

Land, Class, Ethnicity: Permutations of  
Environmental Conflicts in Two Districts of  
Assam

by

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Abstract:

This thesis deals with two cases of migration-induced environmental conflicts in India's Northeast. Although the conflicts in the districts of Nagaon and Karbi Anglong have repeatedly escalated to the level of armed violence involving rebel groups, civilians (both settlers and indigenous) and security forces, they have not received much media or scientific attention. The investigation starts with tracing the local histories of conflict between indigenous communities and settlers in the two districts. As at each stage in these histories relationships between the contending parties will not only have included conflictive, but also cooperative elements, the study takes a special interest in identifying instances of the latter and the conditions that gave rise to them. In other words, the researcher will not only look at boundaries – of territory, identity and social interaction – and the way these are reinforced by the conflict parties, but also try to chart the pathways connecting them – boundary-crossing relationships of e.g. political incorporation and economic exchange. Crucially, the study *focuses on the impacts on the conflict* – the ways it is waged and possible openings for its transformation – *of the adoption of different ideological and political alignments by rural subjects* in both districts. The findings of the study are interpreted in the light of recent theorizing on what is called “conflict inversion”, where “channels” for waging the conflict – ethnicity, or class – come to replace in the actors’ perception of the initial conflict causes, and have to be addressed as such by whoever attempts to initiate a process of conflict transformation. The thesis claims that in determining what trajectories such environmental conflicts can take, the institutional framework (within which they occur), the role of state and non-state actors and the possibility of looking at mitigating the impacts of these conflicts have assumed as much importance as the conflicts themselves.

Since the study is based on a comparison of environmental conflicts in two neighbouring districts in central Assam, there is an exhaustive description of the history of how different administrative conditions developed frontier conditions in the two districts. The description draws on pre-colonial chronicles of the Ahom monarchs, colonial archives and post-colonial policy to show

how historical considerations determine current political identities. In this regard, the thesis claims that conflict over resources, such as minerals, water and territory forms the traditional source of violent contests between peoples. At the outset, the study locates the geopolitical history of Assam and engages with the terms that recur within the study: (a) peasants, (b) indigenous. While conceding that the manner in which these terms are used are still ongoing theoretical and historical debates, an attempt is made to show why the colonial encounter plays such a central role in the current usages of the terms in the thesis. This study further gives a brief outline of the different ethnic groups present in the two districts by using colonial and post-colonial census data. It also describes the manner in which colonial authorities introduced changes in land use patterns in the two districts. While the character of Nagaon changed significantly with the import of indentured labour (for the tea plantations) and agricultural settlers (for revenue) during the colonial period, Karbi Anglong (being a hill region) did not have such a radical change in land-use, primarily because it was designated as an 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' area by the British. However, sequestered into an excluded area has left enduring traces of underdevelopment in the district. For a cogent reading of the thesis, I shall divide the abstract along two narrative axes. The first narrative deals with the story of Nagaon and the second deals with Karbi Anglong. I try and find common grounds and differences towards the end.

### Nagaon

The thesis further asserts that while ethnicity, indigenesness and class are considered to be antithetical principles of organizing collectives for political action, there is some degree of overlap in the manner in which these positions are played out in certain cases. The appeal to ethnic ties in the pursuit of a common agenda evokes myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity between the putative members of an *ethnie*. Where social movements profess class as their main organizing principle, they point to a shared situation of exploitation because of the dominant class' appropriation of the surplus produced by the movements' constituencies. Ethnic protest

discourses usually focus around the charge of collective discrimination based on race and/or culture, whereas class-based protest usually involves calls for a redistribution of societal wealth for the benefit of an economically disadvantaged class or alliance of classes. These factors recur with important and different permutations in both the districts where fieldwork was conducted.

In the course of the study, the colonial history of British capital, military and administrative interventions are discussed at length. Crucial to the study is the fact that many of these interventions have left their traces in contemporary governance and administration of the region (and the two districts) under consideration. Against this backdrop, a comparison of the frontier history and characteristics of both districts are attempted. In the case of the current district of Nagaon, the institutional settings have undergone drastic changes in the last hundred years. From being one of the most favoured districts for peasant settlers (and to a lesser extent, planters) it is now a district where land-human ratio is among the densest. The institutional settings that govern access to management of natural resources – such as forests, cultivable land and commons – have also changed within the territory, giving rise to different forms of political conflicts and mobilisation.

