several other tribes in Northeast India.



Figure 21: Women carrying procured firewood from the hills (source: author)



Figure 22: Scene of brewing *apong* in a *dodgang* (source: author)

In early 2022, we celebrated the *dodgang* of my late grandfather, who passed away in 2020. My parents had been saving money for the feast. Apart from saving, they reared pigs for the event. My mother had been preparing for the *dodgang* three months before the event. Amongst the significant ones is the making of the sacred *apong* (alcoholic drink made with rice). Without *apong*, no *dodgang* or rituals would be successful. She had already done her part of invoking *rigbo* (collective labouring practice) to collect the herbs from the hills needed for making *épop* (yeast) to make

*apong* for the *dodgang*. She received the help of her women friends in the village, who were good at foraging herbs from the hills. She was confident that the *épop* would turn the *apong* delicious, as intended. *Apong* is essential for those Misings who practice traditional rituals. The spirits are offered *apong* as a sign of respect, and it must be served to the people attending the *dodgang*. Families take pride in making the best *apong* and preparing it in massive quantities in *dodgangs*. My family had settled for five quintals of rice for *apong*. People often judge the success of *dodgang* based on the taste of the *apong*. They express dissatisfaction if the *apong* tastes bad. The taste of the *apong* depends on the quality of the *épop*, the quality of which relies on the herbs procured from the hills.

People living away from the hills underscore the superior quality of *apong* produced in the foothills, attributed to the better quality of yeast derived from their access to the hills. Many claim that the *apong* of Béléang is one of the best because of the herbs obtained from the hills. People boast that our village's *apong* is better than many other villages. It is usually a discussion about *apong* after every *dodgang*. On my grandfather's *dodgang* day, the *apong* prepared for the occasion was excellent. I could overhear conversations about the taste and the colour, which turned out red, just like whiskey. A few days later, Gopal and one of my friends from the village had gone to another village to attend a *dodgang*, and I met them when they were back in the village. I asked, 'How was the *dodgang*?' Both replied, 'It was good. However, the *apong* was not great.' Gopal continued, 'The taste is not like the taste of *apong* in our village. Our *apong* is always the best.'<sup>429</sup> Such claims around the *apong* of Béléang and nearby villages are rooted in their access to the hills and forests and their knowledge of the herbs that make the *apong* better.

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<sup>429</sup> Field notes, Béléang, February 27, 2022.



Figure 23: A scene of foraging *Kamro ékkam* (source: author)

Apart from other essentials, *Kamro ékkam* plays a significant role in people's rituals and beliefs. The leaves are essential in storing the *apong* during its fermentation process because of their durability. It is also the most preferred and valued leaf in any ritual. When translated into English, *Kamro ékkam* would be 'real leaf.' Families take pride in being able to serve food to guests on a *Kamro ékkam*. At my grandfather's *dodgang*, my family decided to serve the guests on leaves rather than plastic disposable plates. This privilege is, again, rooted in those with access to the forest. People from faraway Mising villages would also come to forage for the leaves in the hills whenever the leaves are needed for feasts. I would get calls from my friends and distant relatives whenever they were to hold a feast or a ritual and needed the leaves. During my fieldwork, I foraged three times for my distant relatives, each for the marriage ceremonies of my cousins. In recent times, rice wrapped in *Kamro ékkam*, called *tupula bhaat*, has become common in restaurants in Guwahati and other urban areas. *Tupula bhat* has become a way to attract customers and promise the aesthetic of an 'authentic' tribal platter. The leaves travelling from rural corners

to these urban areas speak volumes about the value assigned to the leaves. Using these leaves can be a selling point for restaurant owners, but they also carry and resonate with the assertion of the Indigenous identities of the region.

### **3. Starting one's own logging business**

The statement used by Dupor to describe the relation of people with the hills is not only confined to daily dependence and upholding cultural beliefs. He also referred to the people's commercial economic dependence on the forest through logging. He mentioned that he was involved in logging in the hills in the 1990s. It would be flawed to assume that the people of Bélang or other tribes in Northeast India depend on the hills only for their daily needs. Numerous writings exist about the tribal population and their commercial dependence on and exploitation of forest resources. There are multiple examples of tribes or Indigenous populations involved in large-scale forest transformations across the world.<sup>430</sup> In exploring humans' relationship with nature, Bengt G. Karlsson writes, 'Environmental history alerts us to how human societies have reshaped and co-evolved with their natural landscape, a history of human engagements in nature that seems to have left no place "undisturbed".'<sup>431</sup> As Vinita Damodaran would also argue, 'Nature was not "out there" but was a lived relationship for local communities.'<sup>432</sup> Before attributing specific narratives to Indigenous populations, such as framing them as either having a romantic connection with nature

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<sup>430</sup> Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*; Li, "Indigeneity, Capitalism, and the Management of Dispossession"; Haripriya Rangan, *Of Myths and Movements: Rewriting Chipko into Himalayan History* (VERSO, 2000).

<sup>431</sup> Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*, 84.

<sup>432</sup> Vinita Damodaran, "Indigenous Forest: Rights, Discourses, and Resistance in Chotanagpur, 1860-2002," in *Ecological Nationalism: Nature, Livelihoods and Identities in South Asia*, ed. Gunnel Cederlöf and K. Sivaramakrishnan (Permanent Black, 2012), 118.

or as contributors to its depletion, it is essential to carefully consider the Indigenous people's complex and dynamic relationship with the state and the broader political economy.<sup>433</sup> Falling into believing these tropes would be an oversimplification of the historical and material process that a community goes through under the influence of the broader political economy.

In the context of tribal communities of the NER or elsewhere, while considering people's relationship with the forest, one must consider the unequal and intricate power relationship between the community and the state, internal differentiation within communities and the role of the larger political economy since colonial times. Additionally, when Indigenous communities assert their rights over resources, it does not necessarily always reflect their conservation ethos, but it might point towards their willingness to assert their claim based on their need to exploit the resources and improve their lives.<sup>434</sup> Thomas Laine's work on Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh and Karlsson's work on Meghalaya show that, along with the state, the tribal communities also have a fundamental role in the depletion of forest resources.<sup>435</sup> The NER was one of the highest raw materials suppliers for forest-based industries until the Supreme Court of India banned the timber business in 1996.<sup>436</sup> The *Mahajan* families from my fieldwork area during the 1970s and 1980s became a part of the timber industry proliferating in the hilly neighbouring states. More than ten

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<sup>433</sup> See also, Blaikie, *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*; Rangan, *Of Myths and Movements*.

<sup>434</sup> McDuaie-Ra and Kikon, "Tribal Communities and Coal in Northeast India"; Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*; Rangan, *Of Myths and Movements*.

<sup>435</sup> Laine, "Effects of the 1996 Timber Ban in Northeast India: The Case of the Khamtis of Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh"; Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*.

<sup>436</sup> Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*; Nongbri, "Timber Ban in North-East India."

elephants from Bélang and neighbouring villages were involved in logging activities in the nearby hilly states. I have known the stories of these families engaged in logging since childhood. There are hardly three or four people left who were directly involved in the timber industry in the village and could tell me the stories. One was *Baboi* Talom, whom I introduced in the earlier chapter. One day, towards the end of the fieldwork, I went to meet him. He was busy mending the fence of his house. After I explained why I was there, he said, ‘All right, but I can only talk briefly about the past. We can continue some other day while I work.’ I agreed to his conditions. He said, ‘The stories that I am going to speak about are things of the past, when there were many rich people in the village. We used to take our elephants to Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. We have logged in Mokokchung and Mon districts in Nagaland a few times.’ I interrupted and asked, ‘Who were the people who hired you?’ He replied,

We used to work under Marwaris, who were involved in the logging business in Nagaland. They used to buy timber from local Naga tribes at an exceptionally low price and sell it at higher prices. In Arunachal Pradesh, we used to work in the West Siang district under the Galo elites. Our work was to pull out the logs from the hills to the place where the logs were accumulated.

Meanwhile, I asked him if he could estimate the amounts they earned from logging. He replied,

You cannot imagine the amount of money we earned at those times. People from here would earn a sack full of money. During the logging season in Nagaland, the average income was sixty thousand rupees, which was big money at that time. From what I

remember, in Arunachal Pradesh, we used to earn around thirty to forty thousand per logging season.<sup>437</sup>

Pointing out how his family used income from timber to educate his siblings and cousins, he said, ‘As a result, my siblings have attended good schools and colleges in urban centres.’ He also enlightened me on the accumulation of wealth by the elephant owners of the area, ‘With us, your aunt’s (my father's sister) family was also involved in logging. With the money he had earned from the business, he could buy lands in Gogamukh.’ My aunt’s family was one of the wealthiest families known in the area, with one of the most extensive landholdings in Gogamukh from the money earned from logging. I remember her speaking of the past when she said they would lend money to the Bihari intermediaries in the village. Further, Talom tells an exciting story about a man from a few villages away from Bélang. He said, ‘Imagine the amount of money one earns from the timber industry. A man started a school with the money he earned. During the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)<sup>438</sup> regime in Assam, he could regularise the school and became its headmaster.’<sup>439</sup> These transactions reflect how the tribal elites accumulated wealth in those decades from timber businesses and further invested in other sectors that increased their wealth. However, when considered within the broader political economy, they also operated within unequal power relations with the influential business class engaged in the timber industry.

However, the remaining villagers in Bélang or the villages of the Mingmang panchayat were not involved in this type of logging business until the last decades of the 20th century, except for the

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<sup>437</sup> Field notes, Bélang, December 20, 2023.

<sup>438</sup> Asom Gana Parishad is a regional political party from Assam. It had come to form government twice in Assam in 1985 and 1996.

<sup>439</sup> Field notes, Bélang, December 20, 2023.

already existing timber floating on the river. When a blanket ban affected the rich and poorer rural population across Northeast India,<sup>440</sup> the poorer section of the villages in my fieldwork area found refuge in a very localised timber business. The blanket ban had a negative impact on affluent Mising families, leading some of them to sell their elephants. Most people in Bélang, except for a few individuals like Julen, Upen, Gojen, and his friends, have sought refuge in the hills. The following paragraphs explore the role of small-scale logging in sustaining a living in a time of low paddy production, upholding the social reproduction of many families in the village and of neighbouring villages. Engaging in a discussion on logging in the hills with Susen, he shared his estimate of the number of people working in the timber industry. He said, ‘In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it would be wrong not to assume that more than 90% of people have at least worked in timber-related activities.’<sup>441</sup> Logging was on a smaller scale, different from the commercial logging with elephants. The work was primarily for subsistence and seasonal work, such as finding a place to work after planting and harvesting paddy. People would leave for the hills for months, stocking up on *potika* (country liquor), biscuits, tea, *biris* (a small cigarette rolled in leaves or paper), tobacco, and a sack of rice and other daily needs. Most of the time, they would buy these items on credit, with the assurance that they would return the money when they returned to the village. They would spend months cutting down logs and transforming them into wood planks using hand saws and axes.

Towards the end of 2022, I went out looking for Susen because I wanted him to accompany me to talk to people in timber businesses. He was eager to help because he knew people who worked on

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<sup>440</sup> See, Nongbri, “Timber Ban in North-East India”; Laine, “Effects of the 1996 Timber Ban in Northeast India: The Case of the Khamtis of Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh.”

<sup>441</sup> Field notes, Bélang, November 10, 2022.

the hill. The villagers had finished harvesting their paddy. It was the time of the year when you find the senior population in the village *tiniali* spending most of their day sitting around a fire or taking sun baths. We met a group of middle-aged people making bamboo walls for their houses. Meanwhile, Susen jumped in to assist them. Some people passing by stopped for a while and gave them a helping hand. While he was helping them, I started the conversation on the timber business in the village. When I initiated the discussion, the people there said they were all involved in the business. One of them was Dewan, Rahul's father, who runs a meat shop at the centre of the *tiniali*. He does not remember when he started dealing with the logging business. He found refuge in the hills after he started his own family when he married. After recalling and discussing with the other men, he said, 'It must have been around the early 1990s. I cannot remember the exact year.' The other person, another middle-aged person, recalled his engagement in timber-related activities by highlighting the price of timbers, 'I started working when one KB of timber cost Rs. 35 and left work when the price rose to Rs. 350.' Dewan recalled, 'I supplied the required timber to the newly built Gogamukh College. We used to carry those logs by *thela* or *ghura gari*<sup>442</sup>, and then they were replaced by a cycle. One loads the cycle and sells them in the urban areas today.'<sup>443</sup> These transitions to logging mark the increase of land pressure and population in the village and the unviability of permanent settled agriculture. Additionally, this group noted that the dependency on the forest for commercial purposes grew due to the rising demand for timber in urban areas like Gogamukh, which was rapidly developing. Historically, as also evident from the river chapter,

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<sup>442</sup> *Thela* is a hand-cart used to transport goods. *Ghura gari* is a mule cart.

<sup>443</sup> Field notes, Bélang *tiniali*, December 28, 2022.

timber had minimal market value in the local area, as there was no one to buy timber because of its availability in the forest.

The manual logging process involves three distinct groups of people. The first groups are called *korotiyal*. They go deep into the hills, involved in felling trees and converting them into wooden planks on a *daran*. A *daran* is an elevated platform where people load the logs and cut them into planks with a saw. These *korotiyals* spend months logging and forming groups of three to four, consisting of family members and friends. The other group is the *dulai* people. The act of carrying and transporting timbers is called *dulai*. People involved in this activity trek the treacherous hills and carry down the wooden planks to the plains, where the third group of people proceed forward for sale. The third group is the people who sell the timber, called *ising dukne*<sup>444</sup>. They are the ones who demand the need for timber, and according to the demand, the *korotiyals* and the *dulai* group of people work. The three works are interdependent.

These works in the hills became a safety net for the majority of families in Bêlang and neighbouring villages. In the early years of the 2000s, Susen married Pulpuli, separated from his joint family, and started a nuclear family with only one *pura* of land. He found refuge in logging as a *korotiyal* before becoming a *mistry* (construction worker). While talking to him, he takes me back to the past days when most of the male members in the village had been involved in timber-related activities. Susen and I went thrice to the hills to forage *Kamro ékkam*. These trips to forage leaves in the hills revealed his years of experience in the hills, which is his impressive ability to trek uphill, along with his extensive knowledge of the surrounding hills. His expertise in navigating the challenging terrain while wearing flip-flop sandals has truly been remarkable. I found it

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<sup>444</sup> *Ising dukne* is a Mising term for people who ride cycles loaded with timbers to sell.

difficult to match his pace; it is plausible that he could surpass even professional trekkers equipped with the best gear. Throughout our journey on the narrow trails, he would take the time to share insights about the areas where work has been conducted and where various camps have been established. He also did not shy away from bragging about his abilities in the hills. He has many stories of camaraderie working with many people in the village. Sometimes, he gets nostalgic about his work. Nevertheless, despite all the good memories, working in the hills is always accompanied by hardships and precarity. He also disclosed the other side of the picture to me. He said,

Being a *korotiyal* is a daunting task. When the timber season starts after the monsoon, we work in groups of three or four in one *daran*. Many *darans* are set up in the closer vicinity by fellow villagers. It was like staying in our village as neighbours. Sometimes, I miss those days. When we cut down a tree, the collective efforts of everyone in the immediate vicinity are needed to load it up in a position where we can cut it with our handsaws. Working in the hills required collaborative work. Moreover, transforming the log into wood planks took us around a month. The *korotiyals* depended on reciprocity. The work is also unsafe, and many people get injured.

Being curious, I asked, ‘How much was your average income in a season?’ He replied, ‘I used to earn around fifteen thousand in a season on average. However, our work was unpredictable; we stopped working when it rained and worked mostly during the winter. It has been more than nine years since I left working in the hills.’ ‘Why did you leave the work?’ I asked. He said, ‘Timber had become rare to be found in the nearer distance, and to have matured and good timber, and we had to set our camps deeper into the hills, which were impossible for us to procure. Moreover, the entry of chainsaws also gradually replaced us.’

The people I talked to in the village of *tiniali* have the same opinion as Susen's. Whoever I talked to in the village highlighted that the valuable timber has been depleted in the hills. Moreover, Susen continued, 'Machines have changed the work scenario and replaced the people in the hills. Work that took us a month only takes a few days. A single person with a machine can do the work of three people. We could not continue competing against the machine.' I asked him, 'Why can't you get yourself a chainsaw? He replied, 'It is expensive. It is around forty to fifty thousand. I cannot afford to buy one.' He then teasingly said, 'If you buy me one, I can return to work in the hills.'<sup>445</sup>

The entry of chainsaws had reconfigured the nature of manual work in the hills. It has replaced the *korotiyals*. The limitations that nature and the terrain of the hills brought on the *korotiyals* do not apply to the chainsaw owners. Susen said,

Manual sawing limits the cutting of trees, but not the chainsaws. It can cut down a tree on a sloppy slope, which was previously impossible to do manually. You just need to fuel the machines. There is also no need to make *daran* because they can saw the logs wherever they want, even on a stiff slope. Even harsh weather conditions do not affect the work. Hence, we had to gradually take refuge in construction work. We were lucky that the construction works were gradually proliferating across the area.<sup>446</sup>

Moreover, the reciprocity amongst people that existed during manual sawing times no longer exists. Today, the work of felling trees and converting them to wood planks has become more individualistic. Villagers also accused the chainsaw owners of cutting down immature trees, which manual loggers would have avoided since it was not worth their effort or time to cut down such

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<sup>445</sup> Field notes, Bélang, December 29, 2022.

<sup>446</sup> Field notes, Bélang, December 29, 2022.

trees. People acknowledge that chainsaws deplete the forest faster than hand saws. However, there is no open antagonism against the chainsaw owners. To my question why there is no antagonism against the people using chainsaws, Susen replies, ‘What can I do about it? They are our fellow villagers; they could afford to buy chainsaws, but I could not.’<sup>447</sup> The chainsaw owners are not necessarily wealthy, nor do they belong to the *Mahajan* families. The *Mahajan* family no longer meddle in this ‘trivial’ business. They are into grassroots politics and contractors, and government jobs. Here, the villagers’ knitted relationship with each other overshadows their concerns about the depletion of the forest. Although there has been a realisation of the effects of chainsaws on forest resources, it has never turned into a hostile relationship of challenging them. If one raises these issues of ecological degradation, there are chances of severing the relationship between families and their source of income. For instance, while doing rounds in the hills, I almost ended up severing a relationship with a logger. I came across two people who do logging with chainsaws, who were buying alcohol from a shop on the edge of Sogum village. One of them was the owner of the chainsaw. I was discussing with the chainsaw owner whether any valuable trees were left, and talking about planting trees to sustain the future. The other person somehow felt offended by my statements. He interrupted our conversation and said, ‘We cannot deplete the forest. The forest grows on its own.’ I replied, ‘Yeah, I agree with you, but the reality is different today. Everyone is implying that there are no more valuable trees. Therefore, I insist that we plant more trees for future use. I do not mean otherwise,’ He replied, ‘If I stop doing timber-related activities, who will run my family? I have children, who will feed them? I cannot step away from working in the forest.’ The loss of forests is not as alarming as it seems, despite some concerns about the scarcity of valuable timber and other forest products. While individuals recognise the depletion of forest

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<sup>447</sup> Field notes, Bélang, December 29, 2022.

resources, their socioeconomic positions may impede their ability to engage in conversations about conservation efforts.

Although the entry of chainsaws has dispossessed the *korotiyals*, the work of *dulai* is still significant, since the chainsaw owners need them as their carriers. *Dulai* work or anything related to carrying down of logs was mostly done by those who were the poorest of the population. They leave early in the morning and return carrying down the timber at noon. The wage depends on how much they carry and the distance covered. Waiting near the spot where they drop the timbers in the foothills, the people engaging in *dulai* always look worn out and sweaty. Over 20 families in Bélang still depend on the gruelling work of Rs. 300 to Rs. 400 a day. However, if they work extra, defying their weariness of their body, they could earn around Rs. 1000. At present, owing to depletion of timbers in the hills, many people who engage in *dulai* have shifted their workplace to other hill ranges under the control of villagers of Arunachal Pradesh.



