

POLICIES AND
PRACTICES

97

Peasants, Students, Insurgents and Popular Movements in Contemporary Assam


ROSA
LUXEMBURG
STIFTUNG

November 2018



Policies and Practices 97

Novemeber 2018

Published by:
Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group
GC-45, Sector-III, First Floor
Salt Lake City
Kolkata-700106
India
Web: <http://www.merg.ac.in>

ISSN 2348 0297

Printed by:
Graphic Image
New Market, New Complex, West Block
2nd Floor, Room No. 115, Kolkata-87

*Gefördert durch die Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung e.V. aus Mitteln des Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland.
Sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation eV with funds of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany.*

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is a Germany based foundation working in South Asia and other parts of the world on the subjects of critical social analysis and civic education. It promotes a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic social order, and aims at present members of society and decision-makers with alternative approaches to such an order. Research organizations, groups working for self-emancipation, and social activists are supported in their initiatives to develop models that have the potential to deliver social and economic justice. The work of Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, South Asia can be accessed at www.rosalux.in.

**Peasants, Students, Insurgents and
Popular Movements in Contemporary Assam**

Sanjay Barbora

2018

Peasants, Students, Insurgents and Popular Movements in Contemporary Assam¹

Sanjay Barbora *

This essay is an effort to understand the compulsions and contexts in which popular movements have taken place in Assam since the mid-20th century. Since the turn of the 20th century, political mobilisation for change and renegotiation of power in Assam has centred on the peasant. Initially emerging as an important focus of analysis for modern historians of Assam, the figure of the peasant has become important for other social scientists and politicians alike. The early intellectual scaffold of this process that emerged in the middle of the 20th century, had been the valley-based, male, Assamese-speaking, rent-paying, rural farmer, who had limited access to modern markets and whose way of life was constantly being threatened by other cultivators and the (tea) plantation industry. The peasant, as Lenin pointed out in the early 20th century, was seen to have two souls: one that craved private property and the other that dreamed of visions of equality in a rural community (Lenin 1965: 40-43). Seen thus, the peasant became an important actor in political mobilisation in most parts of the decolonising world. Although the conditions in Assam were similar to many colonised countries in the middle of the 20th century, there were several occasions where peasants in the two valleys and hills in Assam were mobilised politically only to be abandoned, because those who spoke for the peasant, were also responsible for the erosion of the rural community.

In this essay, I sift through a social history of contemporary popular social movements in order to understand the representative character of such movements and the milieu that they attempt to reflect. I do so by drawing on my personal involvement in the human rights movement in Assam, as well as analysing the social and political commentaries on the contemporary political history of Assam. I then ask questions about the ability of the human rights movements to address collective claims, especially the ones raised by peasants, students and insurgents, without losing focus on universal ideas of human rights, justice and peace.

I. Locating the Peasant in Contemporary Struggles in Assam

The rural nature of Assam, as well the centrality of the peasant in it, has been a foundational idea in social science research on Assam. Although not explicitly stated, the political history of contemporary Assam has been animated by the figure and future of the free, rice-growing peasant (Guha 1977, Saikia 2015). The sedentary practices of the valley-dwelling, rice cultivating peasant in Assam had always vexed colonial authorities who saw them as indolent and lazy in their refusal to produce agricultural surplus (Saikia 2000). However, as Sanjib Baruah (2001), pointed out, colonial

* Associate Professor, TISS, Guwahati and Member, Calcutta Research Group. Policies and Practices, Issue No. 97, November 2018

archives and commentaries show that the imagery of the indolent Assamese peasant was an overtly political attempt by colonial administrators to remove different histories of land use in the Brahmaputra valley, where shifting agriculture coexisted with settled, rain-fed agriculture. Erasing the importance of such practices was important in establishing the hegemony of a narrative of laziness and backwardness of the Assamese peasant, when compared to immigrants and indentured workers in the plantations.

The layered reading of the role and responses of peasants to colonial authority is an important academic fact in Assam, as also a lived political reality. For much of the 20th century, the peasant had been the locus of popular and democratic politics in Assam. Many of the movements and organisations that emerged during the anti-imperial struggles of the early 20th century, were unable to successfully navigate identity movements for autonomy and self-determination that emerged in the region. The peasant was frequently invoked as an important figure of political mobilisation, well into the period following the establishment of the Indian republic in 1950. In the decades that followed, the fulcrum of popular struggles in Assam began to shift, as other categories of political mobilisation such as students and armed insurgents, who were not taking up arms exclusively for the peasantry. This is not a condition that is specific to Assam alone. As Isaac Deutscher pointed out in his discussions on the importance of Maoism in the development of the Chinese communist party, especially in countries that did not have a ready surplus army of industrial workers, revolutionaries had to rely on a combination of factors – impoverishment of the peasantry, radicalism of the intelligentsia and perceived (or real) external threats –for their programmes to succeed (Deutscher 1966). Deutscher pointed out that Mao's success began with his break from orthodox soviet political common sense that saw revolutionary potential in urban insurrection, and his move towards the rural and ability to draw in the peasantry into a socialist project. The Maoist intervention in Marxist political discourse is all the more important due to the impact it had on generations of political activists, who saw peasants as the agents of change in Africa and Asia. In Assam too, the role of the official Left – Communist Party of India (CPI), Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the various factions of the Communist Part of India (Marxist-Leninist) – was of utmost importance in configuring the political alliances between classes and communities. However, their strategies and tactics were never always straightforward, and their leaders often had to improvise depending on the rapid changes on the ground. This made for interesting debates around nationalism, immigration and citizenship that came dovetailed during the Assam Agitation (1979-1985)².

The Assam Agitation (1979-1985) was a period of civil unrest in Assam that saw the involvement of several civil society groups led by students of the All Assam Students Union (AASU). Existing scholarship on the times acknowledge that the unrest began with the protests over voter-lists during a by-election that rapidly brought together long-standing political grievances nurtured by the Assamese intelligentsia throughout the 20th century. These had to do with demographic changes, control over resources and political representation for indigenous people of the state, which were all concerns that were traditionally raised by the Left. However, the Agitation also had a subterranean (sometimes overt) anti-Left mobilization, where members of parliamentary Left parties such as the CPM and their student wings were attacked. Interestingly, all the issues that framed a regionalist, identity-based politics, were matters that politically-engaged activists dating back to the 1950s had articulated at different times (Chetiya 1988).

Although much has been written about the agitation and its aftermath, it would be useful to reflect on its outcomes that continue to hold sway over society and politics in Assam today. At the immediate outset, one can think of the re-emergence of ideas of self-determination and secession

that marked the period following the signing of the Assam accord, a period where the Indian state was forced to confront the unfinished political projects of partition, citizenship and nation-building in India (Baruah 1999). It also reopened debates about indigenous rights and autonomy, focusing on the internal fissures within Assam, indigenous communities continued to battle against Assamese hegemony in their struggles for autonomous territories and spaces (Barbora 2008, Singh 2008, Samaddar 2005). With the emergence of new lenses to read contemporary politics in Assam, the issues of the peasantry and their lot also became one that required teasing out from other more immediate political contexts that they had become embedded in.

I need to segue here to explain my own involvement with radical social movements in the 1990s in Assam. As a 23-year-old, getting off at Guwahati railway station, a few days after Parag Kumar Das was assassinated on May 17, 1996, I recall the air of desolation that the city had draped itself in. I made my way anxiously to his house that he had also converted to an office for Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS) – the organisation that I had joined barely a year ago. Along the way, I felt anger and sorrow course through even the most mundane conversations with random people. The man at the cigarette shop warned about bad days ahead, especially after the elections had brought in a regional party to power in Assam. The auto rickshaw driver who dropped me off at the MASS office shook his head to say that he hated the government and the surrendered militants for having killed Parag Das. Within the office, there was razor-sharp sadness that connected all of us to an event that would change our struggle for self-determination and human rights for the people of Assam. Inside the strangely futuristic, low-cost building that used to house Parag Das and his family, as well as a bustling documentation office, I was reunited with scores of activists from the various district committees of our organisation. I knew a few by name, and I was seeing most others for the first time. I remember standing out because of my jeans and Delhi-radical chic t-shirt, but also feeling completely at home among women and men, who were dressed in the manner of lower middle-class professionals and farmers from rural Assam. Personal markers are among the first things that one gets rid of, or holds desperately on to, depending on how one feels about being part of something larger than oneself. MASS had a predominantly rural, or semi-urban membership; most were either from small towns, or villages that were situated in the fringes of such towns. Its office in Guwahati always had a dozen or more women and men working on various things simultaneously. Some gathered newspaper clippings for the documentation centre, others filed legal cases, and many more were involved in collecting funds for legal aid services and public engagement campaigns.

Elements of this memory are constitutive of popular social movements across the modern world. Those who study such movements today have to engage with the works of Charles Tilly (2004) and Sidney Tarrow (1994), in order to understand the representative character and the milieu upon which they reflect. Tilly explained that social movements arose in the west after 1750 and involved a synthesis of three elements: (i) a campaign that was a sustained public effort, making collective claims on target authorities, (ii) employment of different forms of political action such as public meetings, processions, rallies, vigils, demonstrations, petition drives, statements to the media and pamphleteering, and (iii) concerted public representation of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment on the part of the participants and their constituencies. Sidney Tarrow, for his part, stated three facets of the 18th century social movements that theorists feared most: (a) extremism, (b) deprivation and (c) violence. He claimed that 19th century observers led by Emile Durkheim, saw social movements as the result of anomie and social disorganisation, a phrase captured in the idea of the “maddening crowd”, until these crowds were pacified (or normalised) by the emergence of social democratic and labour parties in Europe. Here, I wish to briefly pause and dwell on the two frames that this essay rests on: (i) the peasant, student and insurgent as foundational groupings of political

mobilisation in 20th century Assam; (ii) reflecting on the idea of the “popular” at a time when one’s earlier categories of social action are being reconstituted rapidly because of counter-insurgency, armed rebellion and advancements of the information technology revolution.

Classical works on the peasantry was animated by Marxist political concerns regarding their role in revolutionary transformation. Hence, Chayanov (1991) cautioned against state-sponsored, optimistic attempts to forcibly transform subsistence peasant agriculture, as they were likely to underestimate the organisational foundations of such societies and lead to conflicts; Shanin (1972) described peasants as the awkward class, whose persistent attraction to conservative ideas were important to understand against efforts at collectivisation by the socialist state; Alavi (1965), while pointing out that peasants in colonial times had revolutionary potential, it was only through the activation of the middle peasantry that it was capable of militant action (as a class) against an oppressive state; and Wolf (1966) saw peasant rebellions of the 20th century as specific reactions to the diffusion of a cultural system, that of North Atlantic capitalism. All four postulates are valid and important, as they outline the predicament of modern peasants in most parts of the colonised world. They also allude to the predictable outcomes of their participation in contemporary political struggles, where despite initial mobilisation by radical intellectuals, they have been quickly relegated to the margins following the completion of the moment of dissent. Additionally, scholarly work on the distinction between farmers and peasants in recent times have begun to question the traditional differences between farmers whose struggles are about access to markets and peasants whose struggles are situated in matters pertaining to land ownership and use (Borras Jr. and Franco 2013, Bernstein 2010). In such scholarship, the focus on the role of the peasant, including those who wish to effect political change on their behalf (states and national elite), are important tropes that require extrapolation into this essay as well.