The thesis also tries to draw out the similarities and contrasts of the historical process of frontier making and political mobilisation in the two districts. In Nagaon, the pre-colonial social formation included various sections of caste-Hindu Assamese groups, indigenous tribes and a few ethnic groups from the Gangetic plains. After its merger with British India, the district witnessed struggles of peasants (of diverse ethnic origins) against colonial authority in the late nineteenth century. Almost a century later, this ethnic solidarity among peasants gave way to ethnic conflict when indigenous peasants massacred their settler counterparts in Nellie in 1983. In the interim period, ethnic mobilisation – of both Assamese and settler groups – began to surface as part of the larger politics during the transfer of power in the middle of the twentieth century. Census reports were an integral part of the process of creating an environment of competition in Nagaon (and other parts of the Brahmaputra valley) during this period.

European planters also established a few tea estates around the foothills. The forest resources of the district remained a source of revenue for the colonial administration, as wood and forest products like rubber found their way into a larger, global market. Besides planters, speculators and colonial administrators, the district also attracted missionaries like Miles Bronson, who moved there from Sibsagar and set up three stations of the American Baptist Church during the period 1843 to 1845. Bronson and the American missionaries also set up social institutions like the Nowgong (Nagaon) Orphan Institution in order to collect destitute children from all parts of the district and adjoining hills and train them in Christian tradition. His journals describe the district as a heavily populated one, where Tiwas, Karbis and other indigenous groups vying for control along the river Kollong. Significantly, he also mentions the presence of large numbers of migrants from other parts of the sub-continent.

Political parties like the Congress and Muslim League that evolved around the early twentieth century were also embroiled in the manner in which identities were shaping up locally. The Muslim League and its supporters often spoke for the rights of the settlers during the colonial period. The Congress, though a pan-Indian party, was somewhat autonomous and its members and leaders in Assam came from a caste Hindu background. Iconic figures like the late Maulana Bhasani were important in pushing for a radical change in the immigration and settlement policies in favour of settlers. Moderate leaders from within the Muslim League – such as Mohammad Saadulla – were pushed into opposing the Line System. They kept up the pressure on the colonial authorities to allow for more colonisation of arable land by settlers. Against this backdrop, Nagaon was strategically located as far the British administrators were concerned and even the paramount paramilitary force in the region – the Assam Rifles – began as the Cachar Levy and was raised in the district. The district was abound with rivers and *beels* (ox-bow lakes), forests and bordered the Mikir Hills, as the present day district of Karbi Anglong was called in earlier times.

Matters were further complicated when the deputy commissioner of Nagaon substituted the word "Mymensinghia" (which was the province that sent a large number of migrants) with the word "immigrant" in 1924. This categorisation meant that all persons from any district in Bengal and Surma valley, excluding the indentured workers in the tea plantations, were to be considered as settlers. During this year, there was also a very lengthy debate on the control and transfer of land to immigrants. European government officials expressed the most conflicting opinions though an assistant director of land records mentioned that local Assamese land-title holders could not resist the temptation of high prices for their land being offered by immigrants. He felt that if steps were not taken, the shortsighted Assamese actions would cost future generations their land and culture. He further added that all land of the Assamese blocks should either continue to be settled on annual leases, or a clause be added to the periodic titles prohibiting transfer of land without the assent of the deputy commissioner.

Such reasoning often missed out the point that the many of the Assamese titleholders were actually marginal, or subsistence cultivators, whose agricultural system did not favour the possession of titles. They were overburdened by the administrations insistence on periodic titles as it hampered their semi-swidden agricultural practices. On the other hand, those Assamese who had titles to cultivable lands were members of an incipient land-owning class that developed towards the end of the Ahom rule. The biggest problem however, was the loss of indigenous control over the areas where seasonal cultivation (*paam kheti*) was carried out.

It is against such a backdrop that political mobilisation was carried out by anti-imperialists and nationalists. The contexts within which political lines were drawn Assamese Hindu leaders and Muslims during the colonial period were crucially linked to demographic changes and access to resources. It is illuminating to note that these debates carried over into the post-colonial situation and the census remained one of the most important tools for mobilising political opinion for or against settlers. In 1961, the census report served to build the ground for a sub-national concern within Assamese civil and political society. Along with sundry newspaper reports about the

forcible occupation of grazing reserves, leaders of the All Assam Students Union backed anti-foreigner movement in the 1980s, frequently cite the 1961 census commissioner statement wherein immigrants were said to be concealing their place of birth. The politics of identity was taken up by social scientists, which were differed on their interpretations of demographic and social changes. Some argued that the process of assimilation of the immigrants in Assam was near complete as they had embraced the language, and following the separation of the Muslim dominated district of Sylhet during partition, the Assamese were truly a dominant group in Assam and therefore the fears expressed by Assamese nationalists were unreal. Others, though expressing some ambivalence about the dominance of the Assamese following the separation of Sylhet maintained that the movement was the manifestation of chauvinistic tendencies against non-Assamese people. Yet other social and political commentators declared that the movement articulated real fears of the dispossession of the Assamese peasantry.