Figure 24: A person carrying timber on his bicycle (source: author)



Figure 25: A scene of people doing *dulai* (Source: Author)



Figure 26: People involved in the *dulai* resting on wood planks (Source: Author)

The other group are the *ising dukné*, who sell the timber to the urban areas. They hold a more advantageous position compared to the other sections in the village. They possess the financial resources necessary to invest in purchasing wooden planks sourced from the hills, harvested by the *korotiyals*. Bicycles carrying timbers to Gogamukh are a common sight in the morning, and that is the time they escape the FD checkpoints. Selling timber by bicycle has been around for two decades. Currently, the number of people has reduced because of work opportunities in construction and the depletion of timber in the hills. A few years back, many people were sellers from Bélang. Only two sellers are in the village now. Among them is Rudro (pseudonym), a middle-aged man who has been selling timber for around twenty years. He has six brothers and two sisters. The ten *puras* (13.22 acres) of land owned by his father have been divided amongst

them, with hardly more than a *pura* of land each. After getting married, he branched out from his joint family and set his path to becoming a timber seller in Gogamukh. The first time I went for a conversation, Rudro was busy mending the fencing of their kitchen garden. He welcomed me and made me sit in their courtyard. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, I asked him, 'Did you go to sell timber today?' 'No,' he said, 'These days, we are not regular like we were earlier.' He then called his wife to come out. Both of them were curious about my visit and asked me why I had visited them. Taking a seat on a chair on the lawn, I told them that I wanted to know about their timber business's impact on their lives. He instantly replied, 'Whatever you can see is through the money earned from being involved in the timber business.' I then asked him about his land holdings. He replied, 'You already know about the number of siblings I have. When I separated from the family to start a family, I was given more than a *pura* of land from my father's ten *puras*. I have five *puras* of land now, which I purchased from our fellow villagers.' His wife joined the conversation by adding to the discussion on the increase in landholding. She said, 'We bought the lands with the money earned from the hills. Without it, we could not have increased our landholdings or been able to educate our children.'<sup>448</sup> The family has two daughters and one son. The daughters received their college education in Gogamukh, while the son attended the best school in the area. Recently, he completed his higher secondary education in science at a private college in one of the largest urban centres in the eastern part of Assam's Brahmaputra Valley. Rudro has been able to educate his children and build a decent house. Considering his current condition, it prompts reflection on whether he would have achieved the life he enjoys today had it not been for the hills. When I asked him what has been changing with the business over the years, he exclusively mentioned, 'In the present day, you already know the chainsaw owners. The chainsaw

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<sup>448</sup> Field notes, Bélang, December 13, 2022.

owners have challenged the three-tier work. They no longer depend on us to sell timber. They stock up on timber and sell it by transporting it with small pickup trucks. Indeed, our business is going down presently, but we are still dependent on it.' He paused, offered *tamul* to me, and then continued speaking, 'You already know the road built by the Arunachal Pradesh government along the hills. It has been bringing an uncertain future over the control of the hills.'<sup>449</sup>

#### 4. Competing claims over the hills

The hills have been under contention by counterclaims and overlapping claims of the people, the FD of Assam, and an undemarcated border between the state of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, leading to a tussle. It falls under the SRF, which has existed since the formation of the reserve forest in various parts of Assam during colonial times. Historically, within these overlapping claims by powerful state actors, tribal communities and Assamese peasants have been able to negotiate with the existing regime in expanding their agrarian acreage as well as reclaiming the forested space when they had lost land in floods and erosion.<sup>450</sup> Moreover, in the 20th century, against a forest conservation discourse, Arupjyoti Saikia writes that the legislative discourse of Assam had allowed customary practices like grazing, shifting cultivation and resettlement of population in the reserve forest.<sup>451</sup> Nevertheless, owing to stronger forest laws promoting conservation in the 1980s, political leaders' attitudes gradually shifted from viewing reserve forests as areas for agricultural expansion to recognising them as spaces for conservation.<sup>452</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> Field notes, Bélang, December 13, 2022.

<sup>450</sup> Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*.

<sup>451</sup> Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*.

<sup>452</sup> Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*.

Amidst this increasing pressure, the FD has historically carried out evictions of the villages on the northern side of the road that cuts across the Mingmang panchayat. Half of Bélang village, along with the Jengrai and Rupoi in Assam and Sogum in Arunachal Pradesh, fall under SRF. These villages faced their first eviction in 1972, which led to the demolition of a few houses. Due to resistance from the people, support from Mising community leaders, they have kept the threat of eviction at bay. After a few years in the early 2000s, FD made another attempt to evict the villages, irrespective of the village, which claimed to belong to Assam or Arunachal Pradesh. I remember families taking refuge in the southern part of Bélang when the FD carried out evictions in the early 2000s. Families from Jengrai and Rupoi had taken refuge in acquaintances' houses in Bélang after they dismantled their houses by themselves. Even families from the villages of Arunachal Pradesh took refuge in the houses of acquaintances in villages in Assam. My family had sheltered a small tea planter's family from Jengrai for a few days. They had brought hundreds of tea saplings along with their belongings. One of the tea saplings had grown into a large tea tree, serving as a reminder of the eviction period before it was cut down a few years ago. After that phase, people returned to their village. Even this time, the villages resisted eviction. The pressure from the affected families, Mising organisations and the state of Arunachal Pradesh supporting the villages has led to weakening of the rules of the reserve forest in terms of exclusion of human activities within its boundary.

Despite the FD's eviction threats and making its presence felt, people continued to access and assert their right to access the hills. Being involved in a localised timber business, and claiming the hills could be contextualised in asserting claims over government forests. It points to a complex existence between the FD and the villages. The involvement of villagers in the timber business

speaks about the community's elusiveness in accessing the forest despite the presence of the state. When discussing the presence of the forest officials on the hill, Rudro said,

They seize our timber when they catch us carrying timber to Gogamukh. Forest officials have seized many bicycles and timber in the past. So, we started cycling around 2-3 am to escape the forest officials. We take shortcuts to avoid checking points. It never stopped us from trading. We have been able to manage it till today.<sup>453</sup>

Similarly, many villagers revealed that the forest officials rarely came to the hills and tried to catch the *korotiyals*. The presence of officials in the forest is meagre. When I asked a few people in the village if they knew the hills the people claimed were under the control of the FD, the answers were always no, despite the eviction drive in the past. In contrast, people have always claimed that the hills belong to them. In people's widespread consensus, they do not recognise the hill as a reserve forest. Therefore, except for a few getting caught in selling timber to the town and a few raids in the past, there is no restriction on people accessing the hills.

The overlapping claim of this area makes an interesting case of people's relationship with the FD. The relationship between the FD and rural communities is complex and nuanced, characterised by a lack of clear dichotomy between antagonism and amicability. This intricacy suggests that interactions may vary significantly depending on circumstantial factors. Furthermore, it is important to note that scholars contend that the execution of laws and policies can differ significantly in practice. Sudha Vasan states, 'It is a process influenced and mediated by perceptions, attitudes, and compulsion of multiple stakeholders, including implementers and

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<sup>453</sup> Field notes, Bélang, December 13, 2022.

beneficiaries.<sup>454</sup> Amid ongoing negotiations, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 had relieved some villages residing in the SRF. Scholars observe that this Act has resulted from years of resistance by the communities inhabiting the forested spaces.<sup>455</sup> Under Section 4 of the Act, villages within the SRF have been granted land occupation certificates under the forest. However, people do not have ownership rights over the land, which is not transferable. Moreover, granting occupancy rights does not translate to recognition of the commercial dependence of the hills. Despite the narrative of degradation of the resources in the hills, it is an important source of income for the people squeezed out of agriculture. This important legislation, effective since 2008, seeks to correct the historical injustices forest dwellers face by recognising their rights to forest land, resources, and the management and conservation of these areas.<sup>456</sup> However, there is a considerable discrepancy and ambiguity in implementing the FRA across Assam.<sup>457</sup> For instance, villages that fall under the Protected Areas in Assam are devoid of the rights granted by the FRA,

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<sup>454</sup> Sudha Vasan, "Ethnography of the Forest Guard: Contrasting Discourses, Conflicting Roles and Policy Implementation," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 40 (2002): 4125. See also Rangan, *Of Myths and Movements*.

<sup>455</sup> Eleonora Fanari, "Relocation from Protected Areas as a Violent Process in the Recent History of Biodiversity Conservation in India," *Ecology, Economy and Society—the INSEE Journal* 2, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.37773/ees.v2i1.55>; Joëlle Smadja, "A Chronicle of Law Implementation in Environmental Conflicts: The Case of Kaziranga National Park in Assam (North-East India)," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, no. 17 (March 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.4422>.

<sup>456</sup> Eleonora Fanari and Neema Pathak Broome, "The Status of the Forest Rights Act in Protected Areas of India," *The Indian Journal of Social Work* 80, no. 4 (2019): 461, <https://doi.org/10.32444/ijsw.2019.80.4.461-476>.

<sup>457</sup> Fanari, "Relocation from Protected Areas as a Violent Process in the Recent History of Biodiversity Conservation in India"; Kumarjeeb Pegu, "Assamese Tribal and the Forest Rights Manifesting, or Is It? A Socio-Legal Investigation," in *Proceedings of the World Anthropology Congress 2023 (WAC 2023)*, ed. Tulishree Pradhan et al., vol. 821, *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* (Atlantis Press SARL, 2023).

where the Indigenous communities continue to face eviction from their habitat.<sup>458</sup> Hence, Eleonora Fanari states that the FRA is ‘a legal protection only on paper.’<sup>459</sup>

Compared to other protected areas in the region, despite being legally excluded from accessing the forested space, the people of Mingmang have been able to negotiate and successfully access the hills. These negotiations and assertions of their right to forest resources have helped a large section of people to reproduce themselves. Besides, the villages of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in this foothill area have been sharing the hills based on an undemarcated border and mutual respect between communities from both sides. However, this sharing of hills might not be reflected in other parts of the Arunachal and Assam border, which has a well-defined border. There have been numerous clashes between the FD of Assam and Arunachal villagers, who claim the forest resources along the undefined borders.<sup>460</sup> The construction of a road that ought to establish the border, challenging the undemarcated nature of the area, has resulted in increasing tensions between the villages in this foothill region.

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<sup>458</sup> Fanari, “Relocation from Protected Areas as a Violent Process in the Recent History of Biodiversity Conservation in India”; Pegu and Pegu, *The Conservation Discourse in Assam Must Consider a Sustainable Rehabilitation Plan for the Mising Tribe* | *Economic and Political Weekly*; Pegu, “Assamese Tribal and the Forest Rights Manifesting, or Is It?”; Smadja, “A Chronicle of Law Implementation in Environmental Conflicts.”

<sup>459</sup> Fanari, “Relocation from Protected Areas as a Violent Process in the Recent History of Biodiversity Conservation in India.”

<sup>460</sup> Hazarika and Kipgen, “Can the Borderland Speak?”

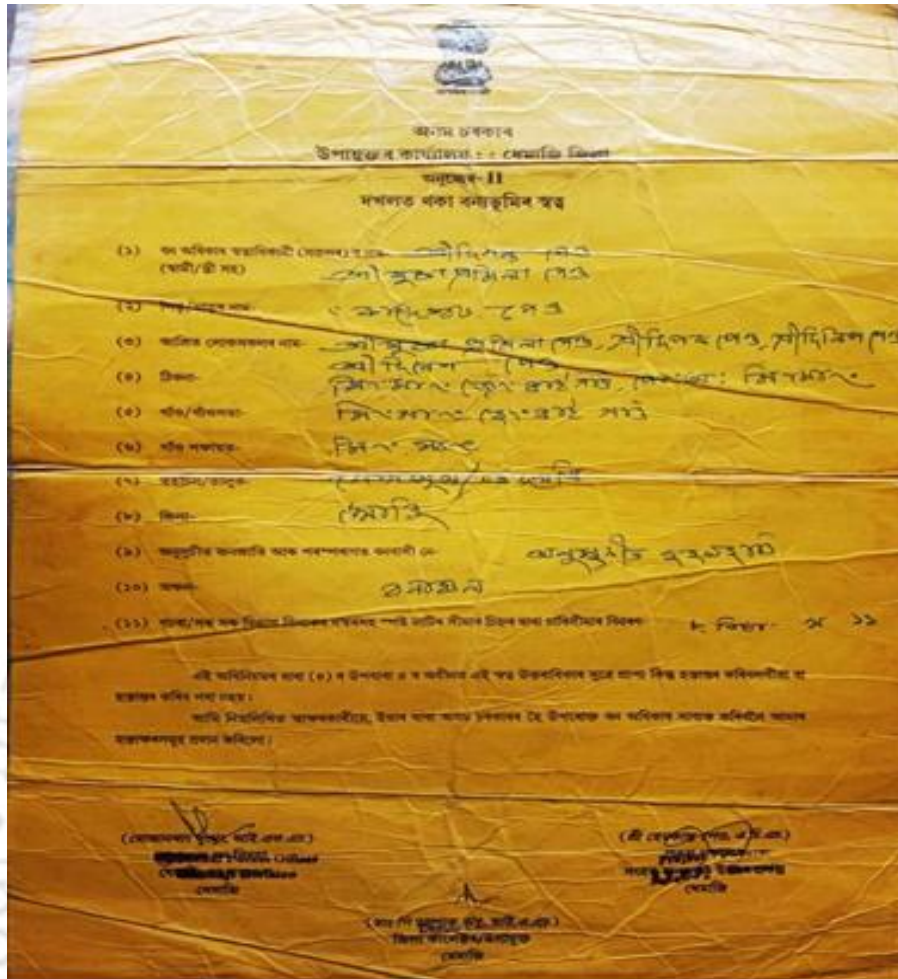


Figure 27: A land document granting occupancy rights in the SRF under the FRA (source: author)

## 5. Tani Brotherhood vs Defending a Reserve Forest

The matter of interstate borders presents a complex and often debated issue within the Northeastern states. There has consistently been significant news coverage regarding violence, territorial disputes, and competition for resources, which has extensively permeated both social and mass media platforms in the region. Villagers from Bélang and nearby villages, who depend on the hills, have protested against the road that connects Likabali to Durpai village in the Lower Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. This road runs through the hills that the Mising villagers from Assam claim as their own. As a result of these protests, the construction of the road has been halted, escalating

the situation into an interstate border conflict.<sup>461</sup> The protest started in 2019. A group of men from Béléang went up to the road under construction and demolished labour camps. The primary concern among the community pertains to their access to the hills. There is a widely held belief that the road currently under construction poses a threat to this access. In the initial phase, the movement gained traction across the villages within the Mingmang Panchayat.

However, the Mising organisations like TMPK had refrained from supporting the cause. Historically, these organisations have been vocal in securing land rights of the Mising community. In this context, the rationale behind the Mising organisations and the leadership for not supporting the cause of the people is based on the notion of the Tani fraternity and a nation.<sup>462</sup> A discourse of the greater Tani brotherhood has become apparent in recent decades. There has been an effort between the tribes to bring back their 'lost' relations, divided by state borders. The Adi-Mising Bané Kébang (AMBK), a joint body of Adi and Mising tribes, has been at the forefront. Another organisation, the Galo-Mising Coordination Committee (GMCC), was formed to restore the lost relationship between Galos and Misings in 2010.<sup>463</sup> The GMCC has been instrumental in the construction and redrawing of the border on this road. The promotion of the Tani brotherhood

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<sup>461</sup> Hazarika and Kipgen, "Can the Borderland Speak?"

<sup>462</sup> In recent years, various tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, including the Misings, have made significant efforts to promote their unity as "Tanis." The Adis, Nyishis, Galos, Tagin, Apatani, and Misings are grouped together as part of the Tani community based on their cultural and linguistic similarities. Additionally, there have been numerous initiatives aimed at fostering goodwill among tribes across the border. One such example is the Adi-Mising Bané Kébang, a joint effort that promotes unity and addresses the issues faced by the Adis and Misings.

<sup>463</sup> "Galo-Mising Coordination Committee Constituted," Archive, *The Assam Tribune*, September 15, 2010, <https://assamtribune.com/galo-mising-coordination-committee-constituted>.

became apparent from the speech delivered by one of the prominent Mising leaders in a program organised for *Mopin*<sup>464</sup> celebration in a Galo village, Hime, situated under the Lower Siang District on the border, a few kilometres east of Bélang. In his speech, he committed to assisting with the peaceful construction of the road. In his speech, he invoked that Galos and Misings are from the same roots and that there will be support from the Mising organisations to construct the road peacefully. Against this backdrop, this whole process also reflects the present Assam and Arunachal government's policy of demarcating boundaries in all non-demarcated borders, in which the Mising leadership have become instrumental.<sup>465</sup> Furthermore, the Mising leadership also asserts that despite this incoming of the road, the villages of Assam will still be able to access the hills without any issues based on the Tani brotherhood.

Despite these claims of the Mising organisations, the question remains whether the boundary's demarcation ensures the existing relationship between the people of Bélang and the hills. The tension stems from the Inner Line Permit (ILP) requirements for Arunachal Pradesh, which restrict access of outsiders claiming ownership over lands and properties that fall under the state.<sup>466</sup> Upon meeting a group of protestors of the movement, a middle-aged man from Bélang, Kaling (pseudonym), says, 'I understand what the Mising leadership stands for. They are promoting brotherhood, but does the law promote fraternity? Why are we not allowed to enter Arunachal Pradesh without a permit? If we are brothers, we should be allowed to enter without a pass.' Listening to Kaling speak, a woman protestor named Doksiri (pseudonym) said, 'In the Jonai area,

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<sup>464</sup> *Mopin* is an agricultural festival celebrated by the Galos.

<sup>465</sup> Sagno, "Assam, Arunachal Sign Historic MoU to Settle Boundary Issue | The Arunachal Times."

<sup>466</sup> Inner Line Permit is a document issued to any person to travel into a protected state for a certain period of time. For any citizen of India to enter Arunachal Pradesh, an Inner Line Permit is required.

we have heard where the border is being demarcated, and not a single leaf can be taken from the hills. One must pay for every forest resource. We are afraid even our areas will become like that if the road is built and the border is demarcated.’ Doksiri's concern is shared by others in the protest. They often cited the incidents at the borders where the Misings were not allowed to enter the forests of Arunachal Pradesh. Joining the conversation, another woman said with anger, ‘See, the Mising leaders have sold our hills. How can we stop the construction without their support? We are rendered helpless.’ Amidst this conversation, Sabitri (pseudonym), Kaling's wife, passionately explained, ‘The hills are like an essential organ for our village. If we are dispossessed, we will suffer from poverty, and there will be increasing social nuisances like theft in the village.’ She further said, ‘I do not need to explain the condition of the village to you. You are already aware. Most of us are dependent on the hills. What will happen to us who are dependent on the hills daily?’ Another woman leader joined the conversation, ‘At present, people have found some form of refuge by working in the dam, but what about when the dam construction is over? Everyone will come back to work in the hills. Our future is dark.’<sup>467</sup> The larger Tani discourse that the Mising organisations have promoted is overshadowed by the constitutional mechanism that curtails the people from the plains from accessing the hills. This highlights the disconnect between the real-life experiences of grassroots communities and the interests of Indigenous organisations. While these organisations claim to represent Indigenous peoples, they do not always align with the socio-economic realities and needs of the communities they serve.<sup>468</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> Field notes, Bélang, March 12, 2022.

<sup>468</sup> See, Maaker, “On the Nature of Indigenous Land: Ownership, Access, and Farming in Upland Northeast India”; Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*.

Due to the lack of support, the protest was limited to BÉlang and a neighbouring village called Bodoti, located to the east of BÉlang. This situation resulted in a denunciation of the Mising organisations. The movement established an alliance with the political parties that the Mising organisations had opposed. In the most recent Assam Legislative Assembly election in 2021, the villagers chose to vote for the parties that promised to support their claims and provide access to the hills. These border issues have prompted various opposition political parties, such as the Indian National Congress and Rajgor Dal, to campaign against the candidate supported by the Mising organisations. However, the election result did not favour the interests of the people, as the Mising organisations-backed candidate won the elections. Moreover, the alliance with opposition parties has disrupted the existing consensus within the village. Including the affluent families, most families with alliances with the Mising organisations hesitated to participate in the protest. I found myself on the opposite side of the protestors, as my family belongs to a section that supports the Mising organisations. Consequently, the movement had become fragmented, reflecting the diverse political affiliations of the community members. This situation highlights the challenging reality of political divisions that exist in a community traditionally known for its unity. These divisions often extend into familial relationships as well. It is important to note that such fragmentation is not a recent development; it tends to surface prominently during national and grassroots elections, revealing the clear division based on party affiliations.