Thus, the peasant, student and insurgent have been invoked in various scholarly works, as the central figures of revolt in the state of Assam. I will try and see how they emerged as figures of dissent around whom popular social movements could be anchored and if there was any traffic of ideas between them. Did the peasant become an insurgent? Or did the student go back to the farm in some idealist version of a Maoist project? Most important, what kind of passion or intellect was at work when such mobilisations were taking place? Through such questions, I reflect on where these figures have come to rest, even if for a moment, in contemporary Assam.

II. *Nangol jar, mati tar...* (The ploughman owns the land)

Historians and commentators of modern Assam have told us about the many ways in which the colonial state had disrupted old agrarian structures of the Ahom Kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley. Arupjyoti Saikia’s work on peasant protests in the valley evoked the contentious world of peasant politics during the 1940s, when rather than celebrate the impending transfer of power from British rule, subsistence farmers were taking to the streets and laying claim to plantation and forest land in order to assert their custodianship over land (Saikia 2014). Saikia’s book on the century of struggles that Assam’s farmers forged and lived through, dwelt on the increasing incidences of litigations that big landowners and plantation managers had begun against small farmers in the Brahmaputra valley. He further deliberated at length on the different tactical and strategic lines that the Revolutionary Communist Part of India (RCPI) and Communist Party of India had taken in order to mobilise the peasants of the valley. Bodhisattva Kar, on the other hand, showed us how small and marginal farmers, in the valley as also in the hills, were complicit in the process of creating semi-legal trade in rubber and forest products, sometimes being able to avoid the revenue collection agencies of the

state (Kar 2009). From their lively accounts of crafty peasants and militant action by their leaders, we are able to reflect on the kind of social and political contradictions that existed in the middle of the 20th century.

Taxation remained at the heart of all the accounts that were taken up by historians of colonial Assam. The reason for militant action in the colonial period always had to do with the peasant's resistance to paying off a state that was not interested in protecting their land and lives. As a matter of fact, whenever the peasant appeared in the archives of the colonial state, one could be reasonably certain that there was some trouble in the air and that the peasant (or someone else) was in need of rescuing. Historian Amalendu Guha's classic book, *Planter Raj to Swaraj* had a very interesting section on nationalists and communist leaders of upper Assam being concerned about the plight of the peasant (Guha 1977). They had identified the plantation as a soul-crushing, surplus-sucking source of misery for Assam's farmers. For one, it had taken over elevated areas of the (Brahmaputra) valley that were earlier used for seasonal cultivation and foraging. For another, it had created an enclave of colonial economy where local people did not eat what they produced and were unable to produce what they ate. Thus, nationalists encouraged peasants to set up their own *baats* where they could sell their surplus to the emerging urban classes. These *baats* continue to be important in contemporary times and serve as markers of political and social alliances in much of upper Assam (Kikon 2017).

For instance, as a child returning to Jorhat town for the winter, I recall with clarity my father's attempts to retrace the six-kilometre distance between our native village and the nationalist *baat* in Meleng. The *baat* was important to my father, because he said my grandfather would trek to every week just so that he could show solidarity with the nationalist cause. Like many 20th century upper-caste *ujoni Oxom* nationalists who had been educated outside Assam and had stopped farming, my grandfather saw no contradictions in his support for the nationalists and their concern for the peasant while our clan still had other families attached to cultivate lands that supposedly was ours, as part of the pre-colonial arrangement that was set up by the Ahom state. As people like my grandfather moved away from agriculture, making sure that all his sons would never have to plough the fields, he was supposed to have become even more rigid in his support for a version of Assamese nationalism that saw people fixed to places that colonialism had relegated them to: the plantation labourer in the plantation, the Marwari and Bengali in the cities that were connected to one another by trains, the tribes in the hills, the Muslim immigrant in the *chars*, the English in bungalows (in the plantation and in cities) and the Assamese in villages that were constantly trying to retain their pristine character, even as they made efforts to reach the cities.

This has several implications for popular politics in Assam. It helped consolidate an untenable idea that the category "peasant" and the identity "Assamese"/ (Oxomiya) would be welded together through a complex history of colonial revenue collection, nationalist literature and political mobilisation in the 20th century. This involved an interesting contestation over the kinds of crops that were being cultivated in the valley. Jute, according to the early 20th Assamese nationalist, was a crop that was favoured by immigrant peasants, while paddy was Assamese (Saikia 2015: 1405-1441). It was also a moment when refined calculations over the quality of land had become important for articulation of claims of belonging. For instance, the radical political figure for peasants of East Bengal origin, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, often claimed that it was the Bhatiali peasant who had transformed the wastelands of Assam. His name attests to the importance of types of land to a people. Bhashani was appended to the Maulana's name because he had decided to build his house on a *char* called Bhashan when the British expelled him from Bengal in the early 1900s. He stayed on in Assam, drawing huge crowds at rallies against British imperialism, where he was constantly speaking against the Muslim League led by the land-owning, English-speaking Assamese

from upper Assam, Sir Syed Saadullah. The Maulana accused the League of selling out, and Saadullah of being a post-box for the colonisers, always delivering bad news to the hardworking peasants (Custers 2010).

The Maulana's mobilisation was not very effective in areas where the Bhatiali peasants were missing, or in smaller numbers. If one were to go by literature on peasant mobilisation in the 20th century, the idea that there were exclusive areas based on inner and outer lines (for settlement) is very compelling. As evidence, there are residues of revenue department decisions like tribal blocks and belts that exist today. It almost suggests the existence of hermetically-sealed ethnic villages in wide prairie-like landscapes, leaving aside the fact that the Brahmaputra valley is not very expansive. The points of contact, even without motorised vehicles and horse carts, could not have been more than a few hours through forest, river and swamps. It is intriguing, therefore, that the peasants chose their leaders, as much as their leaders chose to represent them. The absence of non-Bhatiali speaking farmers in the Maulana's camp, is something we need to think through, keeping in mind that the Maulana represented a popular movement that took pains to keep away from communal ideas, while working for a largely Muslim constituency.

In a parallel world, some political leaders in Assam had been addressing the inequalities arising from the tea and oil industries, albeit in a very coy manner. By the early 20th century, there were at least a few Assamese families who had begun to plant tea and employ indentured labourers like their European counterparts. Some were also involved in the Swatantra Party that was nervous about socialist influences in nationalist politics and were amenable to concessions from the colonial administration. They had imbibed the same ideas of hierarchy as the British, ensuring that the workers in the plantations remained in their labour lines. There were a few interesting differences though. As a child visiting relatives who were managing plantations in the 1980s, I would ask my parents why they were referred to as 'Memsahib and Sahib' in some estates and 'Baidew and Kokaidew' in others. It turned out that plantations belonging to Assamese owners felt more comfortable with salutations by their workers in the vernacular. I also recall the ease with which my upper caste, land-owning and rice-eating relatives were able to slip into their modern European, whisky and tea-sipping selves. They had made a decision to use English education to move out of agricultural work and to a large extent, it did. As historian Jayeeta Sharma points out, it gave them an opportunity to partake in the colonial project of improving Assam, and ensure the anchoring of the idea that this required industry and wilderness to be set apart for people who were able to work and improve upon the latter for the benefit of the market and the state (Sharma 2011).

Like them, there were other groups of Assamese people who began to see their futures in the expanding industries and institutions of the colonial state. The discovery of oil, had also led to a different order of anxieties among political leaders in Assam. As they did not have to deal with indentured labourers, it seemed like a very different project from the tea plantations. Oil exploration and extraction required skilled geologists, engineers and technicians. These were aspirations that were desirable and doable for the emerging, early 20th century Assamese middle class. It saved them from agriculture-like work in the plantations that was done by indentured workers and allowed them to apply science and technology in their working lives. So, when the transfer of power happened in 1947, some Assamese-speaking professionals would follow their jobs, while a vast majority were left to live off the land. However, the end of Planter Raj did make a substantial difference to the emerging educated classes in the region. It allowed a considerable section of educated, semi-urban and rural youth to feel a sense of responsibility towards developing the region and its resources. The appeal to development was significant in the demands made by leaders of agitations in Assam (Baruah 2017: 45-67). These demands, as one might expect, came from a conviction that progress

would emanate from the various departments in the universities and colleges imparting technical education in engineering, medicine and the social sciences in Assam. Such processes have taken place elsewhere too. As anthropologist James Ferguson pointed out in his seminal work on Lesotho, where developmental regimes with their insistence on providing modern technology, also systematically flattened out local politics and discourse (Ferguson 1990). Such regimes, as Ferguson pointed out, are capable of rendering obsolete all forms of local knowledge and debates that are at odds with the modernising ones. In Assam, the developmental state was able to distract and divert attention from agriculture to other occupational possibilities that showed better connections with universities and their curriculum.

The application of technology, as one might recall, was a hallmark of government policy for farmers in the country, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. It was during this period that engineers and agricultural scientists spread out from the colleges and universities across Assam and began to make yet another significant transformation of the landscape. Canals, dikes, embankments and other infrastructure to manage the flow and levels of water in Assam's rivers and water bodies, were taken up with an urgency during this period. Foreign aid and government policies of extending support to farmers meant the expansion of shallow tube wells all over the valley. The post-colonial state was keen to show that it would work for the peasants, since they provided an important political base for political mobilisation and populist policies. This involvement of the state in agrarian matters in India has had a lively, rigorous and discursive debate in the social sciences that brought in sharp opinions from left-wing activists working with peasants (Lerche, Shah and Harriss-White 2013). Hence, the matter of adding technological inputs to traditional agriculture, assumed a political role for some who believed that state support for modernisation would lead to soviet-style reforms among the farming communities in the country and do away with old feudal structures and build new alliances (Chandra 1974). Others, however, saw the co-existence, even encouragement of certain feudal qualities, through the mechanics of caste dynamics in rural areas, even as the state went ahead with a capitalistic development of agriculture (Rudra 1978, Patnaik 1976). The question as to whether agrarian relations in India were semi-feudal, semi-capitalist, or completely capitalist were not just a matter of semantics but also a reflection of the political fissures in the global communist movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It was as though the granular discussions on political strategies and tactical alliances on the ground, were finding their way into academic knowledge about rural India. This also elicited enough discussion in Assam through the 1980s and 1990s and radical youth had a significant role to play in it, especially in the manner in which agricultural societies were to be represented.