The study has tried to locate the perceived changes from within a contemporary anthropological field. Some concerns of the local Assamese political voices are echoed in the sentiments of the people in present times as well. The two villages where ethnographic data was collected reflect the divergent voices amongst the local civil and political communities in the local settings. The village of Kacharigaon, located near Juria, comprises second and third generation immigrants, who now call themselves Assamese Muslims. A pitched road leads up to the village, but during the rainy season, vehicular access is difficult. There are six-hundred households in the village, though they are several clustered enclaves. There are four elementary schools and two primary schools in the village. Kacharigaon literally means the village of the *Kachari* (Boro-speaking people) but the village does not have a single tribal person. In Kacharigaon, village headman is a tribal person who resides in Nagaon town. Speaking about the manner in which the village lost all its tribal inhabitants, the headman mentions that once the settlers came in, the original inhabitants felt threatened and left. Nevertheless, he is still the traditional headman as per the rules set during the Line System.

The other village where I conducted ethnographic work in the district was Srimala Gospara. The villagers say that their ancestors settled in the village in 1950s. The first people to acquire land for settled cultivation were lower caste Hindu Assamese. Nepali-speaking cultivators subsequently followed them. Currently, the village has a small tract of collective grazing land; a large collective fishery, a lower primary school run by the government and a high school started by private initiatives and run by a collective group within the village. The Barapani River flows alongside the village and separates it from the main railhead of Chaparmukh. One can cross a rickety bamboo bridge to get to the village during the winter and spring months. During the monsoon season, the bridge gives way to the flow of water and people have to depend on boatmen who ferry them across. Since the 1950s, other ethnic groups joined the first settlers. Bengali and Muslim Hindus were allowed to settle in the lands adjoining the river and the foothills, by the administration. Many of the settlers had to change their occupations once they entered this area. They were faced with a situation where many had to survive as sharecroppers and tenant farmers over tracts of land that – at best – could support seasonal farming.

The Srimala Gospara area was severely affected during the anti-foreigner agitation in the 1980s. Local residents however have divergent memories of what happened. Many claimed that even local Congress politicians (a party that is perceived to be close to settlers) were also involved in the killings of Muslim settlers. Respondents in the village said that they felt remorse in the manner that political persons had altered the original slogans of the movement. Originally, they said that the movement talked of protecting the identity of the Assamese people, then it transformed into throwing out the illegal immigrants and finally it morphed into massacres and pogroms. The villagers also spoke of a time after the massacres when local political initiatives of radical Assamese nationalists were aimed at de-emphasising the ethnic differences among people. The radical nationalists carried out this process initially but soon, the villagers began to organise their efforts towards sustaining some of the activities. This tradition of cooperation and collectivisation helped the nationalists as well. They called the area their Jaffna (the area controlled by Tamil nationalists in Sri Lanka) and for a while ran a parallel administration there.

Several rounds of counter-insurgency operations, forced the radical nationalists to surrender and many died as well.

It is pertinent to point out here that there have been different levels of violence in the two settings in Nagaon. It may seem that on the surface that there has been more violence in Srimala Gospara given the fact that the events at Nellie had a resonating effect there and also the violent counter-insurgency campaigns that occurred in the 1990s and 2000. In Kacharigaon, there have been no events of such scales of physical violence. Instead the conflicts (in Kacharigaon) are more muted and layered into the social fabric where caste, religion and ethnic affinity continue to be grounds for exclusion of groups. In Srimala Gospara, given the sustained political interventions and downplaying of ethnic identities as part of a strategy to garner support of all communities by the radical Assamese nationalists, there exists an alliance between local people. The manner in which the local communities manage and run the collective projects mentioned earlier also strengthen the ethnic alliance. In Kacharigaon and Juria in general, there is a palpable threat of being engulfed by *others* that is expressed in general conversation as part of a localised political discourse on who are acceptable settler and those that are not. There is a sharp class/caste difference on the matter as well. Within the latest settler community – the second generation Muslims – there is also the phenomenon of the *mattabar* (local leader) who control the lives and labour of new migrants. The newer migrants are poor and need the patronage of their community leaders. At the lowest end of the stratified social order, there is also a unique and (seemingly) unlikely relationship involving alcohol, between the Muslim poor and the dispossessed tribal households. In the contested cultural landscape of Juria, some Assamese Hindus see the Vaishnavite tradition as a possible bridge to bring the tribals and other non-Muslim communities together. However, in this case, the brewing of alcohol remains a cultural barrier and a marker of identity as well.