Figure 28: Women protesting the under-construction road (source: author)

By 2022, the movement was significantly weakened. Only women played a vital role in the movement under the banner of Mingmang Mahila Samiti (Mingmang Women Committee), with only a few men participating in the protest. In asking why the men were absent, a woman leader said, ‘Most men have given up because the authorities target them, and they cannot move away from being breadwinners. In the initial period, two male leaders from the village were targeted and put in jail. That is why we have been bound to take the lead role.’ Individuals such as Susen encourage their spouses to engage in the movement, as they are unable to participate directly in the case due to financial constraints. Susen remarked, ‘If I do not work, who will provide for my family?’ Even Kaling, who is an important figure in the movement, said, ‘I cannot dedicate my entire time to the protest because I cannot afford to sustain my family if I do not work.’<sup>469</sup> Similarly,

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<sup>469</sup> Field notes, Bélang, April 22, 2022.

other men in the village have not been actively involved.<sup>470</sup> Without the support of political organisations, the movement almost seemed crippled. Despite the hurdles, the people of Bélang, especially the poorer sections and those from the neighbouring village, continued to fight for the hills.

As events unfolded, the weakening of resistance transformed the protesters opposing the road into defenders of Assam's territorial land. Kaling articulated a concern regarding the Mising leadership, stating, 'The Mising leadership has failed to defend the land of Assam, which rightfully belongs to us. It is regrettable that they did not assert their position more effectively.'<sup>471</sup> In their claims regarding the hills and the land under the jurisdiction of the Assam Forest Department, the protesters utilised Google Maps and a map of the SRF. This situation represents a unique instance of ecological nationalism, where they invoked the boundaries of the reserve forest to substantiate their claims over the hills, despite their historical conflicts with the FD.<sup>472</sup> The movement of the people not only sought to advocate for access to resources but also inadvertently played a role in delineating boundaries for the state. In a context of a lack of support from community organisations, the momentum of the movement diminished, resulting in the completion of the road construction by the end of 2023. Nevertheless, amidst these protests and asserting the right to access the hills, the construction of the road had refashioned people's existing notion of the hills. The next section delves into this refashioning of the values assigned to the hills.

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<sup>470</sup> Women are also involved in earning from wage income, mainly from agricultural wage activities which is seasonal. However, men in the village does every day *hajira* to sustain a family.

<sup>471</sup> Fieldnotes, Bélang, Conversation, April 22, 2022.

<sup>472</sup> To further explore Ecological Nationalism, Gunnel Cederlöf and K. Sivaramakrishnan, eds., *Ecological Nationalisms: Nature, Livelihoods, and Identities in South Asia* (Permanent Black, 2012).

## 6. Unlocking Opportunities

Against a struggle to socially reproduce oneself, the road construction has brought conflicting reactions. On the one hand, it brought resistance owing to the fear of loss of access to the hills. On the other hand, it gave opportunities to improve the lives of protesting and non-protesting villagers. Scholars argue that roads are not just material forms but also foster the belief of transforming space by promising economic connectivity and opportunities.<sup>473</sup> The road's entry suddenly rendered the land valuable and investible.<sup>474</sup> Amidst the protest, the government of Arunachal Pradesh provided compensation to landowners for the land acquired for road construction projects. The compensation is based on the recognition of the Mising people's ownership of the lands in the hills, although it also falls in the reserve forest, where people do not have any legal claims. Amid the overlapping claims between the FD and the state of Arunachal Pradesh, the formal laws of the reserved forest do not apply. The claim of the Mising villagers to the land in the hills is recognised, and they ought to be compensated when the road is built by the Arunachal government. This act of compensation from the road signifies the politics of claim over the area and rejects the presence of the reserve forest.

Despite a strong sentiment of not letting the road be built, many Mising families from Bélang and neighbouring villages have seen it as an opportunity to improve their living conditions with the money earned from the compensation. With the road increasing the value of land in the hills, it had opened up opportunities and led people to reclaim the lands abandoned by their parents or kept

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<sup>473</sup> Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox, "The Enchantments of Infrastructure," *Mobilities* 7, no. 4 (2012): 521–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2012.718935>.

<sup>474</sup>To have a further understanding of making land investible see, Li, "What Is Land?"; Li, "Rendering Land Investible."

unused by many of them without nurturing and working the land. Until recently, only a few families from Bélang had strong claims to their individual plots of land, while the other villagers had abandoned theirs, despite having cleared the land in the hills at one time. They are guided by the stories of their elders, who recall past efforts to clear these neglected plots. It has also led to a tussle within families and between families in their reclamation of land from the village.

While I was conducting fieldwork, one of my cousins came to our house. He had come to inform us that they were reclaiming their land from a family that their grandparents had offered to needy migrant populations. He also insisted that our family claim our land, which lies next to theirs. My cousin has been insisting on the importance of the land because the road passes beside it. He said, 'The village is getting overcrowded now. The land is conveniently located and can be used as a homestead and for cattle rearing.'<sup>475</sup> My family was hesitant to reclaim land occupied by another family for over twenty years. The claims are based on people's oral narratives and their recognition that these lands were cleared by our families. A family can challenge an occupied tract based on these recognitions by the villagers. In this manner, many families had reclaimed their lands, dispossessing the existing people who lived on the land by invoking that they had initially cleared the land. In the process, there have been tussles over land between the families who cleared it and the families who occupy it at present.

In one case, a family in Bélang reclaimed a large portion of land in the hills. However, the claim created discomfort for extended families because only one family claimed the land, excluding their cousins. One of the extended family members said 'Yeah, they are the older family, and that is why they have claimed over the land in the hills. It was everyone's effort to clear the forest. My father,

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<sup>475</sup> Field notes, Bélang, October 10, 2022.

not them, cleared the forest. However, since their father was older than my father, they claimed the land as theirs.<sup>476</sup> The dissatisfaction is kept hidden to avoid creating divisions within the family. The WhatsApp group of the *Dolung Kébang* (the village council) of Bélang bears the testimony of the tussles. Recently, a family raised concerns regarding Susen's family, alleging that they had not got their share of the land despite the collaborative efforts made in clearing the forest. Due to the complaint, the *Kébang* called a meeting, and Susen's family had to share a *bigha* (0.62 acres) of land in the hills. I have encountered numerous cases of tussles over the land on the hill because the road has rendered the land investible and valuable.

Even before the construction of the road started, in the past 7-8 years, the value of the hills has increased against the backdrop of tourism prospects. The waterfall deep in the hills has become a tourist hotspot. The area attracts tourists mostly in the summer. Waterfall-goers crowd the area on sunny days, weekends, or any national holiday. The importance of the waterfall as a tourist spot can be traced back to 2017-2018. Earlier, except for locals from the area, there would be no one to visit. Nevertheless, it has opened avenues for numerous people, fundamentally the poorer section of the population of the Mising villages. People saw future opportunities to run shops that would cater to the needs of the tourists. It also led to the clearing of forests along the path to the waterfall. There are many new spots cleared to set up shops. This also led many families of Bélang to reclaim the land that their parents once cleared a few decades ago for cultivation. For instance, the entrance of Sogum village had unused plots of land covered by shrubs. Since childhood, we have seen this plot of land as not belonging to any family, but a family began to reclaim the land and converted the land into food stalls. This family also rented out the land to other families to run similar kinds

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<sup>476</sup> Field notes, Bélang, December 2, 2022.

of shops. It is an opportunity for the family to sustain when they have no agricultural land except their homestead land and the land in the hills. During a meeting with the oldest male member of the family, Tapa, who is in his fifties, recalled that even their family had farming land, which they sold to cover medical expenses to save one of their siblings' lives. Now they are left with only the homestead land and the land in the hills.

Likewise, two unemployed young men from Bélang were selling beer at the entrance of the waterfall to earn some extra money. One is an undergraduate college student, while the other is involved in local panchayat politics. Both of them have a desire to start a camping site and have been asking for my help in choosing good tents. I also frequently encounter people from Bélang who loiter around the entrance to the waterfall. During one of my conversations with my neighbour, Sunil (pseudonym), he confessed that he had cleared some land in the forest along the path to the waterfall. He shared his plans to start a restaurant, mentioning, 'I have already thought about it, but I would not start the construction right away. I will begin after some time.'<sup>477</sup> The air around us was filled with dreams, ambitions, and the hope for a better life. There is a strong enthusiasm among individuals to capitalise on opportunities, foreseeing a more promising future, and establish avenues for generating income.

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<sup>477</sup> Field notes, Bélang, August 15, 2022.

ক্রমিক  
 জাননীস,  
 গিণ্ডিয়া, কটাৰ অৰি দংলী গা:ন, মুম্বই নগৰ  
 অতিশয় অসুখত উ সন্মানিত অসুখত সন্মানিত!

বিষয়:- মোৰ হেৰিটাৰ দহনত অৰি পাহাৰৰ আৰ্টি জীয়া -  
 অসুখত দহনত সন্মানিত সন্মানিত সন্মানিত হোৱাৰ বাবে  
 বিবন্ধা কৰিব খৰি দিহাৰ বাবে আহ্বান।

আহ্বান খৰি:- জীয়া মুম্বই।  
 পিতা:- উ দংলী।  
 মাতৃ:- কটাৰ অৰি -  
 গা:ন:- গিণ্ডিয়া  
 জীয়া:- বিবন্ধা - অসুখত

সাহায্য  
 সন্মানিত সন্মানিত সন্মানিত সন্মানিত সন্মানিত সন্মানিত  
 মোৰ হেৰিটাৰ দহনত অৰি পাহাৰৰ আৰ্টি জীয়া -  
 দহনত সন্মানিত সন্মানিত সন্মানিত হোৱাৰ বাবে সন্মানিত  
 বিবন্ধা কৰিব খৰি দিহাৰ বাবে আহ্বান কৰিব  
 দিহাৰ বাবে সন্মানিত সন্মানিত সন্মানিত সন্মানিত  
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কটাৰ অৰি কৰিব খৰি দিহাৰ বাবে  
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Figure 29: A letter written to the Bélang village youth council to settle a land dispute on the hill (source: author)

The construction of the road and the rise of tourism present opportunities for growth. However, these developments have affected the existing power dynamics. Unfortunately, it is the poorer communities that have been more affected, while the wealthier individuals, who are no longer

reliant on the forest for their livelihoods, have adjusted more easily to these changes. For instance, my neighbour Sunil, who is a grassroots politician and a contractor, is considering starting a restaurant, and one of my friends who wants to start a resort belongs to a better family and has different income sources. Since the movement has died down, some well-to-do families from Bélang, whose land had undergone acquisition for the road construction, have become a part of the construction, and part of the work has been subcontracted to the family. Whereas, in the village, poorer families are confronted with a tough decision of keeping the land or earning by selling it. While there is significant opposition to selling land, some individuals have still opted to sell their property along the border. It is difficult to ignore the financial advantages when families are struggling socially and materially to make ends meet. Such is the case with Tapa. He has been offered good money for the land from a wealthy Arunachali individual. Considering the offer, he was willing to sell off their lands in the hills. He said, 'I am offered money for the land we possess, and the buyer is also giving us words to meet the expense of my father's *dodgang*, which has been pending for many years.'<sup>478</sup> Similarly, it has come to my knowledge that even Susen's family is considering selling the land in the hills to perform the *dodgang* of the deceased of their family.

Moreover, the road has also brought opportunities for the wealthy families of Arunachal Pradesh. There is a rush from a few wealthy families of Arunachal Pradesh to buy more land owned by the Mising families to start cash crop agriculture in the foothill region. Besides the road and tourism business, commercial horticultural cash crop agriculture, like betel nut, tea, pineapple, and palm oil plantations in the region, have entered the scene. In recent years, this border foothill region has seen an increase in these agricultural activities. Moreover, the Indian state is aggressively pursuing

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<sup>478</sup> Field notes, Bélang, November 30, 2022.

its palm oil plantation in these remote biodiversity hotspots.<sup>479</sup> This aggressive push has led to an increase in palm cultivation in this border region. Many families from Bélang and neighbouring villages who own land have started planting palm. Reports indicate that palm oil cultivation in the NER has shifted land relations and a rise in wealthy local elites and private entities acquiring land for the plantations.<sup>480</sup> The introduction of cash crops is likely to lead to conflicts among individuals reclaiming land and may accelerate the depletion of hills during agrarian crises. There have been instances of increasing border tensions between neighbouring communities claiming land for plantation purposes in the NER.<sup>481</sup> The entry of the road has altered people's attitudes towards the hills. The interplay of various factors, such as the entry of roads, the growth of tourism, increased individual land claims, and land sales, creates opportunities for both the rich and the poor villagers. However, in the long run, these developments may hinder access to the hills for impoverished populations who rely on forest resources for their daily sustenance.

## 7. Conclusion

The chapter portrays the relationship between people and the hills. It talks about the importance of forest resources in the context of the growing crisis of social reproduction. However, due to

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<sup>479</sup> Ravi Chellam, "India's Palm Oil Plans Wreak Havoc on the Ground," *Down To Earth*, August 8, 2024, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/agriculture/indias-palm-oil-plans-wreak-havoc-on-the-ground>.

<sup>480</sup> M. Rajshekhar, "How India's Palm Oil Push Is Changing Land Relations in the North East," *Carbon Copy*, January 24, 2024, <https://carboncopy.info/how-indias-palm-oil-push-is-changing-land-relations-in-the-north-east/>.

<sup>481</sup> Sandipan Talukdar, "Merapani: Palm Oil Project Reignites Old Wound Of Border Dispute," *Pratidine Time*, April 13, 2025, <https://www.pratidintime.com/pratidin-exclusive/merapani-palm-oil-project-reignites-old-wound-of-border-dispute-8958532>.

excessive dependence on the hills, according to many villagers' opinions, the hills have ecologically degraded over the years. In addition to the context of ecological degradation, the construction of the road threatens to restrict access to the hills, which is crucial for the squeezed-out population in the Mising villages along the foothills. The fear of losing their access to the hills due to the entry of the road shows an obscure future for the people to fend for themselves. Hence, people have asserted their intrinsic dependence on the forest to uphold their control over it. In the absence of support from the Mising organisations, the movement failed to stop the road from being built.

However, the entry of the road had also brought opportunities and prospects that shaped their existing beliefs about the hills. It has brought differentiated aspirations to the people and has acted on existing power relations. This situation contradicts their widespread belief that the hills should be seen as shared resources for the community. As is evident from the chapter, the rich of the village have different ideas about the road than the poorer sections of the village. In a situation where the poor lack support from the Mising organisations, although they are losing access to the hills, the compensation and proceeds from the sale of land present an opportunity to improve their current living conditions. Currently, the combination of historical ecological degradation, the solidification of the border between the two states, and the increasing cultivation of cash crops is gradually dispossessing the local population of their hills. In the context of losing control over the land, river, and forest, as discussed in the current and previous chapters, the next chapter examines how a development project in the form of a dam transforms and reshapes the lives of the people.

## Chapter 5

### The Dam and the People

#### 1. Introduction

The 2000 MW SLHEP under the NHPC is nearing completion. The transmission lines are ready to supply electricity from the Obonori to different parts of the country. The transmission posts have crisscrossed through the paddy fields, villages, and hills. It is only a few months in waiting; one of the largest dams in India will be producing ‘green and clean energy’ and a step closer to becoming a future powerhouse in the world. However, until 2019, an anti-dam protest had halted the dam construction for over eight years, starting in 2011.<sup>482</sup> Since work resumed in 2019, the current state of dam construction does not seem to reflect the previous opposition that delayed the project for many years. Most young and middle-aged men from Bélang and other villages are involved in the dam construction. In the context of the agrarian crises, joblessness and depletion of resources, all my friends and cousins I have known have worked at the dam site. Likewise, people from the larger area around Gogamukh have found refuge in construction work on the dam.

Paradoxically, engaging in ethnography revealed that many workers continue to express their fears and apprehensions about the dam being located in a highly active seismic zone. They worry about the possibility of an unprecedented flood and the potential destruction of river-based livelihoods due to the dam. This dam creates an atmosphere of uncertainty, vulnerability, and uneven risks.<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>482</sup> Pahi Saikia et al., “Contesting in the Policy Sphere: Stakeholders and Policy Formulation on the Lower Subansiri Dam in the Northeast,” *India Review* 22, no. 5 (2023): 531–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2023.2261316>.

<sup>483</sup> See also, Huber, “Hydropower in the Himalayan Hazardscape.”

Hence, this chapter explores people's relationship with it and how the dam reconfigures people's lives in light of ongoing agrarian crises, increasing poverty, joblessness, gradual depletion of resources, and internal social differentiation. Moreover, the chapter tries to insert itself into the debate of Indigenous people's relationship with development projects, and tries to understand what it implies for the politics of indigeneity across the world.



Figure 30: The under-construction dam on the river Obonori (Source: Author)

## 2. Dams, Development and Resistance in India

The post-independent Indian state adopted the Nehruvian notion of development through rapid industrialisation.<sup>484</sup> The Nehurivian development model, named after the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was driven by the state's power to promote the greater good for society based on the idea of 'eminent domain' serving public purpose, carried forward from the British

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<sup>484</sup> Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*.

colonial legacy.<sup>485</sup> In this model, dams became one of the instruments to achieve the goals. India adopted the model of a Multi-Purpose River Valley Development Project (MPRVDP), pioneered in the United States of America.<sup>486</sup> MPRVDP became the adopted model for the modernisation project of a newly independent nation.<sup>487</sup> Dams became the way for industrial growth in a post-colonial nation and to meet the deficit of structural problems to catch up with the industrialised nations of the West.<sup>488</sup> Nehru referred to dams as the temples of modern India, stating that no place is holier than a dam that brings modernity and prosperity to the nation.<sup>489</sup>

However, dams as a marker of development have been challenged and resisted following India's decades of independence. One of the early anti-dam movements was in Kerala against the submergence of a rich bio-diversity area in the Silent Valley reservoir in 1973—the environmental movement emphasised the ecological loss the dam would incur.<sup>490</sup> In the later decades, with the proliferation of the anti-dam movement against the Sardar Sarovar Project, the movement shifted to challenging the violence of technocratic development. It was not only an ecological movement. It revolved around social justice and pitching for an alternative development model. The NBA is one of the movements that dismantled the linear notion of development associated with dams. The

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<sup>485</sup> Michael Levien, “From Primitive Accumulation to Regimes of Dispossession: Six Theses on India’s Land Question,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 22 (2015): 146–57; Whitehead, *Development and Dispossession in the Narmada Valley*.

<sup>486</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*; Nilsen, *Dispossession and Resistance in India*.

<sup>487</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*; Nilsen, *Dispossession and Resistance in India*.

<sup>488</sup> Baviskar, *Nation’s Body, River’s Pulse: Narratives of Anti-Dam Politics in India*; Nilsen, *Dispossession and Resistance in India*.

<sup>489</sup> Baviskar, *Nation’s Body, River’s Pulse: Narratives of Anti-Dam Politics in India*.

<sup>490</sup> Baviskar, *Nation’s Body, River’s Pulse: Narratives of Anti-Dam Politics in India*.

movement raised grave questions on the idea of development and the distributional effects of the dam. It advocated for an alternative development model focused on sustainability, which challenged gigantism.<sup>491</sup> These movements were often called New Social Movements, with an environmental ethos influenced by the Indigenous communities and without the support of political parties, in contrast to old working-class movements. In addition to the anti-dam movement in India, there was a spread of anti-dam movements worldwide, questioning its viability and dam-building practices.<sup>492</sup> By the 1980s, dams had lost their status as symbols of development and progress.<sup>493</sup> This period of growing opposition to large dams worldwide has brought consensus for a collective effort to comprehend the development aspects of the dam's promises to humankind and ecology. The World Commission on Dams (WCD) is one such effort that tried to understand the impacts of dams critically. The WCD reports that although dams have played an essential role in human development, they have also damaged the ecosystem and displaced thousands of people from their habitat.<sup>494</sup> It further argues that the economic benefits of the dam are inequitable, therefore leaving many displaced populations, predominantly Indigenous populations, out of the benefits.<sup>495</sup>

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<sup>491</sup> Nilsen, *Dispossession and Resistance in India*; Whitehead, *Development and Dispossession in the Narmada Valley*.