In the course of my field work and interactions with friends in some of the paddy growing areas around Guwahati and Nagaon between 2001 and 2015, I was struck by the sharply contrasting memories that people had about these initiatives. For many village-based activists, especially those who were close to the kind of views expressed by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the embankments and canals were among the root causes of conflict. They complained bitterly against the rivers that were blocked in order to control floods, as well as against the canals that were constructed to irrigate scrubland areas. I remember my activist friend, Habibur Rohman of Nagaon saying passionately and wistfully back in 2000 at one of MASS' annual meetings in Nagaon: "If only ULFA had the courage to explode the dikes that prevent the Kolong from flowing freely." In his mind, that explosion would allow the people of Nagaon to eat all the wild river fish like Pabho and Chitol that he said had swum along the river until its mouth was closed as part of an effort to prevent Nagaon town from flooding in the 1960s. I reminded him about the floods and he looked at me as though I was a police informer: "Why should the people of a whole region suffer because of some business families and shopkeepers in Nagaon?" he asked testily. Clearly, Habi's concerns for

rewriting the course of history and restoring equity among people were somewhat different from mine. He belonged to a family of farmers from the Rupohi area outside Nagaon and while the blocking of the river might have helped the city, it had led to a steady decline of production of paddy for the farmers. In many ways, his concerns were similar to the kind of issues that were raised by residents of Ferghana valley in Kyrgyzstan, following the country's independence from the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In her nuanced, descriptive work on negotiations around water-based conflicts geographer Christine Bichsel, analysed how post-Soviet political realities left some areas arid and others irrigated and thereby exacerbated existing conflicts among different user communities (Bichsel 2005). As she shows in her later work, central Asia's national and sub-national conflicts have frequently been the result of bad infrastructure and planning of water sharing, where water flows were systematically diverted from one place to another, even as successive governments and planners were unable to ensure equitable distribution and dialogue among users (Bichsel 2009). The parallels with what had transpired in Assam, especially in the period when irrigation and civil engineering efforts taming rivers were undertaken, were hard to miss.

This feeling was accentuated during my frequent visits to Nalbari, where our alumni run a successful rural development organisation called Gramya Vikas Mancha (GVM). Most of the women and men who are full-time members of the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) are from the area and have been doing some extra-ordinary work on renewing an interest in agriculture. Their office is full of hand-made charts and maps that explain the impact of water flows from Bhutan to Assam, as well as migration into and out of Nalbari, Baksa and Chirang districts. My friend and former Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) Guwahati Campus student, Prithibhushan Deka is one of the founders of the organisation that now employs more than a hundred educated young women and men for projects that are funded by a wide array of Indian and foreign donors. He used to be a student activist in the 1990s, at a time when Nalbari was called Assam's Jaffna as it was one of the many places where young people had joined the armed rebellion in large numbers. In Prithi's opinion, much of it had to do with how grazing land and cultivable fields had become unproductive when canals and dikes were built in the area. Once that happened, young men had to migrate out to the city or beyond, in order to earn a livelihood. Water, as is wont, has a way of disappearing from one place and reappearing in another. Within the small ecological universe of Nalbari, it managed to seep through in other places that were quickly occupied by people from outside the district, who were poorer than the farmers who had decided to call it a day. Water, infrastructure and human beings have combined to impact on the value of land since the 1950s. The proximity to a road, once seen as a crucial factor to take produce to the market, also allowed people to leave the villages and become migrants elsewhere.

GVM is located in an area called Barbari in Nalbari district. Most of their work and some of their volunteers are from an area situated approximately 10 kilometres from the NGO's office, called Dokoha. "It used to be called Doboka", Prithibhushan informed me on the muggy evening of June 22, 2013, when he spoke of the time the area was declared a revenue village in 1935 by some British revenue official. According to an apocryphal story, the official's elephant got stuck in the mud and made a sound that sounded like "dobok", which is how the place got its name. At some point, he explained without saying much, the place changed its name and came to be called Dokoha. He had invited me to a screening of an episode of Satyameva Jayate, a television programme that was hosted by the actor Aamir Khan. One of the episodes had dealt with the problems of chemical fertilisers in farming and GVM was keen to get as many farmers to view the episode. Fertilisers had begun to make their presence felt in a big way in the area and the organisation was worried that it was doing

more harm than good, at least for the few farmers who still relied on agriculture as their main occupation.

We were on our way to the house of one of the older members of the NGO, Ajit, who had been involved in radical politics prior to his joining GVM. Assamese-speaking Scheduled Caste and Muslim communities, whose livelihoods depended on the flow of water in the area, dominated the village. Over the past few years, Prithibhushan informed me, local communities had fallen apart, especially after Bengali-speaking Muslims had begun to arrive in the area after they were forced out of river islands and areas that had been eroded by rivers in western Assam. The conflicts always sounded petty when related to others – a straying goat in the neighbour’s yard, pilfered grain from the barn – but they added to the tension in the local area. All of it got accentuated in the rainy season, when water-logging and floods made it necessary for most families in the area to seek support from NGOs and the government. Ajit’s support for local initiatives, given his involvement in radical politics earlier, was of great importance in the relief work that was carried out.

Much of the work conducted by GVM was about mapping the causes of livelihood change and their impact on the local economy. As we moved out the office to Ajit’s house, he pointed out the places where activists from ULFA and Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chattra Parishad (AJYCP) had their offices. They inherited some of the furniture and other material from these offices, but most importantly, they picked up a spirit of volunteerism from both the organisations. Similar acknowledgment would not have been easy a decade earlier – in the 2000s – as the government administration were incarcerating and sometimes killing activists with any obscure connections to ULFA. In most cases, the connections were as fragile as metaphoric spider webs that were both strong and fragile. GVM, AJYCP and ULFA shared a very dense physical and political space with one another and it was not inconceivable that there would be traffic of ideas from one office to the other. In many ways, the evolution of GVM as a developmental organisation concerned about livelihood, social justice and development, emerged from a rejection of violent politics with a deeper focus on everyday needs of a very complex, multi-ethnic rural society in their district. Currently, it partners with some of the country’s foremost donors working on development and relief. The organisation works very closely with the district administration in extending material relief and awareness on many of the government’s flagship schemes for rural communities.

Ajit and his wife invited us in for tea. Unlike other men of the village, Ajit went inside his house, where he made omelettes and tea for us, as his wife asked Prithibhushan about the new work that GVM had taken on in anticipation of the floods that were predicted for the monsoon. In the sticky humidity of the late afternoon June heat, it was interesting to be suddenly reminded of the manner in which former guerrilla members were capable of questioning certain gender roles, such as housework. In most other households in the village, women were relegated to the kitchen, especially when men went visiting on official matters. Despite recent accounts of various degrees gender insensitivity to women’s issues within ULFA (Rajkhowa 2013; Deka 2017), there are anecdotal accounts – as well as parts of Deka’s research – to show that gender roles were indeed part of the process of revolutionary change within the organisation, as many former and current cadre have spoken about organisational mores about questioning social roles ascribed to women³. In fact, in the course of my fieldwork across the Brahmaputra valley between 1999 to 2005, my love for cooking and kitchen work had led several of my hosts in villages to look upon me with some suspicion. Many were used to ULFA male cadres who came to seek shelter in their homes. These young men had little hesitation to cook and clean, since these were tasks that they had been used to in the bush. Ajit and his partner were therefore emblematic of a perceptible turn in gendered ideas prevalent in rural Nalbari. However, for even the most discerning observer, the world of volunteers and voluntary

work in rural Nalbari was markedly masculine, with relatively few women being seen in the execution of community-based work.

To return to the everyday relief and developmental work being done in Nalbari, it is also important to understand the role that animators and community leaders (like Ajit) play in bringing people together. However, they also had to contend with local sentiments. In this case, Assamese Muslim communities around the river Bullu had been at loggerheads with Bengali/Bhatiali speaking Muslims, accusing them of petty crimes in the area. Neighbours saw the newcomers as land grabbers and cattle rustlers, yet such allegations did not merit greater police presence or vigilance. Ajit, Prithibhushan and I left to visit a small settlement around the Pagladiya River, not far from the office and Ajit's house. The settlement had come up in 2012, when settlers from other districts came and blocked a stream that flowed into the Pagladiya, by building houses nearby. In doing so, they flooded areas that were used as *paam* (seasonal) cultivation and dwelling by Assamese Muslim farmers. GVM had attempted to mediate between the local farmers and the settlers, but in the end the police had to get involved to prevent violence between the two parties. Even so, the police were forced to retreat from the dispute and the channel was cleared to allow the water to flow again. This led to rancour between the settlers and the local Assamese Muslim communities.

As the three of us made our way to the house of one of the GVM's main animators, one of the settlers began to berate Prithibhushan about the lack of facilities for their families. "The government has not given us anything sister", he replied in Bhatiali. He asked whether the child she was carrying in her arms had been vaccinated, but she ignored his question and kept asking for more information on relief that was promised by the government, as well as what would happen when the rains came again. As he extricated himself from her, and joined Ajit and me, we met the animator Javed (an Assamese Muslim from a neighbouring village) who muttered under his breath: "Drama again". He took us to the Jatiya Vidyalaya (National School) in the neighbourhood, which was yet another outcome of the complicated interplay of Assamese nationalism and the government of Assam's attempts to extend community-based, people-funded primary education⁴. The animator's obvious frustration with the woman spilled over into our conversation about the preparedness for the rains and plans for GVM's work laid out for the summer. He was exhausted by the constant demands for relief among the settlers, he said. "They are way more aware of the kind of material that the departments send during relief than our Assamese farmers," he said. In the course of discussions about work, Ajit asked Javed about the possibility of screening the Satyameva Jayate episode in the area, leading the latter to scoff: "These farmers (who have settled here) are the main culprits. They use chemical fertilisers indiscriminately as they have no commitment to the land".

For the volunteer-animator Javed, the use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers were linked to the loss of grazing areas, as well as the reduced numbers of cows and buffaloes in the area. He spoke about a time, well into the middle of the 1980s, when the dairy products of the area – curd and cream – were celebrated across western Assam. However, with the canals and embankments, large tracts of land had become unfit for grazing. The cows and buffaloes had also provided farmers with manure for their fields. As the dairy producers began to leave the area, farmers with economic means began to acquire land and rented it out to settlers who had begun to come to the area from other parts of Assam towards the end of 1980s. The settlers, who rented the land, did so for a few years and were understandably interested in maximising their produce. Javed continued explaining that the settlers used any chemicals that private companies had begun to market and bought hybrid vegetable seeds for the winter season as well. All of this had different interpretations, depending on who was being asked about the issue of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The sharecroppers were renting the land for amounts that they found very high – approximately 200 kilos for every bigha cultivated, or

50% of the produce – and the only way to break even was to ensure maximum production from the land that they were renting in. The chemical fertiliser and pesticide companies allowed them a few years of subsidised procurement of the material, after which they had to pay full cost for it.

Caught in the vicious cycle, the sharecroppers said that they knew no other way to break even, especially when they were not sure how long they would stay. Those who could, tried to invest some of their money into buying agricultural land, so that they did not have to rely on short-term, expensive tenures. Those who were renting out land were also not in a position to cultivate their fields on their own. Over time, they had seen their families and relatives turn away from agriculture and rely on hired farm labour. With farm incomes dropping each season, they found it easier to rent out the land for an amount that could help supplement the family's income. In all, everyone around the area covered under GVM's work, were attempting to eke out a living by doing everything they could around land. Farming was one of the many options that they had.