It is interesting to note that if there has been any reconciliation between competing groups, it has not been due to enabling institutions of the state. It is through the practice of participation in

common goals that earlier memories are reconstructed and new forms of social relationships are reconstituted. The implications of such a renegotiation of relationships are immense. Against a politico-legal framework that can either aid, or hinder such processes of re-negotiation. Following the description of Karbi Anglong, I shall consider these issues in both districts in a comparative framework.

### Karbi Anglong

Karbi Anglong was designated a “backward tract” in 1919, and formally declared as a “partially excluded area in 1936. In 1946, the dominant indigenous tribes (Karbi and Dimasa) submitted a demand to the then government of Assam to ensure that the district gets functional autonomy following the transfer of power. This demand resulted in the constituent assembly of independent India forming the Bordoloi Committee in order to look into the issue of autonomy for the hill districts of the colonial province of Assam. Four main features, that form part of the larger geography and politics during the colonial period, informed the eventual decision of the committee to declare the district as an autonomous district under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The first was the opening of the so-called wastelands for the large-scale cultivation of tea. That severely reduced the space available for small swidden-cultivation based societies to practice their traditional systems of agriculture. Secondly, the opening of the wastelands also induced the inflow of labour. A large section of the migrants were indentured labourers who came to work on the plantations, but an equally large number were peasants from other parts of the Indian sub-continent who saw Assam as a frontier that could be colonised. The third feature that informed the eventual framework of the Sixth Schedule was the creation of the “Line System” in Assam, wherein settlement of areas was demarcated along ethnic lines. The fourth feature of the special constitutional provisions was to do with regulating traditional practices of cultivation.

The instrument of this integrative devolution of powers was embodied in the concept of the "Autonomous District Councils" designed by the committee. This instrument was thereafter passed by the Constituent Assembly with certain modifications and it now constitutes the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Originally, the Sixth Schedule was to apply to the tribal areas of Assam. On January 25, 1950, the Indian Constitution came into force. As would be expected from such an ambitious nation-building project, the Constitution tried to build in some safeguards for the marginalised and oppressed groups in the country. For the people of the Northeast frontier, this safeguard came in the form of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The provisions in the Sixth Schedule dealt mainly with the issue of safeguarding the land and customs of the hill tribes of the region. The Karbi did get a semblance of a territory but the Sixth Schedule was not equipped to handle immigration. As other issues like, cultural and social hegemony of dominant ethnic groups, continued to eat away into the fabric of political discourse in Assam, the realities of the day seemed to lead the tribal people into yet another long series of confrontations with not just the state apparatus, but also with the dominant groups associated with the state.

The proposition that so-called backward tribes reside in the hills shows the residues of colonial notions of which subjects are categorised as primitive. Nevertheless, even if one bestows the proverbial benefit-of-doubt to the committee for this, it still does not address the issue of who constitute tribal groups. Implicit in this problem is the issue of marginalisation and impoverishment, as well as the working through of a cultural dynamic in a region where identity is a matter of life, death and most importantly- livelihood. Hence, the persistence of a policy that originated in negating democratic notions of self by reconstituting the governed subject as something less than a citizen reveals the first discordant notes in the nation-building process in India. The effect that this has on political mobilisation is quite interesting. In numerous memoranda demanding separation from forced union, Karbi, Dimasa and Boro leaders have come up with images of a collective self that does not have a similar resonance

in mainstream politics. Hence, in a petition to the Prime Minister of India in 1973, leaders of the Mikir and North Cachar hills stated:

“...there is an indisputable case for constitution of a separate state for Mikir and North Cachar Hills together with the contiguous tribal areas. Only by this means they (we) will be able to exist unhampered, preserve and develop their (our) entities, languages, cultures and ways of life and at the same time be in tune with the mainstream of national life, to sail the wide ocean that is India and not be restricted to the backwaters of the Brahmaputra valley.”<sup>1</sup>

This typifies the kind of intractable cultural and ethnic lines that are drawn in the territorial discourse in the region. Karbi Anglong is a case where autonomy demands are couched in an ethnic language, even as early as 1973. Despite regulations preventing the large-scale alienation of tribal land in the district, the presence of Hindi-speaking agriculturalists has seen an upswing of ethnic violence. The political mobilisation for a separate state in the 1980s also facilitated a greater debate over indigenous claims to a homeland.