<sup>492</sup> McCully, *Silenced Rivers*.

<sup>493</sup> Vibha Arora, "'They Are All Set to Dam(n) Our Future': Contested Development through Hydel Power in Democratic Sikkim," *Sociological Bulletin* 58, no. 1 (2009): 94–114, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022920090106>.

<sup>494</sup> World Commission on Dams, ed., *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making ; The Report of the World Commission on Dams*, Reprint (Earthscan, 2001).

<sup>495</sup> World Commission on Dams, *Dams and Development*; To further explore about the downside of dam, see also, McCully, *Silenced Rivers*.

Despite ongoing advocacy for a more people-centric model of development and substantial empirical evidence indicating the adverse effects associated with dam construction, in the 21st century, the Indian government has consistently pursued the exploitation of the ‘hydro-potential’ of its rivers. The anti-dam movements have faced an uphill battle against the Indian state, often leading movements without the support of political parties.<sup>496</sup> Moreover, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, dam building has been resurgent across Africa, Asia, and South America.<sup>497</sup> Scholars have noted that the increase in dam construction in these countries results from the increase of private capital due to the neoliberalisation of their economies.<sup>498</sup> In India, with the acceptance of neo-liberal reforms in the 1990s, the state's role is reduced to being a broker state in promoting the interests of private capital.<sup>499</sup> There has been an escalation in the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in collaboration with private and global capital in India to develop and industrialise the nation. Nevertheless, the state's role has not diminished as a promoter and enhancer of development with the partnership of private capital. Moreover, the government continues to play a significant role in the sectoral development of infrastructure, like dams and roads.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> See also Michael Levien, *Dispossession without Development: Land Grabs in Neoliberal India*, First edition, Modern South Asia (Oxford university press, 2018); Karlsson, “Into the Grid: Hydropower and Subaltern Politics in Northeast India”; Baviskar, *Nation’s Body, River’s Pulse: Narratives of Anti-Dam Politics in India*.

<sup>497</sup> Scott W.D. Pearse-Smith, “The Return of Large Dams to the Development Agenda: A Post-Development Critique,” *Consilience*, Consilience, January 30, 2020, No 11 (2014): Issue Eleven: 2014, <https://doi.org/10.7916/CONSILIENCE.V01I11.4645>.

<sup>498</sup> Bakker, “The Politics of Hydropower”; Pearse-Smith, “The Return of Large Dams to the Development Agenda.”

<sup>499</sup> Levien, “From Primitive Accumulation to Regimes of Dispossession”; Levien, *Dispossession without Development*.

<sup>500</sup> Levien, *Dispossession without Development*.

In recent decades, the GOI has marked the NER as India's 'future powerhouse', with 168 hydroelectric projects by the Central Electricity Authority (CEA) in 2001.<sup>501</sup> The CEA has recognised the Brahmaputra River basin as having the highest potential for generating electricity. The Indian state's push for dams in the Northeast has been legitimised in the guise of 'development' and 'improvement' of the region, with a paternalistic tone from the centre.<sup>502</sup> Government reports termed the region as a resource-rich yet poor region. This paradox stresses the state's legitimacy to exploit unexploited resources to develop the region. At this juncture, building one of the largest dams in India on the Obonori was materialised, and the state further proposed many future projects in the region. This brought large-scale protests in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. However, protests against dams were not new to the region. There had been protests against the Gumti dam in Tripura, the Mapithel dam, the Tipaimukh dam in Manipur, and the proposed Pagladiya dam in Assam.<sup>503</sup>

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<sup>501</sup> Vagholikar and Das, "Damming the Northeast."

<sup>502</sup> Arnab Roy Chowdhury and Ngamjahao Kipgen, "Deluge amidst Conflict: Hydropower Development and Displacement in the North-East Region of India," *Progress in Development Studies* 13, no. 3 (2013): 195–208, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464993413486545>; Ngamjahao Kipgen, "The Enclosures of Colonization: Indigeneity, Development, and the Case of Mapithel Dam in Northeast India," *Asian Ethnicity* 18, no. 4 (2017): 505–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2016.1258988>; Roluahpuia, "Hydro-Nation, Discourse and Discontent in Northeast India: The Case of Tipaimukh Dam, Manipur," *Society and Culture in South Asia* 4, no. 2 (2018): 255–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2393861718767235>.

<sup>503</sup> Sharma, "Dam, 'Development' and Popular Resistance in Northeast India."

These protests have rallied around the loss of their land and resources that jeopardise their existence in the future, as well as ecological and downstream impacts.<sup>504</sup> Moreover, the so-called development is seen in the light of the neo-extractivism of the Indian state and the ‘enclosure of water commons’, dispossessing people dependent on the river.<sup>505</sup> The process is seen as a process of accumulation by dispossession by the elites, turning the rivers into producing electricity, disregarding the lives and river-based livelihoods.<sup>506</sup> Ngamjahao Kipgen argues that the entrance of the dam is a forceful intrusion into the lifeworld and infringes on the rights of the people.<sup>507</sup> The argument stems from the threat the dam poses to the people, mainly inhabited by the Indigenous population, who challenge their traditional rights over their land.

Despite the issues raised by the anti-dam movements, the prevailing view of dams in India as symbols of development and sources of renewable energy remains unchanged.<sup>508</sup> In the wake of climate change and the drive for renewable energy to meet international standards, the Indian government is relentlessly pushing for hydropower projects in the fragile Himalayan region, especially in northeastern India.<sup>509</sup> Despite opposition from the people, activists, and academicians, ‘national development’ has become a priority over the people. In the face of incidents of dam disasters, such as the one caused by a glacial lake outburst in October 2023, which

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<sup>504</sup> Hiren Gohain, “Big Dams, Big Floods: On Predatory Development,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 30 (2008): 19–21; Sharma, “Dam, ‘Development’ and Popular Resistance in Northeast India.”

<sup>505</sup> Baruah, “Whose River Is It Anyway?”

<sup>506</sup> Baruah, “Whose River Is It Anyway?”

<sup>507</sup> Kipgen, “The Enclosures of Colonization.”

<sup>508</sup> Huber, “Hydropower in the Himalayan Hazardscape.”

<sup>509</sup> Baviskar, *Nation’s Body, River’s Pulse: Narratives of Anti-Dam Politics in India*.

resulted in the destruction of the Teesta III dam in Sikkim, and an avalanche destroying the Rishiganga Hydroelectric Project in Uttarakhand in 2021, the Indian government remains determined to pursue dam projects in the Himalayan region.<sup>510</sup> These incidents reflect the fragility of the region and the danger of building mega infrastructures in the Himalayas. Although the push is mostly on producing ‘green and clean energy,’ studies suggest that dam reservoirs have a high potential to produce greenhouse gases.<sup>511</sup> In light of established evidence regarding the negative effects of dams, the government is now initiating the construction of India's largest dam on the Dibang and Siang Rivers in Arunachal Pradesh.

### **3. The Coming of the SLHEP- From Dream Zone to Resistance Zone**

The coming of SLHEP in Gerukamukh, Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border, has a longer history that resonates with the Assam state's engagement in the path of development and taming the rivers in the history of Assam. The dam on Obonori has been a project to control flooding in the region proposed by the Government of Assam since 1955.<sup>512</sup> Floods have gripped Assam for centuries, and there was a need for a plan to control the recurring floods that resulted in the loss of lives and properties. Arupjyoti Saikia writes, ‘Managing floods was a significant financial headache for the Assam government.’<sup>513</sup> He further notes that the devastating effect of floods led to the formation of the Brahmaputra River Commission in 1954, then the Assam Flood Control Commission in

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<sup>510</sup> Rahul Karmakar and Haidar, “Shadow from Fallen Sikkim Dam Falls on India’s Hydroelectric Projects in Bhutan,” India, *The Hindu*, October 14, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-shadow-from-the-fallen-sikkim-dam-falls-on-indias-hydroelectric-projects-in-bhutan/article67420574.ece>; BBC, “Uttarakhand Dam Disaster.”

<sup>511</sup> McCully, *Silenced Rivers*.

<sup>512</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

<sup>513</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*, 479.

1963 and later the Brahmaputra Flood Control Commission (BFCC) in 1970.<sup>514</sup> BFCC, under the Brahmaputra Flood Control Board in the 1980s, took up the burden of studying the rivers across the valley to control floods.<sup>515</sup> This further led to assessing the river's hydropower potential by building dams. To control floods, the survey of the river Obonori started in 1974.<sup>516</sup> These governing bodies have paved a road map for the development of Assam by curbing floods, leading to the submission of a blueprint for the multi-purpose dam in the Obonori and other rivers in 1983. In a collection of works by Ganesh Pegu, a distinguished singer, poet, and writer from the Mising community, there has been a recent revelation of a song he performed with great enthusiasm at a public event in 1981.<sup>517</sup> The song reflected the development local people had envisioned for the riparian belt of Obonori, who were gradually becoming poor and landless because of recurring floods. The lyrics of the song go as follows,

“Subansirire bukut aji progotir prokolpo,  
Duyuparor horog rosar amar drir hongkolpo,  
Oha hobe mili gyan bigyanere ami puhor bilai jau.”  
“Subansirit hetu hol  
Ipar hipar eke hol  
Gerguatu Bandh hol  
Porbot boiyam eke hol  
Assam-Arunachalor  
Honghoti swarupe siro jugomiya hol.”

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<sup>514</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

<sup>515</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

<sup>516</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

<sup>517</sup> Dimbeswar Doley and Joy Prakash Pegu, *Ganesh Pegu Rasanawali* (Mising Agom Kebang, 2023), 283.

“The project of progress prevails at the heart of Subansiri these days,  
(and) We pledge to build heaven on its banks’  
Let us come (you all), We march ahead, shining with knowledge and science.”  
“Subansiri is bridged now,  
Making both banks alike  
Gergua is also dammed,  
Making the hills and the plains the same,  
(and these) Make the amity between Assam and Arunachal everlasting.” (Translated by Himalaya Bora)

However, the government of Arunachal Pradesh has expressed opposition to the proposed project due to concerns regarding potential submergence. There was a significant risk that upstream towns, including Daporijo, Dumporijo, and Tamen, may be adversely affected by the dam.<sup>518</sup> In the 1990s, the project was inactive until the Brahmaputra Board transferred it to the NHPC in 2000. This transfer involved modifying the original blueprint of the dam, reducing its height from 257 meters for a rock-filled dam to 118 meters. This change was made to minimise the impact of submergence.<sup>519</sup> The construction of the dam appeared to address the flood-related and underdevelopment issues faced by a majority of the Misings that the Mising organisations had raised over a long period.<sup>520</sup> However, Arupjyoti Saikia argues that in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dam meant for moderating floods had lost its characteristics to only producing electricity.<sup>521</sup> There was a shift in the purpose of dam construction, which now favoured

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<sup>518</sup> Saikia, “Subansiri Dam Will Produce Costly Power and Won’t Control Assam Floods. Why Is It Still Being Built?”

<sup>519</sup> Saikia, “Subansiri Dam Will Produce Costly Power and Won’t Control Assam Floods. Why Is It Still Being Built?”

<sup>520</sup> To understand the issues and demands of the Mising organisation, see Sa:n Pangging, *Li:Sang: The Mouthpiece of Takam Misng Porin Kebang* (Central Committee TMPK, 2019).

<sup>521</sup> Saikia, *The Unquiet River*.

international economic interests and national political patronage over the welfare of the peasant economy.

However, the dam authorities continued to paint the dam as a marker of ‘development.’ The SLHEP had come to paint a promising picture of development and employment. In addition, existing literature on dams and movements has failed to capture the complexities of the people's relation to the development promises. It is often a story of anti-dam. Development projects can captivate people and offer opportunities for a better future.<sup>522</sup> Historically, the idea of development has progressed through creating an idea of a better future.<sup>523</sup> Nevertheless, the concept of development has always been contested and conflicted.

In an effort to understand people's reactions to the entry of the dam in Dirpai. One day, I had a conversation with a shopkeeper, a middle-aged person named Ronju. Talking about the dam, he recalled the initial promises made to them by one of the dam authorities. He said, ‘Dam officials told us that our areas would become Mini-Switzerland. It would be developed and beautified.’ He sighed deeply after a pause, ‘We thought these dams would bring development. We did not have any idea of dams. It was something new to us. We were told we would get employment. We were

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<sup>522</sup> Jamie Cross, *Dream Zones: Anticipating Capitalism and Development in India*, Anthropology, Culture and Society (PlutoPress, 2014); Ete, “Hydro-Dollar Dreams”; Duncan McDuie-Ra, “The Dilemmas of Pro-Development Actors: Viewing State–Ethnic Minority Relations and Intra-Ethnic Dynamics through Contentious Development Projects,” *Asian Ethnicity* 12, no. 1 (2011): 77–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2011.538220>.

<sup>523</sup> Cross, *Dream Zones*; Antje Daniel and Dieter Neubert, “Development as Utopia? Road to a Better Future Between Fiction and Lived Utopian Practice,” *Forum for Development Studies* 51, no. 2 (2024): 189–209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2024.2314279>.

amazed by the promises of development by the dam.<sup>524</sup> Listening to the shopkeeper brought back memories from my childhood. I was in lower primary school in the early 2000s when I first learned about the dam project. I encountered a miniature version of the dam displayed at a Mising Youth Festival held in Gogamukh. This prototype featured vehicles, the dam, the hill, and the river. This exhibit seemed to be a way of promoting ‘development,’ and it certainly captivated me. My father struggled to explain what would be constructed, and at the time, and I could not grasp his explanations entirely. I remember how people flocked to see the prototype at the youth festival. It gave the residents of Gogamukh a glimpse of what ‘development’ would look like.

The initial construction process began with the development of the project campus and the road leading to Gerukamukh. This significantly improved the previously narrow and poorly maintained road that connected Gogamukh to the dam and surrounding areas. For people of Mingmang, travelling to Gogamukh used to be a tedious journey that took over an hour. Until about two decades ago, accessing the region during the monsoon season was particularly challenging. There were no bridges over the streams, and the roads were not paved. When the rivers swelled, reaching Gogamukh was impossible. However, after the NHPC arrived, it drastically changed the roads to broader and better roads. Flower gardens marked the road to the dam site at every junction. The project also installed streetlights on the road leading to the site. Ironically, the streetlights stood in contrast to the area's deprivation of access to electricity in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nevertheless, the newly built road and the coming of new infrastructure brought hope to the people deprived of good roads and 'development,' marking the evidence of infrastructural differences that the area was deprived of until two decades ago.

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<sup>524</sup> Field notes, Dirpai, September 9, 2021.

As children, we would be involved in discussions about how Gogamukh would develop from a small town to a big town with the entry of the dam. The road, with flowers planted alongside it, became an attractive sight for the people of my village. As a boy, I often heard the adults who visited the newly built infrastructure and the awe in their expressions. I vividly remember my elder sister and her friends going to visit the project complex and how she explained the changes that she saw. She was captivated by the buildings and the flower plants that bore different coloured flowers on the same plant. Over time, the site evolved into one of the most popular destinations to visit year-round and became well-known as a picnic area. After the infrastructure was established, the number of picnic trips increased significantly. While the river had previously served as a picnic spot, 'development' attracted even more visitors. The area transformed into a tourist attraction, catering to those interested in witnessing the upcoming of mega infrastructure.

After the protest halted the construction, the company took the initiative to promote infrastructure tourism to the people. In 2015, along with my friends who had come from Kokrajhar, the westernmost district of Assam, I took the opportunity offered by the dam authorities to visit the site. Buses would be parked at the picnic spot to take the picnickers near the leading site of the dam. The buses ran at regular intervals. Likewise, many picnic goers grasped the opportunity to visit the infrastructure that was forbidden for non-workers or non-officials. Even today, it is the most visited place in the area. Despite the negative image the anti-dam movement has created around the dam as a symbol of development, it remains one of the most visited sites. When passing by the bridge on Obonori, which overlooks the dam under construction, it's common to see people taking photos with the dam in the background. Likewise, I have encountered villagers from the area who go to the large bridge built over the Brahmaputra (Bogibeel Bridge and Dhola Sadiya

Bridge). Infrastructure has an enchanting capacity.<sup>525</sup> Harvey and Knox argue that despite circumstances where infrastructures fail to deliver their promises, they retain a ‘generic social promise.’<sup>526</sup> People’s pilgrimage to the dam perhaps reflects on the same premises of how the dam as an infrastructure retains a generic social promise of development and modernity.



Figure 31: My family members posing for a picture against the background of the dam (source: Anupama Pegu)

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<sup>525</sup> Harvey and Knox, “The Enchantments of Infrastructure.”

<sup>526</sup> Harvey and Knox, “The Enchantments of Infrastructure,” 523.

Against the backdrop of increasing poverty, landlessness, and unemployment of the Misings in the turn of the century, the dam indeed looked like an answer to the crises of these riparian populations. The delayed development plans materialising must have brought hope to numerous populations. However, a critique of the dam emerged in the early 2000s, the TMPK leaders demanded a proper public hearing and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the dam. As early as August 2001, Kalpavrisk, an environmental action group, had raised environmental concerns related to the project based on a faulty EIA.<sup>527</sup> Further, regarding faulty EIA, one wildlife researcher based in Guwahati had written a letter to the Supreme Court of India stating the violation of laws by the dam.<sup>528</sup> During these initial protests, the TMPK formed the Subansiri Valley Indigenous People's Forum (SVIPF) on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2003, a joint platform to protest against the dam.<sup>529</sup> The organisation had been instrumental in mass mobilisation against the dam for the first time.<sup>530</sup> The Mising community leaders spearheaded the organisations.

Besides, a group of people from Gogamukh, aware of the dam's environmental impact, started to lead against it, forming an organisation called the People's Movement for Subansiri Valley (PMSV). These organisations involved began to question the public hearing held by the NHPC authority, which claimed that the public hearing was a farce. The movement demanded a new public hearing. These organisations, led by local leaders, started questioning the EIA, demanding

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<sup>527</sup> Keshab Krishna Chattradhara, *Swarna Upattykar Pora Mrityu Upattyokaloi: An Analysis of Large dams on Northeast India* (Gokul Kalita Bristi, 2012), 239.

<sup>528</sup> Chattradhara, *Swarna Upattykar Pora Mrityu Upattyokaloi*, 243.

<sup>529</sup> A document in possession of the author titled, "A summary of the dam movement: For the help of leaders involved in the dam movement" (translated from Assamese).

<sup>530</sup> Chattradhara, *Swarna Upattykar Pora Mrityu Upattyokaloi*.

a study of the dam's downstream impacts. Considering the area as a seismic zone in this phase, the movement rallied for small, eco-friendly dams rather than big ones.<sup>531</sup> The movement invoked the recommendations made by the WCD and demanded that the dam authorities follow the recommendations. At the same time, the protestors demanded that jobs and contracts be allocated to local residents instead of outsiders.<sup>532</sup> The movement had started questioning the labour welfare and safety of those working on the dam. In the process, the movement demanded jobs for the local unemployed populations against people considered outsiders from the Northeast. However, the demands for employing the local populations and speaking on behalf of the unemployed populations to be engaged in the dam were discarded by SVIPF, and there was an effort to fight against the construction of the dam with a collective protest with various organisations in Assam.<sup>533</sup>

In 2004, SVIPF initiated a joint movement with the All Assam Students' Union (AASU); in 2005, there was a joint movement with Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS).<sup>534</sup> Subsequently, it garnered support from many community organisations across Assam. Numerous organisations joined the movement in solidarity in the later years. Sanjib Baruah observed that initially, the movement mostly raised against the dam's ecological impact, so newer EIAs were demanded to be conducted.<sup>535</sup> However, only after a few years, in 2005, was there a shift of protest to the issue of

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<sup>531</sup> "Resolutions of the public meeting on Subansiri Lower Dam Project", Takam Mising Porin Kébang (TMPK), Gogamukh, Dhemaji, 15/06/2003.