This resonates with what anthropologist James Ferguson had to say about the speed with which social scientists conflate the land question with the agrarian one. He argued that the question of land was associated with the kind of rights one enjoyed over it and what one wanted to do with it, while the agrarian question was more about the manner in which farming ought to be organised as well as the roles different actors played in it, adding that the beneficiaries are distributed across family and ethnic lines (Ferguson 2013). Talking to people around Nalbari, one is struck by just how much the village field has to subsidise the work of the family. It provided direct livelihoods to those farming, but it also provided a safety net for members who left for cities in search of different kind of labour. That bag of rice that came from home was a point of pride and security for young women and men in the city. In drawing up the various activities that people did with land – farming, renting, selling, collecting firewood, grazing livestock – there was little doubt that most families shared common activities and connections. However, when it came to attributing symbolic collective identity and pride about the place, newly arrived settlers seemed to be excluded.

Would they come for the screening of the film, I vacuously wondered as though there was nothing else they had to do during the summer. Prithibhushan was sure that they would, and hoped that he could persuade some of them to begin thinking along different lines, to be able to interact with others and change the narrative. The Assamese-Muslim and Assamese-Hindu amity stories were clearly used to underline the divide between those considered to be outsiders and the locals (where the Assamese word '*tholawa*' was used to denote the latter, while the outsiders were quite summarily described as '*mia*'). Eventually many men did turn up for the screening. Women and settlers though were conspicuous by their absence on that day. Perhaps there were occasions where the world of settlers and natives met without rancour – during festivals and disasters – but even as late as 2014 and in the absence of sustained political projects that draw the various threads of the transformation of agriculture narrative, it was hard to see how one could create possibilities of inclusion within the local community in the area. Organisations like GVM have continued to explore ways by which women and children, irrespective of their ethnic origins, could come together on common platforms. Health and education were high on the list, but the organisation was working under extremely difficult circumstances.

On their own, these stories are not spectacular and perhaps undeserving of academic attention. Recent scholarship on women's experiences of living along South Asia's violent borderlands have been instructive in drawing one's attention to the manner in which large numbers of people -- especially women, as the section above tries to show -- have been excluded from statist narratives of belonging and policy making (Banerjee 2018). These accounts and research help one understand the Kafkaesque world of policy making, their impact and failure along places that are far

away from officious decision making processes. However, I have not been able to shake off the idea that there exists an aggregated story that weaves farming, migration and insurgency from one end of the Brahmaputra Valley to the other. It is also important to confront the idea that political solidarity and praxis has never been formulaic in Assam. Class alliances were difficult across language and religious divides, but there were always organisations that attempted them routinely in the course their political mobilisation. The cultural works of the Indian Peoples Theatre Association and other leftist organisations from their pre-1947 activities until the 1970s, had bridged the divides with some degree of success, though they were unable to sustain them in the long run (Tamuli-Phukan 2018). For researchers looking at patterns and responses, it can be immensely rewarding to look beyond the formulaic answers to class and identity politics in the state. While it is true that agriculture is an important element in understanding local politics, there is a sense that it is the unheralded parts of the element – water sharing, dike building, and so on – that become crucial to the responses and not merely the quantity of land owned by individuals. Thus, this cycle of poor peasants leaving from and arriving into a small area could be seen as a dense, disaggregated experience of farmers in Assam in the 20th century. Who then, were speaking for them, or speaking about political matters, during and after the days of planning in the 1960s and 1970s?

III. Satro Xongtha, Tez dim tel nidiu, or how the student unions were riled by oil

This allows me to dwell briefly on the role of student-activists like my friends and colleagues I just spoke about. Ever since the Assam Agitation that occurred between 1979 and 1985, social scientists in the country have been intrigued by the role of students in popular social movements. Like other states in the Northeast, students in Assam occupied an important position in the articulation of oppositional politics. In their work on students and middle class politics, Apurba Baruah (2002), Monirul Hussain (1993), Meeta Deka (1996) and Vasundhara Sirnate(2009) had outlined the manner in which student organisations such as All Assam Students Union (AASU) had become an alternate space for young men (and a very few women), who were unimpressed by the official lines of the centrist and socialist parliamentary parties in Northeast India, including Assam. The Language Movement in the 1960s – where Bengali, Khasi, Garo, Karbi and Dimasa speakers protested against the imposition of Assamese in government schools – had led Assamese-speaking youth to gravitate towards a more radical political posture that sought to distance itself from the official position of the state government. At a time when the government was still seen as the major employer of qualified people, language had become an important basis for political mobilisation. Many young student leaders of the period (1970-1980) were second-generation beneficiaries of the government's education system and had grown up studying in Assamese medium schools across the valley. They spoke about colonial injustices, where Assam's resources were badly managed and completely wasted away by people who did not care about the economy and the land. One of the telling slogans of the Assam Agitation that followed the Language Movement was '*Tez dim, tel nidiu*' (We'll give blood, but not oil), emblematic of a particular fascination of the perceived mismanagement of a national resource (of Assam). It triggers another memory from my childhood, where my middle-class, upper Assam relatives sat through evenings of blackouts in Jorhat and cursed the government for the manner in which they had allowed Assam's oil and gas resources to be literally burned away. Every drive from Dibrugarh to Jorhat would elicit some older relative pointing towards the oil rigs where excess oil was allowed to burn away, with the words: "Look at that waste". To this day, I still cannot get over the near obsessive claims that our relatives seemed to have over the land and the resources that it was supposed to contain. I never got to know why the sight of burning oil elicited such

responses from them. However, at a very young age, I was made aware of the importance of science and technology for young educated men from upper Assam. Relatives and friends of family had made a mark for themselves in the department of geology established in 1970 in Dibrugarh University. The prospects of petroleum and oil explorations were instrumental in the creation of taught academic subjects and research programmes that would cater to the industry at a time when universities were not really required to find common cause with industry. Specialised universities such as Assam Agriculture University in Jorhat, had fairly well-funded departments and courses devoted to tea husbandry, leading to a steady traffic of people, ideas and aspirations from the classrooms to the industry that was extremely dynamic. Bruno Latour's contention that social context and technical content were both important in a proper understanding of scientific activity underlines the kind of transactions that happened between the two settings (Latour 1987). If science can be understood through practice, he insisted that scientific literature, laboratories and the institutional context of science were all important in what we consider to be modern in our ever-changing world. The people, who railed against injustice and government profligacy at the sight of oil rigs, were also queuing to get jobs in institutions that would take them as further away from the horizons that had been drawn for them by their parents.

I see a certain reassertion of fundamentals that are dear to conservative opinion in these memories. It was almost as though Assamese-speaking students of the 1970s were able to see the foundering of old solidarities that the radical communists and socialists were calling for, and with it the consensus that held that peasants and workers would inherit the benefits of popular social movements. The workers in Assam would have to be those working on plantations, a class deemed far too weak to act on their own⁵. The peasant, however, was solid but malleable enough to be incorporated into a popular social movement. Schools, colleges and the two comprehensive universities in Assam had created a pool of young women and men who were asking questions and debating ideas, just as their counterparts in other parts of the world. In doing so, they tended to look inwards and found an audience among people of small towns and villages. Writing about the role of peasant ideology in fomenting violence in Rwanda, the economist Philip Verwimp claims that politicians are able to appeal to peasants while paving the path for the expansion of a middle class, by demonising the intimate other (Verwimp 2000). I am cautious about a lazy suggestion that the students of the 1950s and 1960s were responsible for provincializing rural communities and turning their focus away from common struggles against larger, though less tangible adversaries. Such an assertion cannot account for the many layers of complicity and the Weberian explanation of how ideas and projects in fashioning the future change the course of one's life. Where does one find the evidence for such assertions that insist on a connection between student politics and a kind of radical response from farmers?

The Assam Agitation and subsequently the period of insurgency that was spearheaded by groups like ULFA and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) in the 1990s and 2000s were also a period of revivalism. Ideals and ideas about the past were replete with images and radical projects that were focused on the recreation of a past where the indigenous farmers and their families were valorised. ULFA cadres and their enthusiastic supporters cleared large tracts of government forest reserves in Kaki (Nagaon district) during a particularly brutal phase of counter-insurgency between 1992 and 1996. There, as if in studied disdain for the life-and-death situation they were thrust into, radical young women and men began to induce indigenous farmers whose livelihoods had been affected by floods and erosion, to come and settle in the government reserve forests. As word spread, marginal farmers from different parts of the valley came to the area to start cooperative farms under the aegis of ideologically-motivated, poorly-equipped, young, radical activists (Tamuli-

Phukan 2011). Such attempts at reaching into the past in order to reshape the present are not uncommon. In Thailand's Isan (Northeast) region, it had resulted in the mobilisation of memories of millenarian movements that began in the middle of the 14th century and lasted until the mid-19th century (Somchai 2011). Scholars such as Chattip Nartsupha (1984) have utilised a repertoire of elements of past resistance to Siamese tax collection and nation-building, to show how regional politics in (places like) Isan resisted capitalist expansion, by managing to hold on to old, socialistic arrangements in rural areas that drew intellectual and moral support from radical protests by religious leaders. Assam's modern revivalists also followed a wishful amalgam of ideas that drew from selective readings of history, but was oriented towards creating agrarian utopias that attempted to be nurseries of a new, just society.

Such projects, especially those that look towards building new agrarian societies often need intellectual support from a wide range of academic opinion. Cambodia's tragic experiments with left-wing agrarian revolution in the 1970s had the intellectual support of political scientists like Ieng Sary. On a different note and with different consequences, the 1970s were a period of social churning among Indian students who had been radicalised in Maoist ideology as they moved from classrooms to farms across the country (Banerjee 1980). It would be difficult to find a sustained and conscious linkage between academic pursuits and political activity in Assam after the agitation (1979-1985). Particularly, the ULFA period was not best served by English-language intellectual work. There were not too many ideologues writing from university chairs. However, the period nurtured radical debates in Assamese intellectual life, drawing in people like Parag Das, who epitomised the spirit of a Gramscian organic intellectual. Das' work straddled journalism, critical political commentary and human rights as he wrote on wide-ranging subjects such as the lives of *char* dwellers in Assam, the profligate nature of the elite in Assam, as well as the political. Similarly, poetry, fiction and non-fiction creative writing in Assamese with an emphasis on the tragic outcome of the conflict, emerged during this period. Cultural and literary theorists, Rakhee Kalita (2012) and Amit Baishya (2018) have written about and translated the works of ULFA activists, producing interesting work on the interface between the world of underground politics and the over-ground public sphere. However, it would require much reflection to look at the ways in which influences from one universe (of research) could be drawn to others (social activism).

Perhaps a tentative connection can be drawn from the traffic in social ideas between the campus and the home during the 1980s. As the notion of blood and land began to circulate in tragic ways, so did animosity against the other. Campuses across the state were reverberating with slogans about burning fires and wasted resources. In various social science departments across the universities, students and mentors were also writing and researching on ideas that demanded immediate attention. Sifting through old dissertations in university libraries in Assam has become an exercise in education for me. Sociology departments have dissertations about changing social structures of tribes and communities that the researcher belongs to; anthropology departments have interesting field-based descriptions of communities that were trying to preserve some aspect of their identity; and history departments have dissertations that look into retrieving a dignified past for the communities that students belong to.