The villages in Karbi Anglong were selected firstly for the ethnic composition and the fact that they were affected by violence. Most members of the village had kin who were affected by the conflict and were therefore implicated some way or the other. Since the district has two administrative units – Diphu and Hamren – one village was selected. In Diphu sub-division, the village was Hemari-Timung Gaon, which is close to the district headquarter and is an ethnically homogenous village of Karbis. In Hamren, Hanlokrock village (near Baithalangso) was chosen because it is ethnically mixed and had also been affected by conflict in 2005. In the eight odd months spent in different parts of the field, it became apparent that actors struggled, despaired

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<sup>1</sup> The memorandum demanding a separate state comprising the Mikir Hills, North Cachar Hills and the Contiguous Tribal Areas in Assam, was signed by Mr. P.K. Gorlosa and Mr. S.R. Thaosen, secretary and president respectively, of an action committee of the Mikir and North Cachar Hills Leaders' Conference in Haflong in June 1973. [See Dutta, P.S. 1993. *Autonomy Movements in Assam (Documents) Edition I*, New Delhi: Omsons Publication].

and rejoiced in equal measure to the question as to how to make life and everyday relations viable. A brief description of the 2001 census data of the four villages where intensive ethnographic data was collected is in order at this stage. In Hemari-Timung Gaon, where all respondents are classified as "Scheduled Tribe", Karbis are the only ethnic group. The village was set up relatively recently and is very close to the district headquarter, Diphu. Hanlokrok is closer to Nagaon and is situated in the foothills. The dominant indigenous community classified under "Scheduled Tribe" is the Karbis, though Dimasas, Tiwas, Garos and Boros also live in the area and have been enumerated as "Scheduled Tribes". The "general" category comprises Assamese, Nepalis, Bengali-speaking groups, Saoras<sup>2</sup> (Adivasis) and Hindi-speaking groups. Hemari-Timung Gaon is therefore situated in the hilly tracts of the district and has a few pastoralist settlers, as well as many other ethnic groups whose claims to indigenusness are as valid as those of the Karbi inhabitants of the village. The village was created by order of the District Council in the 1960s but was settled much later. Of the current residents, many claimed that they had moved to the village in the last ten years. The road from Diphu to the village leads one as far as a residential Assamese-medium school run by the *Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram* (Forest-dwellers' Development School/ Institution/ Refuge), an organisation affiliated to the right-wing Hindu nationalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Organisation). The school- Gita<sup>3</sup> Ashram- dominates the social and cultural life of the village and its vicinity. There are also two other primary schools- one run by Christian missionaries and a private school- but it is the residential school that dominates the landscape. Gita Ashram's employees are all educated Hindus from western Assam (Nalbari) and southern Assam (Cachar). The male employees belong to the upper castes and the single woman 'animator'<sup>4</sup> was a local Karbi woman, who insisted on identifying herself as a Hindu.

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<sup>2</sup> The Saoras are not categorized as tribals in Assam, though they are considered so other states in India.

<sup>3</sup> The allusion to Hindu texts of learning is not coincidental, as the school after all, seeks to impart Hindu education and way of life.

<sup>4</sup> 'Animators' are grassroots organizers. The term is used by most voluntary organizations to denote potential leaders who can 'animate' the community and make them accept the organizations views and mission.

Such assertions have an explicit logic to them. Hemari-Timung Gaon is inhabited by Karbi villagers who support (or at least claim to) the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC). The ASDC has an avowedly Marxist flavour and one of its factions is an electoral partner of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), 'Liberation'. In political terms, the ASDC and patrons of Gita Ashram are on extreme ends of the spectrum. Local council elections are dominated by the ASDC and the Congress, each vying with the other to develop the infrastructure of villages around Diphu. This has not translated into anything concrete, as the village still lacks a paved road, water supply, banking institutions or dispensaries. There are twenty-five households in the village, comprising twenty Karbi and five Nepali households. The minimum wage in the area is low (Rs. 70/- per day) and most villagers are either subsistence cultivators or daily wage earners who sell timber from the nearby forests and vegetables. Significantly, even though all people own some land where they cultivate vegetables and rice, the villagers see themselves as daily wage earners *and* as peasants. The timber comes from "private" forests which were corralled off by connected persons from Diphu, ostensibly for growing rubber. The rubber trees exist as testimony to some attempt at clearing the forest, but since they have not received any sustained care, the area has now been overrun by shrub and jungle. Most of the Karbis are Hindu though there are five Christian families among them. It is only understandable, therefore that developmental activities and identity would constitute the first line of strategic political planning for Hindu nationalists in a Hindu majority, left-oriented underdeveloped Karbi village in an under-developed area where they have only a miniscule political presence.

Hanlokrok is situated on the banks of the Kopili River and is a large census village, which is actually a conglomeration of different distinct ethnic enclaves. Inhabitants rather confusingly refer to the ethnic enclaves as distinct villages but for the sake of clarity, this study will refer to them as enclaves. Hanlokrok is a mixed area and in some enclaves like Haripur, the local Dimasas have land titles, though in most cases, the land belongs to the Karbi people and other communities that live there have either leased out the land, or live there by virtue of ad-hoc

tenures that allows them to cultivate land and also allows for transfer of tenures across generations.