<sup>532</sup> Chattradhara, *Swarna Upattykar Pora Mrityu Upattykalo*.

<sup>533</sup> "A summary of the dam movement".

<sup>534</sup> "A summary of the dam movement".

<sup>535</sup> Baruah, "Whose River Is It Anyway?"

the dam's safety and the potential downstream impact of the Dam.<sup>536</sup> This further led to the formation of an expert group that conducted a study of the dam's downstream impacts.

The emerging anti-dam movement has tarnished the dam's image as a symbol of development. An uncertain future now challenges this vision. These development infrastructures reflect the anxiety and fears about what lies ahead. Such projects can engage people, leading to acquiescence; conversely, they can also spark contestation and conflict.<sup>537</sup> Development is, therefore, a politically charged idea and an ambiguous term. While looking for answers on how people perceived development, it prompted me to meet leaders to get their reactions at the initial phase of the dam's construction. Initiating a conversation about the initial stage of the protest. One of the leaders recalled, 'In the initial phase, there were clashes between two camps; one group supported the dam, and the other did not. Public opinion was mostly in support of the dam.' He described how people welcomed development, writing in magazines. He highlighted Ganesh Pegu's writing and said, 'Even the famous local personalities had been supporting the dam, and their imagination had been out in writings, celebrating it.'<sup>538</sup>

Against this enthusiasm, the movement had been successful in instilling in people's minds the risk the dam poses to the ecology, river-based livelihoods and erasing the downstream population. The movement familiarised the public with the dangers associated with dams worldwide, especially

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<sup>536</sup> Baruah, "Whose River Is It Anyway?"

<sup>537</sup> Cross, *Dream Zones*; Marc Edelman and Angelique Haugerud, eds., *The Anthropology of Development and Globalization: From Classical Political Economy to Contemporary Neoliberalism*, 8. print, Blackwell Anthologies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 5 (Blackwell Publ, 2008); McDuie-Ra, "The Dilemmas of Pro-Development Actors."

<sup>538</sup> Field notes, Gogamukh, March 7, 2022.

downstream of the river. It raised issues related to the dam building, bringing deep cracks to the development consensus. The movement contested the perceived inevitability of infrastructure, as it was built in a highly seismic and fragile zone.<sup>539</sup> Being in a seismic zone, the dam was assumed to collapse and wipe out the downstream population.

Since the movement began, concerns about the area being a seismic zone have persisted. Speculation arose regarding the potential consequences if the dam were to break. Numerous memorandums, notices, and news articles have been written about the likelihood of the impact of the unprecedented floods of 1950 in the region. There was a dystopian portrayal of the future in the downstream. In a pamphlet published by the leaders of TMPK and KMSS in 2008, based on reports published by the dam, it stated that if the dam breaks, in 35 minutes, there will be an unprecedented flood downstream.<sup>540</sup> As a result, the flash flood water level will rise to 52.47 feet at the dam, 38.25 feet at Gerukamukh, 30.42 feet at Gogamukh, 17.05 feet at Gunashuti, 19.34-21.19 feet at Jengrai, 25.58 feet at Kamalabari and 31.65 feet at Jorhat.<sup>541</sup>

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<sup>539</sup> See also, Nikhil Anand, "Accretion," Society for Cultural Anthropology, September 24, 2015, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/accretion>; Kavita Ramakrishnan et al., "The Temporal Fragility of Infrastructure: Theorizing Decay, Maintenance, and Repair," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 4, no. 3 (2021): 674–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848620979712>.

<sup>540</sup> "Brihot nodibandor boyaboho bipod: Gono protirudor ahbhan" (The threats of Big Dam: Call for protest), Published by TMPK's President Hemeswar Pegu and Secretary Johan Doley, KMSS's President Mulan Laskar, Vice President Pobitro Daimary and General Secretary Akhil Gogoi, July 2008.

<sup>541</sup> The places mentioned are located downstream of the Obonori.

Likewise, numerous pamphlets spoke in anticipation of devastating effects downstream, calling it *Jolobuma* (water bomb).<sup>542</sup> The pamphlets and memorandums portrayed the dam as a bomb under construction, which would destroy the riverine civilisation downstream. The claims are based on the experiences of flash floods caused by dams in the neighbouring region, which have significantly impacted people living downstream in Assam. Notable examples include the Kurichu Dam in Bhutan in 2004, the Ranganadi Dam in Arunachal Pradesh in 2008, and the Kapili Dam in Karbi Anglong, all of which resulted in unprecedented flooding in downstream areas of Assam. Gradually, the positive perception of the dam has been diminished. The movement was able to shift the public consensus against the dam. The prevailing concern at the time was the risk of the dam, located in a high seismic zone, potentially breaking and causing a flash flood similar to the one that occurred in the 1950s. Many discussions were about what if the dam broke, how high the water would flow and at what speed, and in how many minutes the villages on the banks would get washed away. The people's concern reflected the issues that the movement rallied on. In numerous conversations, there was a depiction of a dystopian picture of our future where the production of crops would drastically decrease because the intervention of river flow would impact the groundwater level. A drought-like situation would eventually affect the production of crops. In one of the letters written to the then-Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2009, a group of intellectuals and leaders involved in the movement mentioned the livelihood impact. It emphasised how the river's water flow changes would impact the soil nutrients

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<sup>542</sup> “Namoni Subansiri Jol Bidyut prokolpoi nisinno koribo subansiri poriya hoibota” (Subansiri Lower Hydro Electric Project will destroy the riverine civilisation), Pamphlet published by People’s Movement for Subansiri Brahmaputra Valley, July 2008.

downstream, leading to the barrenness of the soil.<sup>543</sup> It mentions that the ecology of the *beels* (wetlands) is connected to the ecology of the river, which would decrease the fish population and impact the fishing-based livelihoods. Further, the letter emphasised how the dam would impact the livelihood of the people who collect sand, gravel, and driftwood.

One of the calls for protest documents published by KMSS and TMPK states, '*Pani Bikri Hoi Gol,*' which translates to 'the river has been sold.' The memorandums were linked to a more extensive history of people's resistance to the extractive activities from the British period until now. The anti-dam organisations portrayed the incoming dam as a means to extract resources from the region to fulfil demands elsewhere. The organisations talked about water privatisation, which is considered an enclosure of the commons. In demand for public participation against the dam, published in one of the documents by AASU, the document highlights the extractive nature of the dams planned over the rivers in Northeast India. The document estimated that the need for electricity would be 5000MW to 7000MW in 25 years, as opposed to 75000MW in the NER.<sup>544</sup> The issues raised by the anti-dam organisation highlighted the important questions about who benefits from the construction of the dam. It became a rallying point for all the organisations involved in the movement.

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<sup>543</sup> Letter to the Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2009. See also Chattradhara, *Swarna Upattykar Pora Mrityu Upattyokalo: An Analysis of Large dams on Northeast India*.

<sup>544</sup> Published by AASU in the context of extracting electricity from Assam. They have circulated a pamphlet to call the public to participate in the movement. It was titled, "Brihot Nodi Bandhor pora utpadit bidyut asomor majedi uliyai niyar kaam aroombho hoise- ei bandhor biruddhe gontantric andolonor proyujon, Rajoloi satro hontar abedon."



Figure 32: A picture of a meeting held against the dam in 2003 (Source: Purandar Mili)

The movement successfully led expert groups from Guwahati University, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, and Dibrugarh University to study the downstream impact of the river.<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>545</sup> Report on Downstream Impact Study of the Ongoing Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Power Project at Gerukamukh of National Hydro-electric Project Corporation Limited. Published by Lower Subansiri Expert Group 2010.

The expert group had recommended that no mega project be built on the present site, based on the area being a seismic zone. However, the report was not well received by the NHPC authorities. It challenged the report on the basis of the central clearance authorities that have clarified the project's viability.<sup>546</sup> Following this, numerous expert groups were constituted to study the downstream of the dam and its feasibility. In 2011, a Joint Steering Committee was formed by the GOI to study the downstream impact. It recommended a 470-crore package for the downstream areas. On 16<sup>th</sup> December 2011, the movement successfully halted the dam construction through persistent protests against it.

Meanwhile, the movement moved the National Green Tribunal with a petition against the NHPC in 2013 based on negligence of the downstream.<sup>547</sup> Thus, from 2011 to 2019, work was halted until the final clearance was granted by the National Green Tribunal. Following the clearance, work has resumed, and people are now more involved in the construction process than ever before. The court pronounced the clearance to resume construction as the project advances public interests.<sup>548</sup> This resumption of work on the dam is rooted in the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP- the current ruling government party) promise of completing the project after it came into power in 2014.<sup>549</sup> Along with the decline of the movement, there has been an erosion of the leadership that led the

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<sup>546</sup> Baruah, "Whose River Is It Anyway?"

<sup>547</sup> Saikia, "Subansiri Dam Will Produce Costly Power and Won't Control Assam Floods. Why Is It Still Being Built?"; Soma Basu, "Subansiri Dam: Green Tribunal Issues Notices to NHPC, Government," *Down To Earth*, January 7, 2014, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/environment/subansiri-dam-green-tribunal-issues-notices-to-nhpc-government-43202>.

<sup>548</sup> Saikia, "Subansiri Dam Will Produce Costly Power and Won't Control Assam Floods. Why Is It Still Being Built?"

<sup>549</sup> Saikia et al., "Contesting in the Policy Sphere."

movement. The Mising leadership and other leaders who led the movement against the dam were allied with the ruling party, the BJP. Ranoj Pegu, one of the movement's leaders, is a Member of the Legislative Assembly under the BJP government in Assam.

#### 4. Anticipating an Uncertain Future



Figure 33: The motto of the dam project (Source: Author)

Against people joining the workforce in constructing the dam, there is a visible lack of active resistance against the dam, but the issues and fears associated with the dam remain. In the early construction period, many people from the Mingmang area and the larger Gogamukh area found work. Sometimes, company trucks came to pick up labourers from the village *tiniali*. Moreover, people used their bicycles to go to work. I still remember how people cycled to the project site

every morning. Unlike today, the road from Bélang to the dam projects was not paved, and except for the company trucks, there were no motor vehicles to transport them to work. When the construction started its construction in 2005, many people from the area got wage work, and some worked as electricians and drivers. In a situation of joblessness, many people from the area found a workspace and a way to earn a source of income. There was a rush for jobs that the dam company had to offer. However, the anti-dam movement prompted many working people to leave their work at the dam at the call from the leaders. Some former workers mentioned that they had been involved in the anti-dam movement, influenced by the issues raised by the organisations.

In the initial phase, although the dam had promised employment and development, only a few people from Bélang engaged in work on the project on a contractual basis. Susen remembers cleaning the jungle around the offices that the Brahmaputra Board left behind. A few others remember building the bridge connecting the two banks that overlooks the dam. However, on asking why they had left the work then, one of them, Jiten, who currently works in the dam, replied,

At those times, we could manage without working as wage labour. I was a young man. Moreover, cycling to the workplace was difficult. The roads were not good; unlike today, there were no vehicles to transport us. There was also fear; the work was dangerous. Therefore, we would work for a while and leave the work whenever we wanted.<sup>550</sup>

By the time the anti-dam movement peaked, no workers from Bélang were engaged in the dam. People lived without working on the dam and were involved in different kinds of work mentioned in the previous chapters. For instance, most of the people in Bélang had been dependent on *mistry* work and logging. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the globe, the project became the

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<sup>550</sup> Field notes, Bélang, January 26, 2022.

only avenue of work. That is when many people from the area joined to work on the project. The workers joining in large numbers coincided with the loss of daily employment opportunities.



Figure 34: Workers leaving for work in a hired Tempo (Source: Author)

As the dam construction resumed, workers from different parts of the Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts formed the workforce for the dam construction. During fieldwork in Bélàng, there were more than 80 people involved in wage labour work at the dam from the village. The number fluctuates according to the demand for labourers for a site. The major work on the dam, under the NHPC, is sub-contracted to two private companies, SOMA and Patel Engineering. The SOMA company operates on the river's left bank (eastern bank) in Assam, and Patel Engineering Limited operates on the right bank (western bank) in Arunachal Pradesh (See Fig.36). Under these two companies, the labour contractors employ the labourers. The labour contractors of Patel Engineering are mainly from a nearby village called Kolaptakur on the right bank in Arunachal Pradesh, and the labour contractors from SOMA are primarily from the side of Assam. Most of the

people whom I have encountered in the village primarily work on the right bank under the Arunachali contractors, and only a few work in SOMA.



Figure 35: One of the workers of Bélang posing for the camera before leaving for work (Source: Author)

The kind of wage work varies from unskilled wage labour (most of them work in this category), semi-skilled labour (in this category, labourers are promoted only after a few years of experience in the site), and skilled labour (they are those who have experience of working with concrete)—apart from them, only three of them in the village work as supervisors. One of the engineers who works under SOMA confided that there has been a rush to complete the dam since it resumed after its halt almost a decade ago. He said, ‘In a site where there is a need for 100 labourers, 200

labourers have been employed.’<sup>551</sup> Morning scenes in the villages’ *tinialis* indicate the extent to which people are engaged in the dam's construction. People wearing yellow helmets and working boots crowd the village shops across the area. Many of them leave for work, and many return. Few of them wait for their *tempo* to take them to work; many go with their vehicles. There is usually a traffic of people and vehicles when the work shift ends. Tempos (mini-truck) and motorbikes replaced the people who depended on going to work by bicycle. The road to the project has also improved. Against this involvement in the dam construction, numerous people conveyed that the material condition of the people has improved.

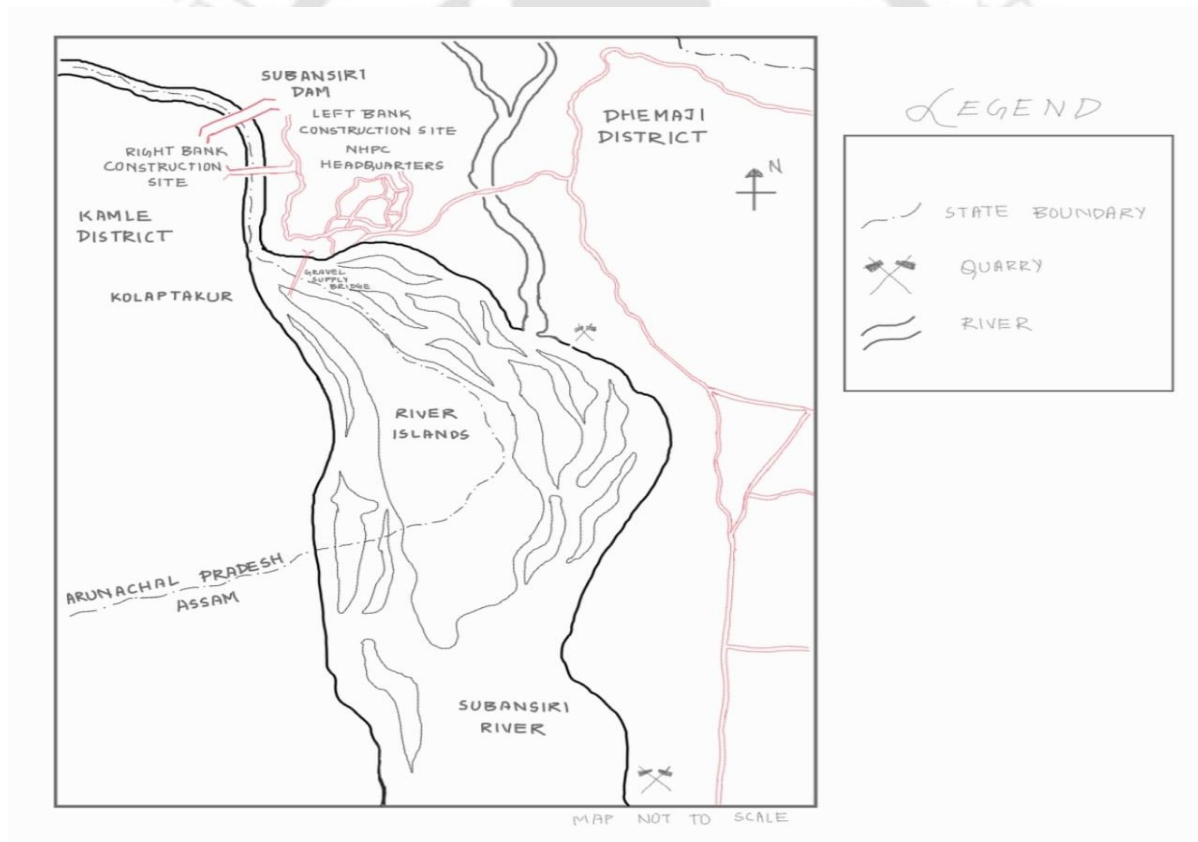


Figure 36: A sketch map of the dam project (Source: Anindya Basak)

<sup>551</sup> Field notes, Dam site, September 12, 2021.

Amidst visible material changes in the villages, I visited the main administrative building of the NHPC to interview the company's Public Relations Officer (PRO). A picture framed with glass at the reception desk reads, 'Your dreams, Our Project.' The image shows the Rhino, Assam's state animal, on the downstream of the dam, alongside the hornbill, Arunachal Pradesh's state bird, on the upstream. The picture depicts the perfect harmony the dam creates in the form of a rainbow. When I met the PRO, I pondered whether those words made sense given the narratives I had heard in the area. In response to my question, the PRO said that the project had changed the area socio-economically. He stressed that the whole place has benefited from the dam and has been transformed. He said, 'Look at Gogamukh, there was nothing 20 years ago. The town has grown since NHPC came here. People from the surrounding villages are employed in the dam.'<sup>552</sup> He then gave me a six-page report on the project, which contained the historical background of the project, Downstream Protection and Developmental works, and the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) schemes that the project has initiated for the area. The reports particularly emphasised the package of Rs. 470 crores sanctioned for downstream protection and developmental works.<sup>553</sup> Moreover, articles written online by top officials of the SLHEP portray the dam as ushering development and somehow elude the main issues raised by the people.<sup>554</sup> The

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<sup>552</sup> Field notes, SLHEP office, January 24, 2022.

<sup>553</sup> "Report published by Subansiri Lower H.E Project," November 2021, 3.

<sup>554</sup> A.N. Mohammad and Basu, "Project Progress: Tracking the Development of the Subansiri Lower HEP," *Power Line Magazine*, December 5, 2022, <https://powerline.net.in/2022/12/05/project-progress/>; A.N. Mohammad and Verma, "Arunachal| Environmental Impacts Management in Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Project," *NorthEast Now*, March 28, 2023, <https://nenow.in/environment/aranachal-environmental-impacts-management-in-subansiri-lower-hydroelectric-project.html>.

articles suggest that the dam does not negatively impact downstream areas and contributes positively to the lives of the downstream population by introducing livelihood schemes, constructing embankments, and controlling river erosion.<sup>555</sup>

However, discussions with the local people revealed a complex response to the dam project. Upon further investigation, it became clear that the perspectives shared by community members often contrasted with the narratives put forth by the dam authority. While the dam is hailed as a ‘people’s dream’ by the dam authorities, this view was contested in the conversations I had with villagers. Fear has become a permanent part of people’s minds. Discussions on the threats of the dam continue to be dominant in the present time. It also indicates that opposition to the dam did not end, although the organised movement has declined. The news of the dam about to be commissioned has been relayed numerous times in the media; however, it has been delayed by multiple incidents of damage caused to the dam construction site in recent times.<sup>556</sup> The fury of the river and the fragile nature of the hills confront the dam-building site.