The tone and tenor of the dissertations that emerged from the period and continue into present times are tinged with a nostalgic view of the rural world. Rural farmers emerge in a timeless manner, struggling for that calorific quota that Eric Wolf had outlined in 1966 at a time when peasant struggles had captured the minds of social scientists of the generation (Wolf 1966: 4-6). Students' thesis in Assam, picked on some aspects of Wolf's important ideas about peasant societies across the world, mainly about their need to survive against competing claims on their resources, without

delving into other aspects like the risks involved in sustaining their way of life. My point here is to shed some light on the charged world of academia in Assam during that the 1970s to 1990s. Universities – both technical and comprehensive – were the sites of a peculiar, self-referential traffic of ideas. As they began to look inwards, while attempting to act upon the political events on the streets, the social sciences reflected the growing disconnect between two competing ideas. The first was the universal idea of a civic, communitarian vision of Assam, while the other was the pursuit of angry claims to a particular identity. From the 1990s until now, one can see the tensions that arise from a provincialisation of academic ideas, and the frequency with which a particular kind of identity politics found its way into the functioning of the university system. Student politics during this period sought self-validation in movements that emphasised differences, through claims of historical oppression that were unique and could not be shared with others. However, there were also some ideas that sought to focus on a shared history of oppression and economic exploitation. Those who spoke of such things, tended to carry guns to amplify their voices. Similarly, it was with us in the 1990s, when the violent expression of anger from below was met with an equally brutal, wholly disproportionate reaction from above.

IV. Manab Adhikar, swadhin oxom aru atmo nirrontor odhikar, or how the human rights movement negotiated the right to self-determination in Assam

When the Indian army came into Assam in 1990, we experienced a flattening of identities, as soldiers entered any home they were asked to search. For me, growing up as an English-speaking, middle-class, privileged male that was a moment of revelation. No matter how hard I try, I find it difficult to forget the collective humiliation of checkpoints, body searches and abuse that we were subjected to. My experiences are not unique and have been reproduced everywhere the modern state has tried to extend itself. Pradeep Jeganathan was able to creatively summarise the manner in which checkpoints became the symbols of state control and assertion during the civil war period in Sri Lanka (Jeganathan 2004: 67-80). In Sri Lanka, as in Assam, one was confronted with the possibility of random violence at the checkpoints. Here, one's accent, features, clothes and much else were objects of scrutiny for the young, nervous and trigger-happy representatives of the state who were always too willing to add that extra dose of anger at being dragged into the fight. Recent scholarship on patterns of recruitment of women in ULFA, show how state humiliation and the consequent need to restore a sense of dignity to oneself and others who had been similarly disgraced, have been prime reasons for significant numbers joining the rebellion (Deka 2017). Anderson's insightful views of the power of print capitalism (through novel and newspaper) in creating modular, nationalist worldviews, as well as Chatterjee's rebuttal of the modular form by pointing towards non-western, inner-worldly origins of other nationalist views, are important places to begin any inquiry into relatively long-lasting mobilisation of unconnected aggregates of people (Anderson 1983, Chatterjee 1993). Their debates, when infused with the resentment of wide cross-sections of Assamese society that felt demeaned by counter-insurgency operations, were important realisations that something had gone horribly wrong in post-colonial, middle-class Assamese ideas about their place in the country.

Humiliation and anger are enough to sustain an anti-national identity, and that was what moved me to join MASS in 1995. However, the organisation that I joined espoused a different kind of politics from the one that the students were talking about. There was an emphasis on expressing a vernacular version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Many of our colleagues, like Hobibur who I had referred to earlier, drew common inspiration from the political journeys of activists who had joined the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). Even as we began to

document cases of human rights violations in the state and move these cases to the courts, we began to build an intellectual argument for the right to self-determination for the people of Assam. Just as ULFA had declared a war of liberation for the people, we too saw ourselves as volunteer's for a society that had been crushed by the state. However, we still had to combat ideas and ideologies that were in opposition to the universalisation of the right to self-determination. "Why are the Bodos fighting a separate war, when they should be uniting with us?" someone asked, as we took a crumbling bus from Guwahati to Udalguri for a fact-finding visit following the death of an activist. My comrade and mentor, Lachit Bordoloi, with his legendary patience explained that it was impossible to insist on homogenous identities, especially when a particular group had already declared that they were different. Our fellow travellers on the fact-finding bus were not convinced, as they thought that they were representatives of the old peasant mobilising left. To marshal evidence for their arguments about a singular Assamese identity, they went back to the 16th century Vaishnavite saint, Srimanta Xonkordeb, who spoke of an umbrella Oxomiya identity. On that day, an exhausted Lachit Bordoloi exclaimed: "But Xonkordeb did not write the Constitution of ULFA, did he?". We all laughed and felt sheepish, but our Lachit-*da* had grasped the essence of a particularly modern problem.

The historian Mark Lilla had recently railed against the liberal retreat from civic politics in the global North (Lilla 2017). Like our friends on the fact-finding mission bus, he felt that liberals around the world had done a great disservice in furthering the cause for identity movements. For liberals, he said, the unit of political activism is the romantic self; its fullest expression, the urban demonstration in support of a particular cause, as big and boisterous as possible. For me, the human rights movement in Assam was different because it stayed away from this kind of single-cause, march-oriented, hashtag-friendly expressions of identity politics (at least in principle). In reality and in spirit, we were compelled to aggregate and disaggregate according to the demands that were made of us by representatives of the state, various civil society actors and our own friends and family. In the difficult years between 1996 and 2003 it seemed as though the peasant, student, worker and insurgent in Assam, would be able to anchor their ships in one dock on the course of their difficult journeys into uncertain futures.

Human rights organisations face a peculiar conundrum in most parts of the world, more so in places that have had fairly long history of political violence. The universality of certain human rights, such as the ones defined under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) are officially upheld, but conveniently forgotten in the course of everyday governance of unruly subjects. Social anthropologist Harri Englund's seminal work on the linkages between foreign aid and aggressive elite posturing for abstract rights, show how an international rights discourse can be utterly divorced from local efforts to pursue democratic citizenship (Englund 2006). Middle class leaders of MASS, insistently articulated the language of human rights with an emphasis on the right to self-determination, as part of its campaigns to take the tenets of the UDHR to the villages. This put them at odds with the government and led to arrests of many of the founding members such as Parag Das, Ajit Bhuyan, Lachit Bordoloi, Anjali Daimary, Lolita Barman and other activists from the different districts where army operations were being carried out. As mentioned earlier, this constant movement of ideas from living rooms, editorial offices and lawyers' chambers in urban areas to the villages, helped in the process of local appropriation. As Peggy Levitt and Sally Merry (2009) have argued with regard to global women's movement, local adaptation allowed the human rights movement in Assam to take on the kind of ideological and social attributes of the place, while retaining some of the original formulations of the UDHR, albeit with a lot of friction. Hence, it was possible and unremarkable for someone from my class background to participate in fact-findings,

report writing, awareness raising campaigns and other activities like organising meetings and seminars in various urban and rural parts of Assam, where most of my other comrades were from distinctly different backgrounds.

As our world settled to rest on that particular Hegelian moment, we realised how fleeting it was. The MASS office is a shadow of its bustling self that existed in 1996. Only a few people remain to do the press cuttings but the documentation centre has long stopped functioning. By 2009, our passion seemed to have become a banal political accessory, as ceasefires, surrenders and peace talks took over from the kind of sustained campaigns that Charles Tilly was talking about. It is hard today to distinguish between the charlatan, the poser or ego-tripper, from the idealist who wants to do good things for others and whose passion may be sincere. It brings to mind Ernesto Laclau's contentions that democratic imagery has less to do with the emergence of liberal institutions and is more concerned with the ways in which popular sovereignty has become the organising force of the modern state and modern political imageries. He further says that inchoate populist responses need to be interpreted as a consequence of social realities that are constantly changing and not simply as manifestations of a lack of strategic direction for movements, that even the most mundane of protests are capable of showing the limits of a system and the potential for starting something different (Laclau 1992; 2005).

Matters pertaining to populist politics have become even more critical following the announcement of the draft of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam on July 30, 2018. Updating the NRC, which was originally enumerated in 1951, began after a petition was filed in the Supreme Court of India in 2013. One of the petitioners was an organisation, Assam Public Works (APW), had come into existence in the year 2000. Unlike other organisations in the region that celebrate the day they were formed in various commemorative ways, APW does not conduct public meetings to mark its day of founding. It typified the kind of organisation that was difficult to conduct research on and even more difficult to obtain information about. In the early 2000s, its main function was to maintain a sustained attack against groups like ULFA that were marked by press conferences and small-scale media campaigns. Actually, it is because of the organisation's opaque origins that there is greater need for students of social sciences to figure out the kind of anxieties that its members raise in public⁶. The organisation presented itself as an NGO and its functionaries like Abhijit Sharma had begun their work by staging plays and street theatre against insurgents and in 2006 had carried out its own opinion poll on ULFA's demands for the restoration of sovereignty in Assam. A poll carried out by volunteers of the organisation among a select section of people from nine districts in western Assam, following which the organisation claimed that more than 95% people had rejected ULFA's demands⁷. More recently, Abhijit Sharma was interrogated by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) for his organisation's involvement with Sarada, a group that had been accused of financial scams, especially in the state of Assam and West Bengal⁸. Courts had also censured APW in the past, more so when it was deemed to have gone overboard in its role as activists demanding probity and transparency in public life. Ironically, for an organisation that claimed to uphold the virtues of the Constitution, APW's activities had been frequently placed under legal scrutiny. Therefore, this is a history that needs teasing out in the context of the NRC, more so since there seems to be a convergence of positions for or against the process. This elision of the role of groups like APW has resulted in the lack of public scrutiny over the organisations and civic bodies that have been associated with the debates. Instead, one finds a concerted effort – at least in the media and social networking sites – to hold individuals accountable for positions that are actually the culmination of decades of activism. Therefore, while there have been critical appraisals *after* the draft was declared, there seemed to be no interest in the kind of advocacy displayed by various parties

concerned: the petitioners to the Supreme Court, the state government, civil society organisations and the Supreme Court itself. Human rights organisations, like MASS, were nowhere in the picture either before or after the draft was announced.