The region was once heavily forested and sparsely inhabited, until other tribes (like the Dimasa) began clearing the forests and settling there in the 1960s. The first Dimasa settlers cleared land around Ludumai and used it for seasonal cultivation. In the mid-sixties, local Karbis, who then settled their own people in the area, uprooted an abandoned Dimasa settlement. Unlike contemporary events, this settlement and resettlement was not a violent one, and elders of both communities came to a mutual understanding on the extent of land that was to be used by both communities.

Hanlokrok has traditionally voted for the Congress – something that caused a certain degree of friction between communities when the autonomous state demand movement was at its peak – and during the course of the study, the Congress retained the seat during the elections to the Assam assembly. In 2003, there was a politically charged atmosphere in Hanlokrok. The majority Karbi and their Dimasa (land-owning) neighbours eked out a living from paddy cultivation in a region that had seen better harvesting days. A serious conflict had arisen between the dominant Karbi and minority Kuki ethnic groups in the district. In neighbouring North Cachar Hills, the conflict between Dimasas and the Hmar ethnic minority that took place in 2003 had affected Dimasa families in Hanlokrok as well. During the first field trip to the area, relations between the Karbi and Dimasa were marked by mutual solidarity to each other's losses. The area did not have Kukis or Hmars (groups that the Karbi and Dimasa militia were fighting with elsewhere). The nerve-centre of the Karbi-Kuki was further away in Singhason hills (in Diphu sub-division) and Hmar-Dimasa clashes were restricted to the neighbouring district. The geographical distance of the epicentres of the conflict in no way diluted the communitarian solidarities of the ethnic groups in the village. Thus, for example, Dimasa households in the village found ways to provide relief to Dimasa civic bodies in NC Hills, while Karbi households – regardless of political affiliations – were also seen to be actively involved in relief and support work carried out by student associations and Karbi civic organisations.

What are the causes of such widespread violence? One of the reasons that hinders a comprehensive understanding of the causes of conflict where resource use and control is at work, is the ubiquitous presence of a security discourse that conflates all conflicts within the “law and order” framework. There has not been a serious assessment of the administrative structures that may be responsible for conflicts. For example, in parts of the district where people are locked in a struggle over disputed lands, it is impossible to find any areas of shared beliefs- either socio-cultural or economic. On the other hand, cultural and religious events help cement ties between the Karbi and their old Assamese neighbours. In the neighbouring districts, marriages between Karbi and Assamese persons are common and this adds to greater kin solidarity even within villages in parts of Karbi Anglong bordering Nagaon and Golaghat districts. The pattern of land tenure and ownership in Karbi Anglong is different from Nagaon, largely due to the district’s “autonomous” status. There are four gradations of land in Karbi Anglong: (a) State reserved forests; (b) District Council reserved forests; (c) Unclassified forests comprising the hills and low-lying forests and (d) Land suitable for wet-rice cultivation. Categories “b”, “c” and “d” are under the purview of the Sixth Schedule, hence under the control of the district council. In category “c”- viz. “Unclassified forests”- farmers may apply for ownership in the low-lying forest areas while in the hills the forests are considered to be “common” or “community-owned”. *Jhum*, or shifting cultivation, is the prevalent practice in the hills. In the hills, the Karbi society was divided into three territorial groups, namely, *Chingthong*, *Nilip Ronghang*, and *Amri Marlong*. It is believed that in the past these territorial groups lived within three specified regions or territorial jurisdictions. In the plain areas of the district, each village has a definite boundary and almost all cultivable land within the jurisdiction of the village boundary is used to cultivate crops. The villages situated in the hills are further divided into two semi-official categories- (i) villages having permanent sites which are *not shifted* to the shifting fields and (ii) villages without permanent sites that relocate to the shifting agricultural fields. In the plains areas where the people have ownership rights- and this sometimes includes recent settlers- the district council (or any other government agency) cannot take over cultivable land for any public purpose without paying due compensation. Such provisions are not there in the hills.