On 27<sup>th</sup> October 2023, I received a call from Rahul, who worked at the dam site. He informed me about a landslide that occurred at the time, ‘The river is blocked and gradually drying up. Many people are worried about the drying up of the river. Check the news.’ After his call, I scrolled through social media, which was flooded with images and videos of the river drying up. There were hues and cries from locals, updating the status of the river. Multiple news outlets reported the

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<sup>555</sup> Mohammad and Basu, “Project Progress”; Mohammad and Verma, “Arunachal Environmental Impacts Management in Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Project.”

<sup>556</sup> Jay Mazoomdaar, “How Ignored Landslide Warnings Led to Subansiri Running Dry,” *The Indian Express* (New Delhi), May 2, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/how-ignored-landslide-warning-led-to-subansiri-river-running-dry-explained-9018295/>.

landslides instantly. The Arunachal Times reported, ‘Landslides hit Subansiri Lower HEP, river flow drastically reduced.’<sup>557</sup> The newspaper reported that landslides had blocked the diversion tunnel, resulting in a decline in water flow downstream. Besides, the news report mentioned, ‘Over the past three years, the project has been hit by four major landslides.’ The previous landslides were in April of the same year, and the previous ones were during the monsoon season of 2022. The district administration of the downstream districts of Dhemaji and Lakhimpur cautioned the people downstream to stay away from the river and keep the animals away until further notice.

Following the blockage of the river, I returned to the villages to learn about the incidents and people’s reactions to the incidents. I set out to Dirpai *tiniali* and stopped at a shop for *tamul*. A middle-aged couple named Ravi and Kanshi ran the shop. I initiated a discussion about the drying up of the river. Meanwhile, Monuram, a middle-aged man in his early forties, came for a cigarette at the shop and eventually joined the conversation. Monuram became more active than the others because he claimed to be a person who is dependent on the river for his daily life. He supplies river fish to the couple's shop. Monuram, joining the conversation, said,

We have never seen this river dry up. We had only heard of it once in the past, in 1950. It was never in our imagination that we could walk across the riverbed. It flowed like a small stream, and in some deep areas, it took the form of ponds.

While listening to Monuram, Ravi added,

We were all shocked by the news. I received a call from a family member working on the site. He told me that the river was going to dry up because there was a landslide that blocked

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<sup>557</sup> Rina, “Landslide Hits Subansiri Lower HEP, River Flow Drastically Reduced.”

the only functioning tunnel of the dam. But they told me it would not be a threat because of the lean season.

Monuram, with a pause, further recalled, ‘Despite the assurance from the people who work there, I did not go to the river that day. I am a person who is attached to the river. I cannot stay a single day away from the river. I can fight calamities, but I was worried about my family.’ With a frown, Kanshi began to speak about her experience. She had concerns similar to those of Monuram. She said,

As soon as I got the news, I rang my husband and children. My granddaughter was in school, and I had to rush to get her. I rushed out to call my husband, who had gone to the river to see if the river was drying up. I could see him fishing along with many others. I called my husband to finish and return home.<sup>558</sup>

Amidst these anxious situations, many villagers mentioned that they had opportunities to fish and collect *bhanga singa* (scrap metal) from the river bed when it dried. According to Monuram, people were able to catch fish in large quantities. Some people took it as an opportunity; on the other hand, many others, like Monuram, did not go to the river because of fear. He said, ‘People would not have dared to go to the riverbed if it were the rainy season.’ He fittingly brings out people’s precarious and vulnerable positions,

We do not support the dam, but our concerns are not heard, and the leaders have lied to us.

We could not stop the dam from being built. We know the dam will break. Do we have a single chance to stand against the government? The dam will never be scrapped; they have

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<sup>558</sup> Field notes, Dirpai, November 20, 2023.

already spent crores of money. Our lives are specks of dust against the money spent on the dam.<sup>559</sup>

While inquiring more about the incident, I discovered that it led Gojen, Julen and many other islanders to flee from the river.

The increasing number of landslides at the dam site heightens their fear. News of the dam's construction on the Obonori River has led the community to envision a catastrophic future. Their understanding of the river's volatility, as well as the terrain and soil conditions, allows them to recognise the potential dangers they face. A resident from a village downstream of the dam, Bahadur said, 'We will die; even if we escape death, the dam will break 100%. They have built a ticking bomb. The company officials and the contractors will escape, but the ticking bomb will not spare us.'<sup>560</sup> Likewise, reflecting on the last conversation with Jugen, he also envisions a future risk for the downstream. He said,

The dam will break one day. Even if the concrete does not break, it will break on the side wall of the hill. The landslides have increased since the increase in construction. There have been recurring landslides of the hills at the construction site annually in the rainy season. We know the hills are incredibly soft. Even the experts said no to the construction of this dam.

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<sup>559</sup> Field notes, Dirpai, November 20, 2023.

<sup>560</sup> Field notes, Rajgarh tiniali, March 3, 2022.

He further described an apocalyptic scenario, saying, ‘One day, the dam will break from a big earthquake, and everything will be normalised again. No one can stop natural disasters; we cannot control earthquakes. It is certain that if there is a natural disaster soon, it will wipe us out.’<sup>561</sup>

Amidst these incidents in the dam, many older generations are reminded of the flood after the earthquake of the 1950s. Bordola, from Dirpai, is reminded of the stories of his parents' tragedy of the 1950s. He stated,

We do not need the dam, and the location of our village is very vulnerable. We would not have time to escape if there were a big flood. The recent water that overflowed from the under-constructed dam was very threatening. People have not seen the natural force of the river in the summer. There was one summer in 1972 when the river swelled and destroyed all the *chaporis*. The quantity of driftwood that it carried was unimaginable. Oh my god! We could cross the river walking on the driftwood. No one has seen such swelling, neither the NHPC officials nor your generation. They would never think of building a dam if they had witnessed the river's force. There has not been a recurrence of such floods. We will be washed away if such a flood comes.<sup>562</sup>

These narratives are from people familiar with the quality of the rock and soil that form the area's hills and are familiar with the river's fury. The yearly erosion of the hills at the construction site backs the people's claims. Many construction workers believe that the eastern bank of the river's hills will erode. They emphasise that it is the hills that will erode, not the concrete buildings. Fear and catastrophic visions discussed during the movements are talked about similarly in the present.

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<sup>561</sup> Field notes, River Island, July 19, 2021.

<sup>562</sup> Field notes, Dirpai, September 29, 2021.

I often had discussions with my friends about the uncertainties of our future because of the dam. In such meetings, we discuss villages that will be worst affected and the number of villages that will escape the flood if the dam is broken. People continue to anticipate the height of the river flow. Some point at trees nearby and make it a standard to calculate the rising water level accordingly if there is a flood or the dam is broken. The spillover effect of the anti-dam movement has brought people to understand more about the ecological, agricultural impacts, and risks to people's lives. People have become knowledgeable about the risks of the dam promoted by the anti-dam movement.

One evening, I was conversing about the dam at my neighbour's house. Sunil, his brother, and two other men were having drinks and roasting meat. The two men who were engaged in *dulai* worked near a village in Arunachal, close to the dam. I had a conversation about the dam with them, and one of the men shared his knowledge regarding the risks associated with it. He said,

I do not need to tell you further about how dangerous the dam is. Even if the dam does not break after completion of its construction, the river will dry up, affecting the groundwater level. Our soil will lose moisture and turn into a desert. In the process, it will affect our agricultural production. We may even have a problem finding drinking water.<sup>563</sup>

These narratives represent the pleas of powerless individuals whose feelings are disregarded and stifled, contesting against a government. I often asked the people one question: 'Why could we not stop the dam?' A standard reply is, 'The leaders have failed us.' The intensity of the protest has decreased drastically. The student organisations in the area seem to be active in making their anti-dam stance on social media, in memorandums, and in a few staged protests in the area. There is

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<sup>563</sup> Field notes, Bélang, November 23, 2023.

always a protest in response to every landslide at the dam construction site. However, people were cynical about the staged protest. For instance, on a fine morning in the last week of September 2021, I was driving to Gogamukh. On the way, I met a college student from my village. He was waiting for the bus, so I offered him a lift. He told me to pick up a few of his friends from Dirpai. While I was driving, they conversed about a protest at Gogamukh organised by an Assamese student organisation against the dam on the eve of Assam's legislative cabinet meeting in the district of Dhemaji.<sup>564</sup> However, on the day of the cabinet meeting, the protestors were nowhere to be seen. One of the students said, 'Durga Puja<sup>565</sup> is near; therefore, they are trying to mint money to meet the family's needs for the puja. They are going to take money for their benefit.'<sup>566</sup> Adding to the conversation, another one said, 'Poisang donnonggé,' which translates to bribe taker.

The allegation that the dam authorities are bribing local leaders has become a widely held rumour among the people. Such rumours severely undermine the community's hope for resisting the dam. Many residents observe that the leaders are becoming wealthier, further fuelling suspicions. The potency of these rumours is amplified by the leaders' apparent inactivity in opposing the dam project. As the dam approaches completion, there have been minimal protests, despite clear evidence against it and ongoing landslides at the construction site. Opposition to the dam is mostly expressed through posters rather than public demonstrations. Trust in the leaders has significantly

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<sup>564</sup>Utpal Parashar, "In a First, Himanta Biswa Sarma Cabinet Meets Outside Guwahati at Dhemaji," *Hindustan Times*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-a-first-assam-cabinet-meets-outside-guwahati-at-dhemaji-101633005989604.html>.

<sup>565</sup> Durga Puja is a Hindu festival, where people revere the Hindu goddess Durga. Durga Puja is celebrated in every corner of Assam. It is a festive season when people buy new clothes and other belongings.

<sup>566</sup> Field notes, Gogamukh, September 26, 2021.

eroded, leaving the community to confront an unequal risk. In these contexts of increasing risks, although one might anticipate resistance, people's realities and reactions are far more complex than simply categorised as anti-development or pro-development.



Figure 37: A hoarding depicting the anti-dam stance of TMPK in a recent meeting held in Gogamukh in 2023 (Source: Author)

## 5. Entangled in material conditions: Beyond Compulsion or Choice

Against the increasing threat of the dam, the community's engagement with the dam is perplexing and ambiguous. This observation prompted an investigation into the reasons behind the lack of protests, despite widespread detestation of the dam among the residents. Likewise, many scholars

have observed a decline in anti-dam movements in India.<sup>567</sup> Amita Baviskar argues that the anti-dam movement across India has changed over the years, and there is a nationwide decline in anti-dam movements. She writes,

In the 1990s, social movements against large dams in India were celebrated for crafting a powerful challenge to dominant policies of development. These grounded struggles were acclaimed for their critique of capitalist industrialisation and advocacy for an alternative socially just and ecologically sustainable development model. Twenty years later, as large dams continued to be built, their critics have shifted the battle off the streets to new arenas- to courts and government committees, in particular- and switched to a techno-managerial discourse of maintaining river health.<sup>568</sup>

She points to the decline of anti-dam movements by locating it within economic liberalisation, the emergence of environmental bureaucracies, and the rise of Hindu nationalism in contemporary times. The point made by Baviskar is evident in the NER of India as well. The NER is touted to be the future powerhouse, where numerous dams are proposed and under construction. These dams are considered to submerge large swathes of the Indigenous lands. However, there is currently a lack of mass protests in this region. In contextualising the case of people's lack of active protest against the Mapithel dam, Bengt G. Karlsson argues that people's apparent inactivity cannot be reduced to passivity or submissiveness.<sup>569</sup> Taking the case of the lack of active protest, Karlsson contextualised the people's lack of resistance in the context of the increased security state. The lack

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<sup>567</sup> Baviskar, *Nation's Body, River's Pulse: Narratives of Anti-Dam Politics in India*; Karlsson, "Into the Grid: Hydropower and Subaltern Politics in Northeast India."

<sup>568</sup> Baviskar, *Nation's Body, River's Pulse: Narratives of Anti-Dam Politics in India*, 26.

<sup>569</sup> Karlsson, "Into the Grid: Hydropower and Subaltern Politics in Northeast India."

of active protest is rooted in the violence perpetrated on the people by the state. It indicates that in the guise of development, the Indigenous people have been threatened by violence, employing the state security forces. Hence, several scholars point out that these developmental projects also militarised the areas where it is built.

Similarly, the movement against the SLHEP has been met with violent repression by the state.<sup>570</sup> It has led to the jailing of many anti-dam protestors.<sup>571</sup> There were efforts to paint the anti-dam movement of Obonori as a security issue connected to Maoist activities.<sup>572</sup> In linking Maoist connections with the movement, the government tried to dismantle the movement and discourage people from participating in the movement.<sup>573</sup> These news reports reveal the numerous times the leaders and participants of the dam were intimidated, threatened, and jailed. Emerging scholarship highlights the state's monopoly over violence to promote 'development' and the dangerous situation under which the social movements function under an authoritarian regime in India.<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>570</sup> "10 Injured in Firing on Anti-Dam Agitators," Archive, *The Assam Tribune* (Guwahati), September 15, 2010, <https://assamtribune.com/10-injured-in-firing-on-anti-dam-agitators>.

<sup>571</sup> Anupam Chakravarty, "Subansiri Dam Protests: Akhil Gogoi Goes on Indefinite Fast," *Down To Earth*, May 21, 2012, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/environment/subansiri-dam-protests-akhil-gogoi-goes-on-indefinite-fast-38257>.

<sup>572</sup> Baruah, "Whose River Is It Anyway?"; Karlsson, "Into the Grid: Hydropower and Subaltern Politics in Northeast India."

<sup>573</sup> "Govt Using Maoist Threat to Quell Protests against Mega Dams in NE," *The Times of India*, October 9, 2011, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/govt-using-maoist-threat-to-quell-protests-against-mega-dams-in-ne/articleshow/10289037.cms>.

<sup>574</sup> Bastian Duarte and Jairath, "Anti-Dispossession Movements in India and Mexico"; Jairath, "Special Issue on Dispossession and Resistance in India and Mexico"; Shah, "When Decolonization Is Hijacked."

On the other hand, literature on social movements indicates that people at the receiving end of land grabs do not always protest it. Literature on people's reactions to global land grabs indicates that community reactions to land grabs or developmental projects are varied and complex.<sup>575</sup> Natalia Mamonova discusses how Ukrainian peasants were integrating with large farming companies that were seizing land in rural Ukraine.<sup>576</sup> The Ukrainian peasants adapted to the changing scenario, and they showed a lack of interest in upholding the peasant way of life. In the process, it challenges the assumptions that there will be indispensable resistance when there are challenges to the peasants' way of life. Peasants or people threatened to be displaced are integrated into the development models contingent on their socio-economic conditions. In the Indian context, the response to land grabs similarly remains diverse and complex.<sup>577</sup> There is a consensus that not everyone loses out on development projects; instead, depending on the social position, development projects have brought differentiated impacts.<sup>578</sup> In recent years, numerous communities, especially peasant communities, have been seen protesting against SEZs or becoming a part of them. The protests of peasants of Singur, Nandigram and Goa stood out as a

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<sup>575</sup> Hall et al., “Resistance, Acquiescence or Incorporation?”

<sup>576</sup> Natalia Mamonova, “Resistance or Adaptation? Ukrainian Peasants’ Responses to Large-Scale Land Acquisitions,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 42, nos. 3–4 (2015): 607–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.993320>.

<sup>577</sup> Levien, *Dispossession without Development*.

<sup>578</sup> Levien, *Dispossession without Development*; Michael Levien, “The Politics of Dispossession: Theorizing India’s ‘Land Wars,’” *Politics & Society* 41, no. 3 (2013): 351–94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329213493751>; Alpa Shah et al., *Ground down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class, and Inequality in Twenty-First Century India* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

success story of resisting developmental projects.<sup>579</sup> On the other hand, there are also instances of people who became a part of the SEZ in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and many other states.<sup>580</sup>

Within this context, Indigenous communities are often seen to represent vocal opposition and an uncompromising stand against such projects.<sup>581</sup> Specifically, the Central Indian tribes are known for their resistance to development projects. They have become the face of advocating an alternative development model. Michael Levien argues that the tribals protest not because they are primordially attached to the land.<sup>582</sup> He refuses to paint the tribes as romantic populations with an inherent attachment to nature. Instead, he points out that many factors lead to resistance against the projects rather than integration. Their disinterest in integration is explained by their remoteness, which leads to lower compensation; secondly, there is a mismatch between the knowledge of the people to be employed in the project; thirdly, it is their material relations with the natural resources that lead to protests against it. This analysis of Levien holds a material and historical understanding of the tribals. However, the pervasive imagery which assumes that Indigenous people would outrightly reject development is still prevalent.<sup>583</sup> Scholars like Judith Whitehead argue that these environmental movements in India, like the NBA, have overlooked the people's historical, material, and social context, which the global political economy has shaped for centuries.<sup>584</sup> It has

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<sup>579</sup> Levien, *Dispossession without Development*.

<sup>580</sup> Levien, *Dispossession without Development*.

<sup>581</sup> See Levien, "The Politics of Dispossession"; Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*; Cepek, *Life in Oil*.

<sup>582</sup> Levien, "The Politics of Dispossession."

<sup>583</sup> Gerharz et al., *Indigeneity on the Move*.

<sup>584</sup> Whitehead, *Development and Dispossession in the Narmada Valley*.

also misled us into understanding the tribals or Indigenous communities as simplistic communities. She further argues that Indigenous communities instead fall into a binary of representing ecologically sensitive communities as opposed to their material context and aspirations that continue to be shaped by the larger political economy. These movements often undermine or stop people's will to engage in development. Moreover, the social movements have failed to recognise the heterogeneous nature of tribal populations.

The emerging literature on Indigenous people's reactions to development projects challenges such *a priori* notions.<sup>585</sup> In a context of growing rural distress, Indigenous and tribal communities often find themselves at the social and economic margins, with amongst the poorest indices of development, and increasingly alienated from land and natural resources that were integral to their subsistence economy. Further, people's aspirations for upward mobility and a will to improve propel them deeper into a market economy, of which they seek a share. Mibi Ete, writing on Indigenous communities' responses towards large dams in Arunachal Pradesh, points to the relative lack of opposition to the many large dams proposed in the state for precisely some of these reasons.<sup>586</sup> For instance, she locates the negotiations that the Ramos tribe had with dam authorities for 'improvement/development' within their self-perception of being marginalised, powerless and

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<sup>585</sup> Cepek, *Life in Oil*; Dash, "'Future Uncertain!' — Dispossession by Mining and Young Men - Mining Company Engagements in Eastern India"; Ete, "Hydro-Dollar Dreams"; Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*; Itay Noy, "The Politics of Dispossession and Compensation in the Eastern Indian Coal Belt," *Critique of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2022): 56–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X221074831>; Sacco, *Paying the Land*; McDuie-Ra and Kikon, "Tribal Communities and Coal in Northeast India."

<sup>586</sup> Ete, "Hydro-Dollar Dreams."

backwards in relation to other tribes in the region. She stresses that these processes of negotiation or cooperation are often disregarded in popular discourses or academic debates.

Thus, people's engagement with the dam must also be situated in the diverse realities of the Misings, which are marked by internal differentiation, landlessness, joblessness, and agrarian crisis. Despite the adversities associated with the dam, since work resumed in 2019, people from the nearby areas have started to work on the dam construction, and the coronavirus pandemic has made the dam the only source of income. Regardless of the apocalyptic words and visions, people have found a way to earn a living on the dam. The work site at the dam has somehow eased the already scarce wage-labouring scenario. It provided a regular income of Rs. 15,000 to Rs. 30000, according to the category of work the people engaged in for their temporary tenure in the dam.