Prior to the declaration of the draft of the NRC, there wasn't much critical debate around the issue, barring a prescient note on its possible fallouts by Sanjib Baruah in an op-ed piece for the *Indian Express*⁹. The article was subsequently translated into Assamese and published in *Axomiya Protidin*. Over the next few months and until the publication of the draft, there were several opinion pieces, interviews and essays that addressed the NRC issue, creating a spectrum of political positions. Broadly put, those who put forward the argument that the NRC draft symbolised an official subversion of Indian Citizenship Act and discriminated against Muslims, were on one end of the spectrum. The other end of the spectrum was occupied by those who saw the NRC as the culmination of the agreement that was signed between the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the government of India, called the Assam Accord of 1985. Both positions emerge from realities that seem incomprehensible to one another and are embodied in the sadness that permeates the debate. It is clear that those who hold these positions are willing to see the point the other is trying to make, as explained poignantly by Abdul Kalam Azad in his essay in *The Caravan* in September 2018¹⁰. In a moving account of how humiliation and endurance are responsible in equal measure for the grievances that Muslims have in Assam, Azad writes about how he feels proud to hear his son sing Bishnu Rabha's songs, even as he realises that his Mia identity poses a threat to those who call for deportation of foreigners. He ruefully cites the commentary of public intellectuals like Hiren Gohain, who have stated that communitarian goodwill, rather than platoons of state militia, would be better able to protect the relationship between so-called settlers and indigenous people in Assam. In most other contexts, such a statement would be termed as sagacious but given the political activism around the issue of identity and migration in Assam, it can also have ominous overtones.

There is a tragic story in the making here. How does one make sense of the fact that some of India's most brutalised citizens in Assam find themselves defending the actions of a state that seeks to make political gains from updating a rather routine document that is part of statecraft in most parts of the world? This sounds convoluted enough, but the NRC debates underline a violent process where communities see each other as potential threats to their existence. In doing so, they find comfort in the fickle world of alliances with parties that represent the state, including institutions like the police, courts and political groups. In such a scheme, the NRC appears not merely as a disruptive effort made by the state in order to manage a crisis, but as a logical end to decades of political mobilisation. It is therefore difficult for Assamese commentators, even those who had been critical of identity movements in the 1980s, to disavow the NRC process. Given the peculiar situation of the citizenship debate in Assam, it is also equally difficult for those left out of the draft to feel reassured that this was a technical matter that would be resolved in a peaceable manner. The evidence against such a possibility is overwhelming, especially following the different conflicts undertaken by the state and non-state actors to clear spaces they claim as theirs. For non-state actors, this was manifested in the many internecine conflicts centred on issues of belonging, in the two autonomous hill districts, BTAD, Goalpara¹¹. For the state, evictions have been the usual route of displacing people from particular spaces that it wants for other purpose. It is true that until the first decade of the 2000s, the state's capacity to evict people from parks and forests were somewhat limited, since insurgents and other non-state actors had asserted their rights over resources (Vandekerckhove and Sukyens 2010). However, since the 2005-6, the state in Assam had begun to evict farmers and others considered to be encroachers from the fringes of national parks and forests

(Barbora 2017). Other than a few organisations, such as the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), there have not been many organisations that speak on behalf of the section of people still dependent on agriculture.

Incomes from the farming sector have not risen in the last decade. Peasants in Assam, when they are not being evicted from the fringes of cities and national parks, are forced to migrate in search of livelihoods, leaving their land to poorer farmers to work on. Students scramble for any employment and sometimes land up in prisons in Iran as undocumented workers¹². Insurgents exist as militarised cells somewhere in the hills to the east. Each one of them is imbued with passion and exhaustion in equal measure, but it does seem as though we are unable to translate it into something more. We – at least those who fall on the left end of the political spectrum in defence of universal human rights -- defend our passion privately and resentfully even. I believe there is a need to look for subtle differences and nuances in our defence of passion. We must remember Plato's wise words that passion is the last defence for the intellectually weak. If anything, we must assert that we are not so. These are especially difficult times to predict the kind of alliances and associations that advocacy groups and organic intellectuals will be forced to make in the coming decade. Over the decades, one saw groups coalescing around issues. In the 1950s and 1960s, radicals in Assam found common cause with their comrades in other parts of India during the heydays of the Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA), but it was also a time of ferment for some form of armed struggle, as proposed by the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI)¹³. In the 1970s and 1980s, they found common cause with regional voices of dissent, like those fighting for autonomy for Punjab and their demands for Khalistan¹⁴. In the 1990s and early 2000s, it was almost as if Assamese-speaking radicals had rediscovered their connections to the Northeast region. In doing so, they were engaging with the idea and finding out that the “denial of self-determination (had consistently) led to conflict and violence where the State's use of force and control effectively eliminate(d) people but their aspirations” (Longchari 2016: 272). Those carrying arms began an eastward trajectory that would take them to Burma for training and logistical support, while human rights and student activists would attempt to find local connections closer to home¹⁵. Ironically, it was also a time when inter-community clashes were becoming more prominent expressions of political mobilisation. In Assam, it would be an occasion for disparate communities to come together in organising peace initiatives that involved visits to affected areas, writing extensive reports for the media and trying to restart dialogue among communities whose relations were turning violent. In these context, the insistence on inter-ethnic dialogue was reassuring, as was the idea that the security of one community which was depended on the goodwill of another. However, one can imagine that in the absence of any activism that embraces ethnic difference, while upholding universal ideas of just-peace, such appeals for inter-community connections might sound ominous. This is especially true when every community feels that it has been abandoned by the (Indian) state, while attributing closeness of the state for their neighbours (and other communities).

The tragedy of the situation cannot be overemphasised: being sensitised to humiliation ought to enable one to extend solidarity to others who have been similarly subjugated by the state, or other powerful bodies that determine the manner in which civility can be measured out. Instead, one sees a scramble for ownership of state-initiated processes that are designed to exclude, distract and obfuscate. Organisations like APW have not been at the forefront of struggles against state excesses. Instead, they have benefited from articulating issues and subjects that are very close to the kind of problems that the administration was confronted by. They represent one end of a spectrum of advocacy that shows how the modern state apparatus require non-state actors to speak a similar language to theirs. With their involvement in the NRC, they also represent a strand of political

opinion that believes in the power of the judiciary to right historical grievances. However, one needs to take into account that proponents and opponents of the NRC, especially those representing organisations and interest groups, have come to their respective positions through a process of reasoning and careful negotiations. Even though they may not be able to show adequate evidence to back their claims, it remains pertinent to argue that these positions are a reflection of the complex layers of political reality and mobilisation of the kind that Tilly and Tarrow have alluded to, especially in the ability to start campaigns that are sustained public efforts and make collective claims on target authorities/audiences. Thus far, proponents of the NRC have articulated a few seemingly contradictory issues that can be resolved through the process: (a) a check on illegal immigration, (b) adequate attention to be paid to indigenous communities who are losing their land and other wealth-producing resources, (c) an end to the vilification of religious minorities, and (d) resolution of several other related issues pertaining to voting and citizenship. As those involved in the debates themselves point out, it is unclear how these ends will be achieved but they nevertheless argue that the NRC is part of a wider solution that will lead to conflict resolution for the people of Assam. Proponents of the process include influential student groups like AASU, as well as intellectuals and organisations that owe allegiance to the Left and to indigenous political demands for territorial autonomy. Opponents of the process, on the other hand, argue that the draft is emblematic of the following disturbing realities: (a) Assam's often violent political mobilisation has left four million people in a state of legal limbo, (b) the state's systematic campaign to marginalise Muslims in Assam, (c) a flawed process that might not be able to resolve any of the political and social issues that it had ostensibly raised, and (d) it was a colossal display of hubris from a state that was bent upon humiliating a section of people. While much of this is true, one needs to constantly point out the fact that it does not capture the entire spectrum of opposition to the process. The opponents of the NRC today also include large sections of Hindu Bengalis from the Barak Valley, certain sections of middle-class, caste-Hindu opinion makers (like the Prabajan Virodhi Manch, or Forum Against Infiltration), who feel that the process was not stringent enough anyway, as well as national and international organisations like Citizens for Justice and Peace, and Awaaz Foundation. I would be reckless in arguing that there is an alliance on either side, seeing that each position represents very carefully crafted political strategies by the organisations and individuals who have been drawn into the debate.

What then do I make of my own involvement in this very messy project that include friends, non-friends and enemies? How does one deal with comrades switching sides, or being told about an important event that one has not been invited to? After 2009, when ULFA's political wing and a large portion of its armed cadre decided to negotiate with the government of India, I actually saw how fragile such matters really are. If Hegel were right in his pronouncement that the world is constantly changing and that it occasionally rests in a particular moment, then the difficult years of counter-insurgency (between 1990 to 2009) would be my own Hegelian moment. It was difficult to find evidence for public endorsement that could support the idea of self-determination, or even a casual acceptance of the universality of human rights. As advocates of both, we were constantly falling short of clinching the argument in a purely legal sense. The war between ULFA, other armed groups and the Indian state meant that we had to constantly improvise. As defenders of the universal human rights, we had to remind the state of its obligation to protect the liberal (even socialist) constitution of the country. In doing so, we sought allies elsewhere, especially those who were at the receiving end of the feudal and capitalist persona of the Indian state. It was not difficult to explain to an Assamese widow from Barama that she ought to make common cause with the Dalit survivor in Lakshmanpur-Bathe, in Bihar. It was easier to find comrades in industrial Okhla (Delhi) who would

offer their modest home as refuge for itinerant activists from upper Assam than it was to find safe houses in Sibsagar (Assam).

As advocates of self-determination, we had to constantly navigate a moral and political world that was asking difficult questions, especially about the manner in which stable categories like peasant, student and insurgent had become enmeshed and interchangeable. There was also a second layer of difficulty involved in the self-determination debate, one that was briefly alluded to in the anecdotal interaction between Lachit Bordoloi and other colleagues earlier in this text. The *self* in the idea of self-determination was constantly being questioned during the years outlined. Hence, it took enormous courage and fortitude to abide by Universalist ideas, especially at a time when it would have been easier to succumb to populist notions of identity of the self. The difficult years for the human rights movement in Assam therefore, were also its most significant. At the moment when it was actually very difficult to identify oneself as a member of MASS, also seemed to be a time when the organisation commanded a moral high ground in popular politics. Evidence for its support, therefore, had to be sought elsewhere and not in the common-sense world of parliamentary politics and institutions of representative democracy. Therefore, when asked to measure my involvement in a movement that I chose to be a part of, I do so with the knowledge that its most difficult moments were perhaps its best. In these most difficult moments, the human rights movement in Assam was able to become a platform for the most diverse Weberian status groups that one could think about: ethnic groups and communities, workers' associations, students' organisations, immigrant farmers and others that would take far more time to enumerate and skills to fall back than I can hope for at the current time.

Endnotes

¹ This is an extended version of a public lecture with the same title that was delivered on November 28, 2017 and organised by Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (MCRG) at Kolkata. Barbra wishes to thank colleagues at MCRG, especially Profs. Paula Banerjee, Ranabir Samaddar and Anita Sengupta. Thanks are due to Profs. Haripriya Rangan and Craig Jeffrey at the Australia India Institute, Melbourne, where much of the text was reworked. Thanks are due to Joel Rodrigues for his copy editing skills and insightful questions on an earlier draft. These ideas and reflections would have remained inarticulate were it not for heated, often unresolved discussions with Aküm Longchari, Dolly Kikon, Lachit Bordoloi, Sanjib Baruah, Parismita Singh, RK Debbarma, Sarat Phukan, Rulee Phukan, Rachel Kashena, Abdul Kalam Azad, Yengkhom Jilangamba, Orup Koch, Mrinal Gohain, Ankur Tamuli-Phukan, Kishor Kalita and various cohorts of acutely critical and inquisitive students from the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPACS) and Centre for Sociology and Social Anthropology (CSSA) at TISS Guwahati. The usual disclaimers apply.