In villages like Hanlokrok, the narratives of ownership and homelands overlap in tragic ways. Unlike Hemari-Timung Gaon, where formal land ownership rests solely with Karbis, in Hanlokrok other communities also own land titles. In the 1950s and 1960s, non-Karbi cultivators (mainly Dimasa, Tiwa and *Adivasis*) cleared the forests and sought permission from the Karbis to settle in the area. Since the autonomous council's control over allocation and use of land was relatively unstructured, it fell upon traditional Karbi elders to give permission to the settlers. Hence, the *sarthe* (traditional leader of a village, or villages) – an old man called Sarthe Tisso (who died in 2001, passing on the titular position to his son, Bonglong) – gave other communities the permission to cultivate and even own land in the area. Until the 1980s, there were no surveys of land and only after the autonomous state demand movement gained ground did the administration begin to demarcate land boundaries.

Contemporary events, including violent conflicts, are somehow linked to such traditional practices, especially when the state's legal framework takes upon itself the task of streamlining traditional structures into a given administrative framework. In the course of this streamlining, the traditional role of the *sarthe* is transformed. Where he (there are no cases of women being accorded the status of *sarthe*) once had the powers to allocate land, today the *sarthe* merely certifies the validity of legitimate sales and transactions that occur in the markets. It is therefore a common sight to see the *sarthe* jokingly demand a share of the proceeds from the sale of livestock or timber in the market from those going out to sell the same. The *sarthe's* certificate of legitimacy ensures that the livestock or timber being traded is not stolen property and that its sale or transaction is binding on both parties.

The traditional Karbi line of authority was based on a cumulative social and cultural control over territory. Hence the *sarthe* of one village, was superseded by the *baway* of a cluster of villages, who in turn was answerable to the *pinpo*, who had access to the royal Karbi court and the *lindokepo*, who is the traditional Karbi king residing in Ronghang Rongbong (the capital of the old Karbi kingdom). With the *sarthe* and the *baway* being slowly incorporated within the administrative structure, there was also the transformation of the lines of authority and accountability in the

Karbi social structure. By the mid 1980s, the *sarthes* and *haways* in Karbi Anglong were part of the government's administrative structure as village headmen (*gaonburah*) and in an effort to widen ethnic representation; they (government) gave a similar status to elders and politically important persons of other indigenous groups. In the event of a conflict between different ethnic groups, this fact is cited as a major grievance by certain radical sections of the Karbi political community.

### Conclusion

The indigenous response to migration has been sustained over a hundred years. It has taken different forms, from the peasant rebellion at Phuloguri in Nagaon, in the pre-colonial period to ethnic clashes in Karbi Anglong in the twenty-first. The responses, almost always have had the potential to be violent. Unlike certain other indigenous protests, notably in central India where protests were "quiet" and relied mainly on messianic figures for support, the protests in Assam were not centred on one person. They involved peasants, workers and subsistence farmers whose livelihoods were disrupted by colonial intervention and immigration.

In Karbi Anglong, the first recorded protests were not against immigrants and settlers but against "feudal oppression". While one might argue that feudalism, in the Marxian sense of the word was not entrenched in Karbi Anglong, the reading of progressive Karbi history has today acquired a language of "stages" that is a product of sustained Leftist mobilisation in the region. This Leftist mobilisation was actually focussed on issues of political and civil rights for the district and not so much on settlers and migration. Since 1980s, students in Karbi Anglong had been pressing for an autonomous state, a demand that had adequate constitutional precedence as the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram were carved out of the colonial province of Assam by constitutional edict and rules. These rules were "offered" to all hill areas and tribes living in the province and Karbi Hills and North Cachar Hills remained within Assam. The arguments for the two districts remaining with Assam are rooted in constitutional history. The proposition that "backward tribes" reside in the hills shows the residues of colonial notions of which subjects are categorised as "primitive". Nevertheless, even if one bestows the proverbial "benefit-of-doubt"

to the committee for this, it still does not address the issue of who constitute "tribal" groups. Implicit in this problem is the issue of marginalisation and impoverishment, as well as the working through of a cultural dynamic in a region where identity is a matter of life, death and most importantly- livelihood.

There seems to be a pattern to ethno-nationalist demands in the Nagaon and Karbi Anglong. What links them together is the lack of an institutional setting to handle these demands. Most political demands for self-determination are centrally linked to the idea of a distinct identity of an ethnic group. The manner in which this identity consciousness is articulated is precisely the subject of discussion. It is against this backdrop that much of what appears as guarantees of autonomy compatible with the aspirations of given groups of people within the framework of the constitution, or even within international law, can actually be seen as a condensed body of intricate political negotiation. In essence, these negotiations are supposed to appear as processes that lead to further democratisation of society and politics. In the Indian context, this idea was supposed to form the core of the federal ethos of the republican tradition. Hence, provisions like the Sixth Schedule, and even the recent *Panchayati-Raj* Bill are seen as efforts to ensure the devolution of powers of administration and governance to the grassroots. In each case, legislative, resource mobilisation and executive powers are supposed to somehow address the complex web of people's aspirations. Yet in the manner in which they filter down, they are leave more questions than answers in their wake. One senses the overwhelming assertion of the concerns of the (centralised) state in losing its locus as the sovereign font of law and administrative processes. Indian democracy is defined by its constitution, inasmuch as it is defined by a particular notion of the rule of the "majority". On one hand, a 'statist' view asserted that it was the individual citizen, rather than seemingly amorphous collectives, who were the backbone of the state. This view harked on the tensions between notions of citizenship and that of communitarian collectives and reiterated that the state was above all gods. This view that the individual's loyalties as a citizen of the state supersede her or his loyalty to other identities is constantly being challenged by a second discourse that is articulated against the backdrop of inadequate representation in matter of governance and administration. It would be tempting to