Sunday is the day of rest and feasting for the people who work at the dam. On weekdays, most men in the village are rarely seen, not even for a chat. The only exceptions are a few individuals working as wage labourers in the village. On days like these, it feels as though the village has changed significantly from the one I grew up in. Just a few years ago, I could easily meet and hang out with friends during the week. On a particular Sunday, I started looking for my friends at their homes. Eventually, I met my friend Rahul at his house. Rahul is a graduate with honours in Assamese literature from Gogamukh College. After his graduation, I saw him putting effort into getting many jobs. He even trained as a land surveyor and briefly worked in Uttar Pradesh for an electricity transmission line company. However, he did not find a foothold in any of the jobs. Rather, he found refuge in the dam. Among the village workers, he is known to be one of the most regular guys who does not skip a single day of work. He has the burden of educating his two sons, one of whom enrolled in a private English-medium school in Gogamukh. Rahul would often tell me about his struggle to sustain his family. When we had the conversation in 2021, he was already

a year into work and about to buy a second-hand motorbike for his daily commute to work. After a brief introduction from him about his work and the money he earns, I continued to question what the dam project brought to us and what he thought about it. After pausing for a while, chewing betel nut, Rahul said, 'The dam construction could not be stopped, although it should have been stopped. Although we protest against the dam, we cannot ignore the money from engaging in the work. It gives us a regular source of income.' He pointed at the scarce job opportunities and the surplus population who are looking for jobs and said, 'If we resist the dam and stop working at the sites, the company will find workers from elsewhere. There are already numerous people looking for jobs. They will easily replace us and will not even bother.'<sup>587</sup> These mixed feelings of engaging with the dam to earn money are rooted in society's material conditions, widespread unemployment, and aspirations for a better life. As is evident from the previous chapters, the material conditions of the villages have been historically impoverished. The landholdings are highly fragmented. Most of the population depends on *hajira* for daily existence. The natural resources that the people claim are gradually degrading, which worsens their material conditions. Despite the concerns related to the dam and the criticisms of the existing development model, individuals have persisted with this development, largely due to their prevailing material conditions.

On another day, I called Rahul and told him to call for a discussion with some of the people working at the dam site over an evening drink. We decided to meet at Susen's house. Susen and I prepared food and drinks for the workers who would turn up. Hunali, Koko, Rahul, Milton, and Nage came for the discussion. All of them worked on the project except Susen. They work as contractual labourers under Arunachali labour contractors outsourced by Patel Engineering Ltd.

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<sup>587</sup> Field notes, Bélang, September 26, 2021.

Hunali and Nage, in their 40s, used to be involved in *mistry* work. Both have a decade of experience and secured a skilled pay scale at the project. Koko used to depend on miscellaneous wage work; now, he works with Hunali at the same site. Milton, my childhood friend, works as an electricity generator caretaker. All of them belonged to landed families, but their lands are now fragmented. Susen poured the drinks, and we began to discuss their work at the dam site despite fear. Hunali shared his thoughts,

There may be a few labourers working there who support the dam construction, but most of us do not. I personally do not like the dam, but we have no choice but to work there. Our lives and livelihoods compel us to go. We do not go to work in support of the dam.

They all agreed with what Hunali said about their engagement with the dam. Koko then intervened and said, 'Unemployment in our society is taking a toll on us. Our material conditions have deteriorated over the past. We do not have enough land and resources.' Rahul then pointed to the destruction caused by the dam and said,

The dam has drained our resources and negatively impacted the environment, affecting the hills, as well as the river's flora and fauna. It is depleting the few resources we have left. The river no longer has enough resources, as the dam consumes everything. Additionally, we have noticed a significant decline in the presence of birds and animals at our work site.

The conversation paused for a while, then Nage intervened, 'Whatever may be the future, but presently people are living a better life.' 'Yes, you are right,' said Koko. Koko further said,

We need money to live in the present times. I have supported my three children at ease because of the income from the dam. My parents struggled to provide us with biscuits or

clothes. You must know how many clothes children need in a year. We get nothing in the village for free. We must buy everything.<sup>588</sup>

The above discussion on their engagements with the dam reflects the looming agrarian crises, loss of natural resources, and lack of an employment in the village. In these prevailing crises, working at the dam becomes a way to have a better life. The villagers are not in a position to refute the money and comfort that is coming from the dam. Moreover, the aspirations to fight the material conditions blur the pervasive fear of the dam. People describe their work experience in the dam as pleasant and profitable. They have many ways to skip work and rest. However, it is still dangerous to work at the sites. There are numerous cases of deaths of workers from the area while meeting with an accident at work.

One day, while returning home from a visit to the dam site, I encountered Jonti (pseudonym) from Bélang. I am told by elders that his grandfather had sold their lands for consumption of opium. Currently, they only have a small homestead, where their rickety house is built on the edge of the road in the village. He had recently cleared matriculation and enrolled in a higher secondary school. He works as an unskilled wage labourer. He was returning from the work site, and as he saw me, he greeted me with a smile. I told him that I was wandering around, talking to people about their work on the dam. Then I asked him, ‘How is work here?’ He replied with a smile, ‘Magbo (Brother-in-law), it feels better to work in the dam. The work is much easier than working back in the village. Working in the dam is much more comfortable because I work only for half the day. The rest of the day, I rest.’<sup>589</sup> As Jonti waited for the tempo, I stood by the bridge that

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<sup>588</sup> Field notes, Bélang, November 4, 2021.

<sup>589</sup> Field notes, Dam site, December 2, 2022.

overlooked the under-construction dam. It seemed to me that it had increased in height in no time. It was late in the evening, and thousands of lights lit up the dam structure. Along with Jonti, hundreds of workers were returning home, and many others were rushing for their night shifts at the site. After a few minutes, the tempo arrived, and he left.

Many workers discuss how comfortable it is to work at the dam site. One day, Rahul mentioned, 'I work during the first half of the day and rest in the second half.' Even on night shifts, I have heard about them getting enough sleep in between work shifts. It is a regular income without having to spend the entire day working. The dam is where they can earn money without working much. I often meet Rahul and a few of his friends who get home early because they leave their work midway through the day. The improvement in people's material condition is visible. The people engaged in the dam are becoming better off than those who are not. The village beside Bélang, Jengrai, is one example. People of Jengrai began working on the dam much earlier than the people of Bélang. Many people in the area have witnessed and recognised the improvement in people's conditions. People have been able to build *pucca* houses. Often, people of Bélang express regret that they did not get involved with the dam construction earlier. One day, Susen, while leading the construction of a concrete house for a person working on a dam in neighbouring Jengrai, reminded me about their material improvements. He said,

Look at Jengrai. Look at their houses; they are all *pucca* houses. Our village has remained the same. Look at our village; we should have started to work for the company early. Only during the pandemic did we start to work for the company. If our people had been engaged

in the dam since the initial day, we would have prospered. We would have become employees with higher salaries.<sup>590</sup>

Amid the visible improvements, the residents of Bélang are actively seeking opportunities to engage in the dam construction project and to ensure they receive their fair share of the benefits.

One day, I sat down with Ménéko, a construction worker in his thirties, at a shop in the Bélang *tiniali*. I asked him to help me count the number of motorbikes that had increased in the village. We counted more than sixty bikes, whereas there were hardly ten just a few years ago. The rise in the number of bikes is largely due to the changes brought about by the dam's construction. Most of these bikes are purchased in instalments, as people hope to pay them off before the dam's construction is complete. Many young people desire to own a bike, and a few of them come to me for suggestions on the best bikes available in the market.

Just beside the shop where we were sitting, a new shop was under construction. I came to know it was owned by Rahul. He had saved over 1.5 lakhs in over three years of working at the dam. Rahul informed me that he planned to start a grocery store. There are several similar 'success' stories from across these villages. There are stories of many who could buy back their mortgaged lands or could successfully organise a big wedding ceremony, purchase gold for their wives and daughters, afford health expenses, and increase landholdings.

## **6. Development and its differential impact**

Although, people have seen improvement in a short period, at the same time, they were faced with an anxious future and anticipated a disaster. However, development impacts people differently,

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<sup>590</sup> Field notes, Bélang, January 29, 2023.

depending on their social positions.<sup>591</sup> In the evening, when we had the group discussion, Hunali also stressed the negative changes and increasing precarity in the villages. He said,

How will our future be amidst landlessness, fragmentation of land, and loss of resources? Look at our village. Is there a single youth who goes to college to study? Most of them are involved in the dam construction work. We are just thinking about the present, not our future. They will buy a bike with a 3-year instalment. These situations make me sad. In the past, the labourers were picked up by the company in trucks or buses. But today, we are on our own. We must rent our vehicles to go to work. The welfare of the labourers is of little concern to the company. Even if we are hurt, there is no insurance for us. There have been cases of accidents, and there are efforts from the company to bury the truth.<sup>592</sup>

Concerns about the future weigh heavily on many individuals. While the community recognises the short-term benefits that the dam provides to the village, there remains significant uncertainty about how these labourers navigate their daily lives. Despite their challenges, they continue to work on the dam, often treated as disposable workers without job security, as they are employed through labour contractors. These workers are aware of the Provident Fund that they are entitled to, but there are notable discrepancies in its distribution. Many suspect that the contractors are misappropriating the funds meant for the labourers. Nevertheless, amid these insecurities and instances of exploitation, people find some solace in having a steady source of income.

They are also ready to work without much protest because of the weak Labour Unions. One of the employees, an engineer in the project, highlighted the discrepancies in disbursing wages, ‘The

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<sup>591</sup> Levien, *Dispossession without Development*; Shah et al., *Ground down by Growth*.

<sup>592</sup> Field notes, November 4, 2021.

official wage rate is Rs. 467, where the contractor gets a share from it, then it is reduced to Rs. 427, but the labourers are paid according to whims around Rupees 380- Rupees 390.’ He further said, ‘If one complains, they have a high chance of getting terminated.’<sup>593</sup> As Gago and Mezzadra argue, ‘Extraction cannot be reduced to raw materials. Extraction also targets the labour and life of populations, aiming at extracting value from them in such a way it expands and complements the notion of exploitation itself.’<sup>594</sup> Talking about such discrepancies with Koko, he said,

We know this case and how they extort money from each labourer daily. We cannot go against the labour contractors. It is an open secret. We cannot raise our voices against this corruption, or we will be fired from our jobs. We cannot raise the issue because we sometimes sulk at work. Sometimes, we rest and then work.<sup>595</sup>

Along with the presence of an exploitative work environment, my conversation and observations unpack an emerging patron-client relationship between the workers and the contractors. The contractors are called *maliks*, which could be translated to owner. These further get revealed at any festivals or rituals held in the village. The *maliks* get a special reception from labourers who work under them on-site. They are treated to the best foods and drinks. One would often come across listening to revering the *maliks* by calling them sir. These instances of treating the *maliks* reflect their efforts to be on good terms while they are employed under them. Moreover, this is also a way to ascertain future job opportunities under these *maliks*, when they are laid off when they are out

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<sup>593</sup> Field notes, Mohoricamp, March 10, 2022.

<sup>594</sup> Verónica Gago and Sandro Mezzadra, “A Critique of the Extractive Operations of Capital: Toward an Expanded Concept of Extractivism,” *Rethinking Marxism* 29, no. 4 (2017): 579, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2017.1417087>.

<sup>595</sup> Field notes, Bélang, March 2, 2023.

of work. Keeping a good relationship and gaining trust often leads them to upgrade their job from unskilled to semi-skilled workers.

There are numerous instances where the *maliks* used the labourers for household work. Rahul has also been involved in the farm of one of his labour contractors. He complains about the work being risky because the area where they work is elephant-prone. Nonetheless, Rahul works on the farm without any complaints. He cannot afford to lose his job and must depend on the labour contractors to continue earning for his family. Moreover, he was frank about how he was treated by the *Malik* family with the best food when he worked for them on their farm. He also told me about how his *malik* will get him into newer jobs when their construction work is over on the site. Many workers mention how some of their *maliks* are humane and how they trust them.

Against a backdrop of a crisis of social reproduction, people are desperate to sustain their jobs despite the exploitation. People's willingness to work in the dam displays a higher level of unemployment in rural areas. Numerous reports on youth unemployment in the NER show a double-digit figure compared to the national figure.<sup>596</sup> Scholars would term these populations surplus reserve armies without access to a decent wage or a regular job, a reality in Asian, African, and South American countries.<sup>597</sup> In the context of joblessness, multiple positions in the dam are obtained through familial and acquaintance ties. For instance, Milton secured a job through his elder brother's connection with one of the employees. He is not fond of working as wage labour as it demands heavy physical work. He belongs to a better-off family that can negotiate better than

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<sup>596</sup> Kaustubh Deka, "Youth and Infrastructure Development in Northeast India," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung India*, 2019, <https://in.boell.org/en/2019/03/19/youth-and-infrastructure-development-northeast-india>.

<sup>597</sup> Li, "To Make Live or Let Die?"

many others in the village. Likewise, I have heard of many others in the village who secured jobs by bribing.

This, however, does not guarantee a permanent job. The tenure depends on continuing work at a particular site. Once the site is completed, people lose their jobs. Milton's tenure at his job ended when the construction was over. He was out of work for a few days. His family once requested that I help him secure a job, as I knew an engineer who worked in the company. I took him to the engineer with their request and put up his case. This also applies to the wage labourers. They often lose their jobs when they complete a construction site. They cannot afford to stay without a job. I often observed that labour groups went to their *malik's* house to discuss future work and where they could secure it. They depend on the labour contractors to find more sites and continue the work.

However, as the dam is nearing completion, people have gradually been released from their jobs. The work on the dam is almost over, and people have become jobless in the middle of 2023. The village is back to its normalcy, where you meet people on weekdays. Although people have been out of jobs, a few continue to work. Changes from a wage rate system to a piecework rate system have caused people to leave their wage jobs. Earlier, the *Maliks* mainly hired people from the neighbouring villages. Now, the *maliks* mostly hire *Miya* (Bengali muslim) labourers. When I asked about the changes, one of the last wage labourers from Bélang told me, '*Miyas* work at a cheaper rate than us. They are also easy to dominate. Since we are locals, we only work if the rate

suits us. *Miyas* cannot assert their rights as we do.’<sup>598</sup> This speaks volumes about the social and material position of the *Miya* labourers in Assam.<sup>599</sup>

In Bélang, hardly four people were working when I returned home at the beginning of 2024. Hunali was one of the last people to work. He also left work because it did not pay him as it did in the past. One worker who was still engaged said, ‘Yeah, I am continuing to work, but we do not earn the amount of money we used to earn when we were paid based on a daily wage rate.’ The context of exhaustion of work poses numerous questions for the future. One village elder pointed out future labour questions for the poorer section of the people. He said,

We do not have enough land, and not everyone is educated to take up modern jobs. We will be confined to only wage work that involves physical labour. Where does our future lie? We are not prepared for new kinds of work. Even if we migrate to the cities, we will only be confined to wage labour.<sup>600</sup>

This does not apply to the political class and jobholders. ‘Development’ as a force comes with this overarching language of improving the human population and standard of living. However, it has a different effect on the existing power relations. Shah et al. argue that free market policies and state-sponsored privatization, which are often promoted in the name of development, have not fulfilled the promises made to improve the conditions of Adivasi and Dalit populations at the

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<sup>598</sup> Field notes, Bélang, February 6, 2024.

<sup>599</sup>To further explore the socio-economic situation of the Bengali muslim population, please see Gorky Chakraborty, *Assam’s Hinterland: Society and Economy in the Char Areas* (Akansha Pub. House, 2009).

<sup>600</sup> Field notes, Bélang, April 20, 2022.

bottom of society.<sup>601</sup> In fact, these approaches have had the opposite effect. They further argue that this capitalist development intensifies the existing social identities. It further contends that the Dalits and Adivasis are threatened with new forms of exploitation and oppression. This analysis of new forms of capitalist development models opens scholars' attention and efforts to study the differential impact of development on the marginalised sections of people.

Similarly, there is a general understanding of the dam's differing impact on the local population. I frequently heard people comparing experiences based on ethnic identity, particularly among the Misings, the caste Assamese community, and the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, in relation to the benefits and drawbacks that the dam brought to their lives. There are comparative narratives about how the Misings missed out on reaping the benefits of the dam in comparison to the Arunachali and the Assamese. Many have suggested that I evaluate the extent to which members of the Mising community have achieved wealth as a result of the dam's development in comparison to Arunachali villages and the *Mipag* villages (a term used by the Misings to refer to the Assamese population). In this context, in people's narrative from Bélang, the people impacted by the dam project in Arunachal Pradesh have seen unprecedented 'development and improvement.' In recognition of the property regime of the Arunachalis, the company also had to collaborate with the propertied class of Arunachal that falls under the project.<sup>602</sup> Primarily, it brought sudden material changes to

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<sup>601</sup> Shah et al., *Ground down by Growth*.

<sup>602</sup> The state of Arunachal Pradesh issues land titles in accordance with the Land Settlement and Records Amendment Bill 2018. Previously, citizens of Arunachal Pradesh did not possess formal land titles; instead, they were issued land possession certificates. Despite these legal frameworks, people often assert their land rights based on customary laws. See Arunabh Saikia, "Arunachal Pradesh Gives Individuals Ownership of Land but Will They Really Benefit from

the village. Most of the labour contracts are awarded to the people on the right bank of the river, which falls under Arunachal Pradesh. People from the village getting contracts is rooted in their control over the lands where the part of the dam project is situated. In the Arunachali village, the one with the most land under the project became the richest. However, in that village, no one is a labourer; most are labour contractors and supervisors. Elders from Bélang say that there was nothing on the Arunachal side before the dam. One of them said, ‘They have become *Mahajans*. They were not like this before. They used to clear forests for us, and we employed them. Now look at them, they can employ our people. Most people currently work under them. In a similar conversation with another older man, I asked him why it was the case. He replied, ‘They have control over resources. They own hills, which belong to them, unlike Assam, where everything belongs to the state. Moreover, even their state stands for the people.’ Similarly, many elders pointed out that the Arunachali villages were not as wealthy as they are today.

However, in the context of Assam, customary claim over the land does not prevail. The land where the dam is built is a reserve forest, although people of Bélang and neighbouring villages used to work and claim those lands in the past. As mentioned, the land where the head office of the project is located was farming grounds for many people from Bélang. However, the FD has evicted the people from the space because it is in a reserve forest. It shows how the people of Arunachal Pradesh have more bargaining power owing to their control over the area where the dam is built. On the other hand, it was the opposite for the Misings, who had once claimed the left bank area of the project. Moreover, in the context of *Mipags*, I inquired about the methods through which the

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It?,” *Scroll.In*, March 23, 2018, <https://scroll.in/article/872474/arunachal-pradesh-gives-individuals-ownership-of-land-but-will-they-really-benefit-from-it>.

*Mipags* experienced improved conditions due to the dam. There is no clear-cut answer to that. In many discussions I have had with people, they would often assign the *Mipags* to be cleverer (in a negative sense) than the Misings. *Mipag* is a term used by the Mising to refer to outsiders. However, in Assam, in contemporary times, it is confined to the caste Assamese or people who have close relations to the caste Assamese. The term *Mipag* carries a baggage of stereotypes, and they are often portrayed as cunning and untrustworthy.

People have seen the growth of a village near Dirpai called Jorabari (pseudonym), a *mipag* village. The Jorabari village saw sudden growth after the dam had been built. I am told that many contractors belong to the village. Talking to Bordola, from Dirpai states, ‘People of Jorabari have grasped the opportunities unlike us because they are cleverer than us. They know how to make connections.’<sup>603</sup> Many people echo the impression of the village as becoming wealthy. Many elders whom I spoke to lamented the general impoverishment of the Misings because the Misings are not clever enough. The lamentation could be linked to the broader political and economic dynamics of the caste Assamese, who hold dominance, while tribal populations in Assam fall behind them. The Mising movement for the Sixth Schedule upholds that the Misings as a community in Assam have not improved as compared to the tribal in the neighbouring hilly states.<sup>604</sup> Nonetheless, the caste Assamese is not a uniform category. Anyone who fits into the term *mipags* is often associated with negative undertones, and they are the ones who have benefited mainly from the dam in Assam. Primarily, the contractors from Assam are said to belong to *mipags* and have no allegiance to the organisations involved in the anti-dam protest. Many contractors in the project had resigned from

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<sup>603</sup> Field notes, Dirpai, September 21, 2021.

<sup>604</sup> To have further understanding of the Mising Movement and their demands, see Pangging, *Li:Sang: The Mouthpiece of Takam Mising Porin Kebang*.

student politics and became a part of the project. Many pointed out that many *mipag* contractors became part of the dam while the movement was on.