² Most of the debates during the Assam Agitation (1979-1985) that are currently available were carried out in Assamese, Bengali and English.

³ Personal communication with families of activists conducted between 2000 and 2005.

⁴ Jatiya Vidyalayas, are part of a larger political and social project that came to fruition in 1994. Its origins lie in the fact that the government of Assam allows schools to be set up by private trusts and associations, as a continuation to colonial times when the state was unable to provide schools in far-flung areas. Until the 1980s, Assamese education was the preserve of state-run schools, where students supposedly did not have access to quality education. The Assam Jatiya Vidyalaya project involved several activists of the Assam Agitation who felt that affordable, good quality private education ought to be provided in Assamese as well. The presence of a Jatiya Vidyalaya in a particular area is often a testimony to many things at the same time. For one, it shows local community mobilisation for education, as these schools are provided with a common curriculum in Assamese. Secondly, it also signifies the presence of a fairly large number of persons who wish to send their children to Assamese medium schools, as English-medium schools are either too expensive or not present in the area.

Third, and most importantly, they are also markers of a particular kind of Assamese nationalist ideals of expanding children's knowledge in the language that they probably speak at home. Therefore, for a person to showcase a Jatiya Vidyalaya in a place is to also make a point that she/he has forgone other options like a *madrassa* (that most poor Muslims send their children to), English-medium or state schools.

⁵The role of indentured workers in social and political movements in Assam has been well-documented by historians such as Amalendu Guha (cited in this essay). However, the nature of the plantation system has been detrimental to expanding political solidarity between workers and peasants. For a greater part, the contemporary political history of Assam after 1947 has not seen widespread mobilization of lines of solidarity between descendants of the indentured workers and peasants in the adjoining areas. I am aware of the creation of new forms of solidarity between Adivasis and their neighbours, by religious institutions like the Catholic Church, Shankar Sangha and peasant groups like the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti. Unfortunately, the scope of my current essay does not allow me to draw on these contemporary developments.

⁶Social anthropologists have scrutinized the anxieties that arise from the manner in which certain secrets are purveyed and circulated. In this particular case, there is a need to uncover the revelatory principle involved in studying organizations like APW that exist as public shadow (rather than outright secrets) that appear and disappear at strategic political moments. For a more detailed description of the myriad usages and analytical possibilities arising out of secrecy, disclosure, the public and private, see Manderson, Davis, Colwell and Ahlin (2015).

⁷ For further details, see:

<https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/survey-shatters-ulfa-dream/cid/739408> (Accessed on August 18, 2018).

⁸ See, thenews report "APW head quizzed by CBI – Sharma's firm had constructed road for Saradha resort." *The Telegraph*, 21 September, 2014. Available from:

https://www.telegraphindia.com/1140921/jsp/frontpage/story_18856948.jsp (Accessed on August 18, 2018).

⁹ See, Baruah, Sanjib. 2018. "Stateless in Assam." *The Indian Express*, 19 January. Available from:

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/national-register-of-citizens-5030603/> (Accessed on August 23, 2018).

¹⁰See, Azad, Abdul Kalam. 2018. "Growing up Miya in Assam: How the NRC weaponised my identity against me." *The Caravan*. 23 September. Available from: <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/politics/growing-up-miya-in-assam-how-the-nrc-weaponised-my-identity-against-me> (Accessed on September 28, 2018).

¹¹ These include the violence that occurred in Dima Hasao (involving Hmar, Zeme, Naga and Dimasa communities in 2003, 2005, 2009 and 2011) and Karbi Anglong (involving Kuki, Karbi, Dimasa and Rengma communities in 2004, 2005, 2014), which are the two autonomous hill districts in Assam. They also include the period of violence in the current areas of BTAD (involving Bodo, Adivasi, Nepali, Muslim, Rabha and Hajong communities in 1993, 1996, 2008, 2012 and 2014). Other districts like Goalpara also saw violence between the Garo and Rabha communities in 2010-11. Similarly, people in most districts of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam have been witness to some form of inter-ethnic conflict that resulted in expulsion of one set of people from the area.

¹²In 2013, I was called upon to help with the return of a young man who was stuck in an open prison in Iran. He was from Morigaon and his widowed mother had approached a local human rights activist to help with his case. The boy had spent a fortune to train as a marine engineer and was offered placement on a merchant ship in Iran. His agent and employer did not have proper work papers and he, so he and two other colleagues were detained (first by the Iranian coast guard and thereafter their police) for more than a year in various places such as Bushehr station, Urduga jail and finally in Khoramshehr port. He was eventually allowed to return to Assam in 2014.

¹³IPTA had activists like Bhupen Hazarika and Hemango Biswas as their members. Both activists were much admired across the region and were responsible for diffusing tensions during communal riots. Rongili Biswas has written evocatively about her father, Hemango's underground days in the Shillong-based webzine, *raiot.in* <http://raiot.in/my-fathers-underground-days-in-shillong/> (Accessed on September 19, 2018). Similarly,

archivist Avinibesh Sharma has documented RCPI's iconic leader and cultural icon, Bishnu Prasad Rabha's extraordinary, Rabelaisian world of activism and art in his article in the same webzine. For more details see: <http://raiot.in/my-fathers-underground-days-in-shillong/> (Accessed on September 19, 2018).

¹⁴As a student returning home from Shillong after the Assam Accord in 1985, I recall electioneering with my cousins in Jorhat. All of us, still in school, were out canvassing for the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). My aunts and uncles were all praise for NT Rama Rao of the Telegu Desam Party (TDP), who had come to campaign for AGP. The Congress party had shipped in Bollywood stars like Amitabh Bachchan, but for Assamese speaking voters in Assam, it was NTRama Rao who was the real draw. Similarly, representatives of the All India Sikh Students Federation were occasional visitors to the office of AASU in Guwahati and various other districts of the Brahmaputra valley.

¹⁵The human rights movement in the region began with the formation of the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (in the Naga territories) and Committee for the Protection of Human Rights (CPHR) in the 1970s. Much of their work was unenviable data collection, filing petitions and cases in the courts of law following brutal campaigns by the Indian army in places that did not occupy the national imaginary back then. MASS started in 1990, considerably later than the existing movement in Nagaland and Manipur. However, in the mid-1990s, Parag Das was instrumental in the creation of a broad-based platform called the North East Coordination Committee on Human Rights (NECOHR), where most other human rights organisations of the region came together to undertake joint campaigns and protests.

References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Alavi, Hamza. 1965. "Peasants and Revolution." *The Socialist Register: A Survey of Movements & Ideas*, 2, pp. 241-277.
- Baishya, Amit. 2018. *Contemporary Literature from Northeast India: Death worlds, Terror and Survival*. New Delhi: Routledge CRC Press (Forthcoming).
- Banerjee, Paula. 2018. *Borders, Histories, Existences: Gender and Beyond*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Banerjee, Sumanta. 1980. *In the Wake of Naxalbari: A History of the Naxalite Movement in India*. Calcutta: Subarnarekha.
- Barbora, Sanjay. 2017. "Riding the Rhino: Conservation, Conflicts and Militarisation of Kaziranga National Park." *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography*, 49 (5), pp. 1145-1163.
- Barbora, Sanjay. 2008. "Autonomous Districts and/or Ethnic Homelands: An Ethnographic Account of Genesis of Political Violence in Assam (North-East India) Against the Normative Frame of the Indian Constitution." *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 15 (2), pp. 313-334.
- Baruah, Apurba. 2002. "Approaches to the Study of Student Movements in Northeast India" in Apurba Baruah (Ed). *Student Power in Northeast India: Understanding of Students Movements*. New Delhi: Regency Publications. pp. 1-20.
- Baruah, Sanjib. 2017. "India and its Northeast: Another Big Push without a Take-Off." in Yasmin Saikia and Amit R. Baishya (Eds.) *Northeast India: A Place of Relations*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, pp. 45-67.
- Baruah, Sanjib. 2001. "Clash of resource use regimes in Colonial Assam: A nineteenth-century puzzle revisited." *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 28 (3), pp. 109-124.
- Baruah, Sanjib. 1999. *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Bernstein, Henry. 2010. *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*. Halifax and Fernwood: Kumarian Press.
- Bichsel, Christine. 2009. *Conflict Transformation in Central Asia: Irrigation disputes in the Ferghana Valley*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Bichsel, Christine. 2005. "In search of harmony: repairing infrastructure and social relations in the Ferghana Valley." *Central Asian Survey* 24 (1), pp. 53-66.

- Borras Jr., Saturnino M and Jennifer C. Franco. 2013. "Global Land Grabbing and Trajectories of Agrarian Change: A Preliminary Analysis." *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 12 (1), pp. 34-59.
- Chandra, N.K. 1974. "Farm Efficiency under Semi-Feudalism: A Critique of Marginalist Theories and Some Marxist Formulations." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 9 (32-4). Pp. 1309-31.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Chatthip Nartsupha. 1984. "The Ideology of Holy Men Revolts in North-East Thailand" in Andrew Turton and Shigeharu Tanabe (Eds.), *History and Peasant Consciousness in South East Asia*. Senri Ethnological Studies, 13, pp. 111-134.
- Chayanov, Alexander. 1991. *The Theory of Peasant Co-operatives*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Chetiya, Anima. 1988. *Political Parties in Assam During 1952-1980: An Analytical Study*, Unpublished doctoral thesis, Department of Political Science: Gauhati University.
- Custers, Peter. 2010. "Maulana Bhashani and the transition to secular politics in East Bengal." *The Newsletter*, 55, pp. 12-13.
- Deka, Dixita. 2017. *UNDERGROUND: Lives, Activism and Representation of Women in ULFA*, Unpublished MPhil thesis, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati Campus.
- Deka, Meeta. 1996. *Student Movements in Assam*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Deutscher, Isaac. 1966. *Ironies of History: Essays on Contemporary Communism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Englund, Harri. 2006. *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ferguson, James. 2013. "How to Do Things with land: A Distributive Perspective on Rural Livelihoods in Southern Africa." *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 13 (1), pp. 166-174.
- Ferguson, James. 1990. *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Guha, Amalendu. 1977. *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*. New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House.
- Hussain, Monirul. 1993. *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*. Delhi: Manak Publications.
- Jeganathan, Pradeep. 2004. "Checkpoint: Anthropology, Identity and the State" in Veena Das and Deborah Poole (Eds.), *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*. Santa Fe/London: School of American Research Press/James Currey. Pp. 67-80.
- Kalita, Rakhee. 2012. "Of ends and beginnings: war, peace and the interregnum," *Seminar # 640*. Available from: http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/640/640_rakhee_kalita.htm (Accessed on September 13, 2018).
- Kar, Bodhisattva. 2009. "Historia Elastica: A Note on the Rubber Hunt in the North-East Frontier of British India." *Indian Historical Review*, 36 (1), pp. 131-150.
- Kikon, Dolly. 2017. "Portraits of a Place: Reflections about fieldwork from the foothills of Northeast India" in Melanie Vandelhensken, Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh and Bengt Karlsson (Eds.), *Geographies of Difference: Explorations in Northeast Indian Studies*. New York: Routledge. Pp. 72-88.
- Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. London and New York: Verso.
- Laclau, Ernesto. 1992. "Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity." *October*, 61 (Summer), pp. 83-90.
- Latour, Bruno. 1987. *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press.
- Lenin, Vladimir Illyich. 1965. "The Proletariat and the Peasantry" in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works Volume 10*, Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Lerche, Jens, Alpa Shah and Barbara Harriss-White. 2013. "Introduction: Agrarian Questions and Left Politics in India." *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 13 (3), pp. 337-350.
- Levitt, Peggy and Sally Merry. 2009. "Vernacularization on the ground: local uses of global women's rights in Peru, China, India and the United States" *Global Networks*, 9 (4), pp. 1470-2266.
- Lilla, Mark. 2017. *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*. New York: Harper Collins.