see the persistence of primordial identity in the shaping of demands for autonomy in such a situation. Perhaps it would help to see some semblance of political leverage at work here. Even when it comes to voting in the case study areas, there is a clear difference in who people vote for and for what reason. In predominantly Assamese enclaves in Nagaon, one finds blue, white and red flag of the regional *Asom Gana Parishad* (AGP), a regional party that came to power following the Assam agitation. It was formed by many of the student leaders of the Assam agitation and remains a strong proponent of regionalism in the Northeast. In settler enclaves one finds the proliferation of Congress signs and symbols. The party is associated with ideas of national identity and is also perceived to be sympathetic to the cause of minorities and settlers. In Karbi Anglong the indigenous people traditionally have voted for the Congress as it was the only big party in the scene. However, with the growth of the autonomous state movement and formation of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), this party garners the indigenous votes during elections.

The definitions of an indigenous collective self, is meant to challenge a "settler" nation state. In both cases, indigenous cultures within post-colonial societies find themselves excluded from the decision processes that central to the state. Their subsequent declaration for separation from a "mother body" is based on an implicit declaration of *people-hood* based on genealogy and descent ties function "not only as other sub-national units do in, say, the assertion of ethnicity, but point to the history of pre-contact and raise questions about legal and moral legitimacy of the present national formation" (Murray 1997: 11). In this significant development, one sees that ethnicity and notions of ethnic contiguities begin to change almost as soon as the community sees itself as the purveyor of a smaller national space. In just a matter of two or three decades, the organic solidarity of the groups classified as plains tribes, against caste Assamese society changes to one of mutual distrust and competition between groups who are placed on the same social and economic plane. On the other hand, under certain conditions, they also engender ties that would have been impossible to think of within the parameters of mainstream politics. The threat and reality of bearing arms for the community therefore can also be read as instrumental functions of

violence where it is an expression of the failure of state either to provide security or to protect the lives of multi-ethnic communities in conflict with one another.

To sum up, in Nagaon and Karbi Anglong, the ability to transcend identities is dependent on a number of related factors. The first is the language and processes within which a larger political discourse takes place. Political parties, in this sense, have been instrumental in the evolution of strategies that are adopted by native Assamese, indigenous and settler communities. One of the strategies in this case is for groups to identify with particular local, regional or even national political parties. Sections of civil society also adopt this strategy when they articulate political positions. Parliamentary politics has the ability to transform local issues into a national debate. However, India's legislative bodies- like the two houses of parliament- follow the logic of majorities. In this process, peripheral regions like the Northeast are at a disadvantage because they represent a 'small state syndrome', where even though the formal institutions of governance- states, bureaucracy, police etc.- are in place, their effectiveness in influencing national policy is negligible.

This thesis started with asking a few core questions on the manner in which land, class and ethnicity come into play in conflicts between ethnic groups in parts of the world that have undergone a fundamental transition from being imperial frontiers to units of a sovereign, federal (post-colonial) state. Territory is the resource most seriously contested and fought over, in both Nagaon and Karbi Anglong. Environmental conflicts in Assam have shown how history, ambitious social engineering projects and contemporary events merge in everyday politics. Population figures, demographic change and the creation of "otherness", create a discourse that is built on standardized responses to political questions of governance and citizenship. Based on the evidence collected in the course of this study, class and ethnicity do not appear as mutually antagonistic modes of political mobilization that stand out on their own. Instead, they appear as artefacts that are shaped by state policies and an uncritical reliance on a political vocabulary that does not pay enough attention to pathways of existence. Class and identity becomes yet another strand in the conflict bundle. The meta-narrative of conflict and insurgency in Assam, threatens

to make the daily instances of cooperation (between different ethnic groups); the nuances in the use of language; the outcomes of seemingly innocuous developmental dreams and sociological/psychological reasons behind the articulation of people-hood (in distinct opposition to celebration of citizenship), processes that will slip away from academic discussions.

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