On the other hand, in a conversation with one of the top leaders of TMPK from Gogamukh, he said, ‘I could have quickly become a labour supply contractor, but I chose not to become one because it would tarnish the image of the organisation I represent.’ However, the grassroots leaders in my fieldwork, whom I have encountered, have a sense of losing out in the development process. A few of them are trying to become labour contractors under the company. For instance, whenever I talked to a few grassroots leaders of TMPK, the likes of Sunil (who is no longer involved with TMPK), were involved in the movement; he regrets their decision not to take the money offered by the company when they were agitating. He said, ‘Had I known the movement would turn out like this, I would have taken the sack of money offered to us. We did not take the money because we were loyal to the movement.’ Similarly, while discussing the movement, another encounter with four senior TMPK cadres from the area resonated with dissatisfaction with not allying with the dam authorities. While discussing, one of the senior grassroots TMPK members from Mingmang said,

We would have been richer by now if the movement had not happened. Look at the changes that are happening in our areas. If the movement leaders had not stopped us, we would have been working in the company and would have had better lives. The leadership now has surrendered to the dam authorities and the state. We could have worked in the dam had we known the movement would fail.<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> Field notes, Borola TMPK office, February 9, 2022.

Sunil and his friends have been trying to secure a labour contract for a site. I often meet them coming to the project, trying to strike a deal. However, when I asked them about their chances of getting the contract, Sunil said it was already late when they were looking for these works. He said,

There was no chance of getting work at the right bank because Arunachali would not let us work there. Even on the left bank, the work is almost over. We are already late. We were left out of the process of becoming rich. We could have been the boss now.<sup>606</sup>

However, it came to my attention that Sunil and his friends secured a site to supply labour and were trying to get another. Similarly, a young leader belonging to a political family from Bélang faced setbacks while seeking work on the projects. While he knew about my fieldwork trip to the project office, he accompanied me to the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) office to learn about available CSR schemes. However, there was no positive response in our first meeting with the officer. He formed an association named the Mingmang Unemployed Youth Association to get contracts and schemes. I drafted a letter for the association seeking opportunities from the dam authorities. He said, 'The dam will be commissioned soon, and we should try to make as much opportunity from the dam.'<sup>607</sup> His efforts went in vain many times. In 2024, I learned he got a labour contract for a few remaining construction sites in the dam. He has been able to get that with a recommendation from a political leader. Now, he employs around 15 workers from the village, mostly youths in their early twenties.

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<sup>606</sup> Field notes, NHPC office, March 21, 2022.

<sup>607</sup> Field notes, Bélang, January 28, 2022.

The concerns and trajectories of the people engaged in politics or who have other avenues differ from those who earn a livelihood through wage labour. The question is serious for the poorer section facing ecological and agrarian crises. In mid-January 2025, in another group discussion at Susen's house with some construction workers and the new labour contractor. The conversation highlighted the different backgrounds in our society that allow us to have varied dreams and interests. The conversation took a turn when my cousin, Migang, in his early thirties, spoke about his regrets that they could not grasp the opportunity that the dam offered. The other worker sitting beside him, Jiten, Koko's younger brother, disagreed and said, 'I disagree with you, brother. Even if we wanted to grasp those opportunities or dreamt of earning money, we could not have done it.' He further said, 'Look at our material conditions. We do not have a fallback; we only work. If we had invested our time in looking for better opportunities or becoming contractors, we could not have done so because we did not have the resources or time to seek them. We are better suited to be labourers.' He did not stop there. He pointed at me and the labour contractor's social position to situate his argument. He said,

Do you think he (pointing at me) could continue to pursue higher studies at this age without his family's and parents' support? Could even he (pointing at the labour contractor) have secured a contract without his family's support? No, they could not. Our parents did not give us the platform. If we had resources, we could have secured all opportunities. Look at us! We are not in position to think of anything other than working to fulfil our daily needs.<sup>608</sup>

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<sup>608</sup> Field notes, Bélang, January 18, 2025.

These conversations and narratives leave us to question the overarching vague promises of development projects that come with the promise of improving lives. On the contrary of such promises, evidently, it reinforces the existing social and material conditions that force a section to work under exploitative conditions, lacking a foothold and another section that can exercise their choices. For the majority of the population, the grave question is about securing a source of income in the context of a crisis of social reproduction.

## 7. Conclusion

The chapter lays out people's complicated relationship with the dam amidst joblessness and agrarian crisis, where social reproduction has become increasingly challenging. It is an effort to understand the aftermath of the anti-dam movement that lasted for over a decade and highlights the surplus population struggling to secure jobs. The chapter highlights the importance of understanding people's historical, social, and material contexts to understand the varied reactions to development projects. It challenges the simplistic understanding of people's reactions to dams and development as acquiescence or resistance. Instead, it stresses the need to be situated within a dynamic context and process that is constantly negotiated, albeit under severely unequal terms.<sup>609</sup> This situation points towards the grave situation of the agrarian crisis and joblessness in these 'remote' corners of the Indigenous populations of the country. In this situation, people manage to secure a way of living that is far from ideal, leaving these populations in a precarious and vulnerable position for the future, effectively joining the surplus reserve army of the world.

Further, the chapter ends with how the entry of capital has differentiated impacts on communities based on social and material position. It points out how different social positions based on class,

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<sup>609</sup> Jairath, "Special Issue on Dispossession and Resistance in India and Mexico."

ethnicity, caste, gender, etc., negotiate with capital, and these negotiations lead to the accumulation of some who are already in a better position and keep majority in a precarious and vulnerable existence. These varied social positions and realities within these tribal communities, against an imagery to be relatively egalitarian or have control over resources, call for attention to Indigenous or tribal movements for autonomy and self-determination to consider these internal differentiations and issues related to labour and ecological degradation.



## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

This chapter concludes the thesis. The thesis aims to understand how Indigenous/tribal people react to development projects in the context of the agrarian crisis and changing political economy. This line of questioning is rooted in challenging the imagery of the Indigenous population being frozen in time. In doing so, the thesis contributes to critically understanding indigeneity and the larger literature of understanding people's reactions to an increase in global land grabs, especially in the lands that belong to Indigenous/tribal and peasant communities. There is a popular assumption that Indigenous populations have an intimate relationship with land, forest and water. Against this backdrop, there is a widely held perspective about Indigenous and tribal populations that depicts their resilience in maintaining an Indigenous lifestyle despite development pressures that threaten to dispossess them of their means of production.<sup>610</sup> Owing to this assumed relationship, a burden of resistance is placed on Indigenous communities by global advocacies of Indigenous movements.<sup>611</sup> However, the stress of romantic attachment with nature lies in the history of Indigenous communities' situated nature of struggle against projects that threaten to dispossess

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<sup>610</sup> See also Nilsen, "Contesting Resources, Contesting the Nation?"

<sup>611</sup> Cepek, *Life in Oil*.

them of their land.<sup>612</sup> Often, contrary to popular belief, Indigenous communities may not protest against development projects.<sup>613</sup>

In these contexts, based on reactions of tribal populations to development projects, there is a tendency to assign tropes of ‘pro-development’ or ‘anti-development.’ That leads to delegitimising the claims of indigeneity of Indigenous populations. Historically, scholars have presented a contrasting depiction of a ‘non-sustainable’ perspective on one hand, while on the other, they have expressed a ‘romantic attachment’ to the ways in which Indigenous peoples utilise forest resources.<sup>614</sup> Bengt G. Karlsson stresses that there is an underlying assumption that if Indigenous communities do not adhere to sustainable usage of resources, they are bound to lose their claim over the resources based on indigeneity.<sup>615</sup> He further argues that this argument arises in regions where Indigenous populations reside in areas rich in biodiversity and conservation space. This process of assigning tropes and critiques leads to delegitimising the claims of indigeneity by Indigenous communities across the world, often without considering the situated nature of their claims and their historical and material contexts.<sup>616</sup>

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<sup>612</sup> Jairath, “Indigeneity as Assertion Understanding Social Movements”; Nilsen, “Contesting Resources, Contesting the Nation?”

<sup>613</sup> Ete, “Hydro-Dollar Dreams”; McDuie-Ra, “The Dilemmas of Pro-Development Actors”; Hall et al., “Resistance, Acquiescence or Incorporation?”

<sup>614</sup> See also Julie Guthman, “Representing Crisis: The Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation and the Project of Development in Post-Rana Nepal,” *Development and Change* 28, no. 1 (1997): 45–69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00034>; Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*.

<sup>615</sup> Karlsson, “Destroying One’s Own Home.”

<sup>616</sup> Jairath, “Indigeneity as Assertion Understanding Social Movements”; Karlsson, “Destroying One’s Own Home.”

However, in the presence of these contrasting images, often what is left out is the analysis of people's historical and material conditions within a broader political economy that shapes their choices. Against these backdrops, the thesis contests this notion of a linear understanding of tribal population and argues for a historically and materially grounded understanding of change within tribal societies.<sup>617</sup> Hence, by a historically and materially rooted analysis, the thesis portrays a complex picture of Indigenous/tribal and peasant populations' reactions against development projects that threaten their means of reproduction.<sup>618</sup> The thesis calls for contesting the neat categorisation of people's reactions to development and argues that it is non-linear, dynamic, and dialectical.<sup>619</sup> The dynamic character is based on community efforts to negotiate with the state, corporations, and capital, and how these entities shape and act within communities.<sup>620</sup>

Thus, asking how people reacted to development projects during an ongoing agrarian and ecological crisis, I aimed to explore how this agrarian crisis originated in the first place. Hence, the first chapter examines the history of agrarian change and the entry of the fiscal regime following the British regime in the region to the present time, sedentarising a community from a

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<sup>617</sup> Cepek, *Life in Oil*; Vasundhara Jairath, "Environment as Land: Understanding Anti-Displacement Politics in Jharkhand," *Journal of Developing Societies* 37, no. 2 (2021): 216–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796X211001250>; Kikon, *Living with Oil and Coal*; Li, "Indigeneity, Capitalism, and the Management of Dispossession"; Li, "To Make Live or Let Die?"; Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

<sup>618</sup> Cepek, *Life in Oil*; Hall et al., "Resistance, Acquiescence or Incorporation?"; Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*; McDuie-Ra and Kikon, "Tribal Communities and Coal in Northeast India"; Ete, "Hydro-Dollar Dreams"; Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*; Sacco, *Paying the Land*.

<sup>619</sup> Jairath, "Special Issue on Dispossession and Resistance in India and Mexico."

<sup>620</sup> Jairath, "Special Issue on Dispossession and Resistance in India and Mexico"; Dash, "'Future Uncertain!' — Dispossession by Mining and Young Men - Mining Company Engagements in Eastern India."

history of being mobile. The chapter examines the historical progression of agrarian systems, specifically the transition from mobile subsistence agriculture to sedentary cash cropping practices. It places this transition within a broader political economy as well as aspirations of the people to engage in cash cropping. Furthermore, it contextualises the current state of agricultural practices, highlighting the shift from paddy as a cash crop to largely subsistence-oriented agriculture in contemporary settings. It situates the transition amidst the increasing ecological factors of floods and diseases that negatively impact the agrarian production process. In light of these circumstances, the chapter traces the history of land becoming a commodity, which became a fallback at a time of ecological crisis and disease. It also points to the failure of the weak Indian state, that have failed to support the suffering populations from these disasters and diseases. The effort to address these crises resulted in the sale of land, which subsequently rendered certain segments of the population landless, while concurrently enabling the accumulation of land among others. This led to increasing internal differentiation among the villagers, turning a section of the population impoverished and squeezed out of the agrarian system. This squeezed-out population in a context of joblessness is forced to depend on insecure, informal, and exploitative menial wage labour. In addition, the majority of the offspring of landed families have joined the squeezed-out population owing to joblessness and increasing land fragmentation due to the increase in population within the families. There is a gradual impoverishment of the majority of the village population, hence, joining the global reserve army of labour.

The second and third chapters on the river and the forest largely focus on how these natural resources provided a source of income in a context of joblessness and increasing pressure on land. This chapter sheds light on the gradual depletion of natural resources caused by human activities in the pursuit of livelihoods. However, with the increase of powerful extractive forces with a logic

of profit making, the depletion of the natural resources has drastically increased and further dispossessed the poorer sections who depend on the natural resources for social reproduction. In this context of heightened extraction, the poorer segments of the population remain the most vulnerable and precarious, losing access to the resources that are essential for their social and economic survival.

Within this context, where agriculture is unviable and there is an increase in the depletion of natural resources, failing to uphold social reproduction, the fourth chapter brings out how the dam construction economy reconfigures the economy of the people who have been facing hardships to socially reproduce themselves. Thus, in addressing the research question, a historically and materially grounded analysis of people's relationship with the dam reveals a paradoxical stance. On one hand, downstream villagers protested and expressed concerns about the risks associated with the dam; on the other hand, employment at the dam—despite its insecure and informal nature—offered a consistent source of income that enabled them to confront their precarious circumstances. Working in the dam has also been able to fulfil the aspirations of people, and there are success stories that have improved the living conditions of the wage workers. In the context of a lack of active movement against the dam and their becoming a part of its construction, the impression reflects people's acceptance of the dam. However, it is more nuanced. This ambiguous and paradoxical relationship lies in people's struggle for social reproduction for a majority of people who have been squeezed out of agriculture in their history of agrarian change. This struggle for social reproduction lies in the conjuncture of numerous factors rooted historically in the influence of changing political economy of controlling land and forest resources since colonial times, ecological factors, and increasing capitalistic relations within the community. Currently, aside from a few families, there are sections of the impoverished population without landholdings

or with fragmented landholdings, making it difficult for them to socially reproduce. Echoing Tania Li, the situation reflects the situation of ‘Land’s End.’<sup>621</sup> This process of transition from having access to enough land to increasing pressure on land does not resonate with the notion of drastic changes as suggested by Marx’s idea of primitive accumulation, but is mundane, and it is within kin and relatives from the same community.<sup>622</sup> There were no direct external forces that dispossessed people from their land; nonetheless, it is also rooted in conjunctures of local ecological factors and increasing capitalistic relationships within the community.

Thus, in the process of highlighting the struggle of people’s social reproduction, the thesis contests the fixated imageries of the Indigenous population as frozen in time, self-sufficient, egalitarian, and idealistic attachment to nature. Moreover, against a popular narrative of Indigenous populations as homogeneous, the capitalistic relations within Indigenous communities imply that tribal communities are heterogeneous.<sup>623</sup> Hence, the thesis also emphasises the point that apart from being influenced by the larger political economy, the present situation of impoverishment is also rooted in the increasing class relations within the community. This heterogeneous nature is reflected across Indigenous communities in India, where section of tribal elites increase the accumulation of land and resources against a poorer section of the tribal population.<sup>624</sup> The process

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<sup>621</sup> Li, *Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

<sup>622</sup> Li, *Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

<sup>623</sup> Minati Dash, “Dispossession by Mining and Differentiation Among Young Men by Chalki in Eastern India,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 57, nos. 1–2 (2023): 122–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00699659231212964>; Khan, “Is Tribe a Homogeneous Category?”

<sup>624</sup> Kikon and Karlsson, *Leaving the Land*; Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast*; Karlsson, “Destroying One’s Own Home.”

of accumulation has led to the dispossession of a section of Indigenous communities who depend on these resources as commons for upholding their daily activities.

However, in a broader trend of increasing pressure on land and resources, people are not extremely helpless. The villagers have always found a way to sustain a living. The thesis highlights the history of negotiations of the community with different regimes and powerful actors. Negotiation is a central theme that stands out while revisiting the thesis chapters. Historically, people have negotiated with the state for access to lands, forests, and rivers that the state exclusively claims. Moreover, against a weak welfare Indian state, when impacted by ecological factors and diseases, they were left to fend for themselves, and in these circumstances, they sought recourse to selling land. The deepening agrarian and employment crises have led to the opening of new avenues for logging and mining. Moreover, it also has to be kept in mind that there is an ecological degradation of these resources. However, the thesis does not assign tropes to the villagers as a non-sustainable way of living. However, it situates them in a need to socially reproduce themselves in the presence of a weak welfare state and increasing capitalistic relationships within the village against a broader political economy. In the context of ecological degradation, currently, the majority of the villagers have found a way in the concrete construction sites. They have quickly learnt how to work with concrete, which has been one of the major refuges for most of the village population, irrespective of whether they are landless or landed.

Conversely, while there is an emphasis on people's ability to negotiate, these negotiations of communities are always on unequal terms in a broader political economy.<sup>625</sup> In today's context of neoliberal capitalism, discussions about negotiation must consider the class relations and diverse

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<sup>625</sup> Jairath, "Special Issue on Dispossession and Resistance in India and Mexico."

characteristics of tribal populations within their communities and their interactions with other tribes and caste societies. Recent scholarly works highlight the differentiated reactions to extractive projects based on varied social positions and identities in India, leading to increased domination by wealthy members between communities and within communities.<sup>626</sup> It has led to what Alpa Shah and Jen Lerche write about the economic growth of India, ‘...not only income inequality but also social inequality has become entrenched rather than erased in India.’<sup>627</sup> The chapters on the thesis highlight these issues of how the wage-working population of the village are positioned in relation to capitalistic relations within the community, neighbouring tribes and the Assamese population. These poorer sections of the villagers highlighted concerns of an uncertain future, a lack of choice and a foothold, and insecurity in doing informal wage labour. The uncertainty is rooted in the broader trend of the current political economy, where the state has failed to create secure jobs for the unemployed population. However, currently, government welfare schemes<sup>628</sup> and institutions have had a strong presence for the last two decades under the

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<sup>626</sup> Levien, *Dispossession without Development*; Shah et al., *Ground down by Growth*.

<sup>627</sup> Alpa Shah and Jens Lerche, “Tribe, Caste, and Class- New Mechanisms of Exploitation and Oppression,” in *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class, and Inequality in Twenty-First Century India*, by Alpa Shah et al. (Oxford University Press, 2018), 203.

<sup>628</sup> The villagers are beneficiaries of central government schemes, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), National Food Security Act (NFSA), Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), and Pradhan Mantri Awaaz Yojana (PMAY).

Panchayati Raj system<sup>629</sup> and the Mising Autonomous Council (MAC)<sup>630</sup>. Despite these institutions and schemes at play, there are no radical changes in people's lives, and they continue to depend extremely on *hajira*. However, examining the ground realities of the schemes and their implementation was beyond the scope of the thesis.

In these conjunctures of increasing land pressure, internal differentiation, joblessness, agricultural unviability, and depletion of natural resources, there is an uphill battle for the Indigenous population and the leadership that stands to represent the Indigenous population. Against the backdrop of emerging labour questions, implying a newer experience and reality for large populations of poor Indigenous people, there is a need to centre the labour question of these rural areas and secure the lives of the Indigenous population migrating for work. However, there is no easy answer to challenge the new realities emerging in these areas dominated by Indigenous populations. It is essential to acknowledge what Tania Li emphasises: the significance of understanding how capitalist relations establish themselves in areas occupied by Indigenous and tribal communities.<sup>631</sup> Hence, in a context where capitalist relationships within Indigenous communities in the NER result in land alienation, resource depletion, and increasing unemployment, it is essential to ask a fundamental question raised by Maaker and Tula: who

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<sup>629</sup> The Panchayati Raj system is self-governance system and decentralised model of governance for socio economic transformation in rural India.

<sup>630</sup> MAC was formed after the Mising Autonomous Council Act 1995 under the state of Assam, where the community had been granted autonomy to govern themselves for a social, economic, educational, and cultural advancement of the Mising communities along with other communities that fall under the area of council. See <https://directoratetribalaffairsplain.assam.gov.in/information-services/autonomous-councils>

<sup>631</sup> Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*.

possesses the authority to define and regulate the customary rights of these tribal communities?<sup>632</sup> Similarly, it is also significant to raise the classic question in rural agrarian political economy articulated by Bernstein, which becomes fundamental ‘Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it?’<sup>633</sup> These questions are not novel; however, within the contemporary framework characterised by expanding capitalist relations and the proliferation of extractive industries that displace Indigenous communities, these issues require ongoing scrutiny and engagement by Indigenous communities and organisations.



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<sup>632</sup> Maaker and Tula, *Unequal Land Relations in North East India*.

<sup>633</sup> Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*, 22–24.

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