- Longchari, Aküm. 2016. *Self Determination: A Resource for Just Peace*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House.
- Manderson, Lenore, Mark Davis, Chip Colwell and Tanja Ahlin. 2015. "On Secrecy, Disclosure, Public and the Private in Anthropology: An Introduction to Supplement 12" in *Current Anthropology*, 56 (12). Pp. S183-S190.
- Rajkhowa, Kaberi Kachari. 2013. *Issa-Anissar Swotteu Kisu Kotba* (A few tentative words to share). Guwahati: Alibaat.
- Patnaik, Utsa. 1976. "Class Differentiation within the Peasantry: An Approach to Analysis of Indian Agriculture." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 11 (29), pp. 82-101.
- Rudra, Ashok. 1978. "Class Relations in Indian Agriculture: I." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 (22), pp. 916-923.
- Saikia, Arupjiyoti. 2015. "Jute in the Brahmaputra valley: The making of flood control in 20th century Assam." *Modern Asian Studies*, 49 (5), pp. 1405-1441.
- Saikia, Arupjiyoti. 2014. *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam Since 1900*. Delhi: Routledge.
- Saikia, Rajen. 2000. *Social and Economic History of Assam 1853-1921*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.
- Samaddar, Ranabir. 2005. "The Politics of Autonomy: An Introduction" in Ranabir Samaddar (Ed) *The Politics of Autonomy: Indian Experiences*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 9-31.
- Shanin, Teodor. 1972. *Awkward Class: Political Sociology of Peasantry in a Developing Society, Russia, 1910-25*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sharma, Jayeeta. 2011. *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Singh, M. Amarjeet. 2008. "Ethnic Diversity, Autonomy and Territoriality in Northeast India: A Case of Tribal Autonomy in Assam." *Strategic Analysis*, 32 (6), pp. 1101-1114.
- Sirnate, Vasundhara. 2009. "Students versus the State: Politics of Uranium Mining in Meghalaya" in *Economic and Political Weekly* 44 (47). Pp. 18-23.
- Somchai Phatharathananuth. 2011. *Civil Society and Democratization: Social Movements in Northeast Thailand*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Tamuli-Phukan, Ankur. 2018. *Making of a national festival: Bihu in colonial and post-colonial Assam*, Unpublished PhD dissertation, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta: Jadavpur University, Kolkata.
- Tamuli-Phukan, Ankur. 2011. "My Days With Nationalism in Assam: Ankur Tamuli Phukan." *kafila.online* (Available from: <https://kafila.online/2011/11/02/my-days-with-nationalism-in-assam-ankur-tamuli-phukan-2/>) Accessed on July 11, 2018.
- Tarrow, Sidney. 1994. *Power in Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tilly, Charles. 2004. *Social Movements 1768-2004*. Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers.
- Vandekerckhove, Nel and Bert Sukenens. 2010. "The Liberation of Bodoland: Tea, Forestry and Tribal Entrapment in Western Assam." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 31 (3), pp. 450-471.
- Verwimp, Philip. 2000. "Development ideology, the peasantry and genocide: Rwanda represented in Habyarimana's speeches." *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2 (3), pp. 325-361.
- Wolf, Eric. 1966. *Peasants*. Englewood-Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

CRG Series on Policies and Practices

74. Cities, Rural Migrants & the Urban Poor-III: Migration & the Urban Question in Delhi
75. Classes, People, and Populism
76. Logistical Space I: Logistics and Social Governance
77. Logistical Space II: Mobilities and Spaces
78. Logistical Space III:Hubs, Connectivity and Transit
79. Logistical Space IV: The Asam Paradigm
80. People, Politics and Protests I: Calcutta & West Bengal, 1950s - 1960s
81. People, Politics and Protests II: Bengal and Bihar
82. People, Politics and Protests III: Marxian, Literary Debates and Discourses
83. The Importance of being Siliguri, or the Lack thereof: Border-Effect and the “Untimely” City in North Bengal
84. Logistical Space V: Representations of Connectivity
85. Logistical Space VI: Logistics and the Reshaping of Global Governance
86. Logistical Space VII: Finance Capital & Infrastructure Development
87. Logistical Space VIII: Trade, Capital & Conflict
88. Logistical Space IX: Conflict & Social Governance in Northeast India
89. People, Politics and Protests IV: Occupy College Street: Notes from the Sixties
90. People, Politics and Protests V: The Creative & Cultural Dimension of the Naxalbari Movement
91. People, Politics and Protests VI: Karporri Thakur
92. People, Politics and Protests VII: The Radical Rural
93. People, Politics and Protests VIII: Left Front Government in West Bengal (1971-1982)
94. Population and Rent in *Capital*
95. *Capital*: Value & Translation
96. The Urban Turn

CRG Series on Policies and Practices

- 31 Local Dynamics, Universal Context : Border Trading through Moreh, Manipur
- 32 Two Studies on Asylum Seekers and Other Immigrants in Finland
- 33 Endangered Lives on The Border: Women in the Northeast
- 34 Globalisation and Labouring Lives
- 35 Right to Information in a Globalising World
- 36 Bengal-Bangladesh Border and Women
- 37 Between Ecology and Economy : Environmental Governance in India
- 38 Incomplete Citizenship, Statelessness and Human Trafficking: A Preliminary Analysis of The Current Situation in West Bengal, India
- 39 Place of Poor in Urban Space
- 40 Law and Democratic Governance: Two Studies from Europe
- 41 Finding a Point of Return: Internally Displaced Persons in Sri Lanka
- 42 Colonialism, Resource Crisis and Forced Migration
- 43 Situating Transit Labour
- 44 Two Essays on Security Apparatus
- 45 Governing Flood, Migration and Conflict in North Bihar
- 46 A Gigantic Panopticon: Counter-Insurgency and Modes of Disciplining and Punishment in Northeast India
- 47 Public Interest Litigation in India: Implications for Law and Development
- 48 Governing Caste and Managing Conflicts-Bihar, 1990-2011
- 49 Emerging Spaces and Labour Relations in Neo-Liberal India
- 50 Peace by Governance or Governing Peace? A Case Study of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)
- 51 Women, Conflict and Governance in Nagaland
- 52 Tripura: Ethnic Conflict, Militancy & Counterinsurgency
- 53 Government of Peace
- 54 Bengal Borders and Travelling Lives
- 55 Financialisation, Labour Market Flexibility, and Global Crisis
- 56 The Chronicle of a Forgotten Movement: 1959 Food Movement Revisited
- 57 The Religious Nature of Our Political Rites
58. Social Impact of the City Planning Machinery: Case Study of Road-Widening in Bangalore
59. In Search of Space: The Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal after Partition
60. Stateless in Law: Two Assessments
61. Failed by Design? : The Limitations of Statebuilding
62. Contesting Ideas on Peace (A Report & Some Reflections)
63. Body/Law/Technology: The Political Implications of Society as Apparatus
64. Accumulation under Post-Colonial Capitalism-I: An Overview
65. Accumulation under Post-Colonial Capitalism-II: War, Debt, and Reconstruction of Economy
66. Accumulation under Post-Colonial Capitalism-III: The Arab Question in Post-Colonial France
67. Accumulation under Post-Colonial Capitalism-IV: Mobile Labour and the New Urban
68. West Bengal-Bangladesh Borders: Humanitarian Issues
69. Policing a Riot-torn City: Kolkata, 16-18 August 1946
70. Labour, Law and Forced Migration
71. Rohingyas in India: Birth of a Stateless Community
72. Cities, Rural Migrants & the Urban Poor-I: Migration & the Urban Question in Kolkata
73. Cities, Rural Migrants & the Urban Poor-II: Migration & the Urban Question in Mumbai

CRG Series on Policies and Practices

- 1 People on the Move: How Governments Manage Moving Populations
- 2 Resources for Autonomy - Financing the Local Bodies
- 3 Peace Accords as the Basis of Autonomy
- 4 Debates Over Women's Autonomy
- 5 Unequal Communication: Health and Disasters As Issues of Public Sphere
- 6 Globalisation, State Policies And Sustainability of Rights
- 7 Autonomies in the North and the North East: More Freedom or the Politics of Frontier Management?
- 8 Examining Autonomy : The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in Assam
- 9 Democracy, Autonomy and the Community Media
- 10 Women and Forced Migration
- 11 Flags and Rights
- 12 A Status Report on Displacement in Assam and Manipur
- 13 Weapons of the Weak: Field Studies on Claims to Social Justice in Bihar & Orissa
- 14 Towards a New Consideration: Justice for the Minorities
- 15 Conflict, War & Displacement
- 16 The Draft National Rehabilitation Policy: A Critique
- 17 Limits of the Humanitarian: Studies in Situations of Forced Migration
- 18 Prescribed, Tolerated, and Forbidden Forms of Claim Making
- 19 Three Studies on Law and The Shifting Spaces of Justice.
- 20 Primitive Accumulation and Some Aspects of Work and Life in India in The Early Part of The Twenty First Century.
- 21 Citizens, Non-Citizens, and The Stories of Camps
- 22 Tales of Two Cities
- 23 Ways of Power, Minorities, and Knowledge on Minorities: An Assessment of Research Policies and Practices.
- 24 Whither Right to Food? Rights Institutions and Hungry Labour in Tea Plantations of North Bengal
- 25 Hunger, Food Scarcity, & Popular Protests in West Bengal
- 26 Cyclone Aila & the Sundarbans: An Enquiry into the Disaster and Politics of Aid and Relief
- 27 View from India: Media & Minorities in Europe
- 28 Protecting the Rights of the Tsunami Victims: The Sri Lanka Experience
- 29 Nation Building and Minority Alienation in India
- 30 Environment and Migration Purulia, West Bengal

POLICIES AND PRACTICES is the research paper series brought out by the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (CRG). Writings under this series can be referred to and used for public educational purposes with due acknowledgment.

ISSN 2348-0297