



Éva Rozália Hölzle

# Land, Life, and Emotional Landscapes at the Margins of Bangladesh

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at the Margins of Bangladesh

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*Éva Rozália Hölzle*

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# 1 Introduction: Land and Life

## Abstract

Chapter 1 presents the main claim of the book that land dispossession has emerged as a means through which Bangladeshi state officials challenge the legitimacy and worth of farmers' ways of life, who as ethnic minorities, inhabit national, political, and geographical margins. Moreover, conflicts over land in Bangladesh expose the propensity of the governing authorities' desire to control and eliminate cultural differences for the survival of the nation-state. In uncovering such dynamics, the book argues for a focus on life instead of land, flipping the analytical vantage point. Furthermore, the chapter draws attention to emotions as analytical devices in getting closer to farmers' experiences of violence and their modalities of agency, unfolding in the process of land dispossession.

**Keywords:** land, life, land dispossession, violence, emotions, 'mobile fieldwork', extended case study

It is a bright and hot January afternoon in a small Bangladeshi border village next to Assam. The year is 2012. Villagers – women and men, young and old – fill a midsized room of a central house. The sun enters the room just halfway. It brightens the middle part, leaving all four corners wrapped in darkness. People sit in concentric circles to face each other while speaking. The seating is not arbitrary, however. There is a strict sense of hierarchy. Eight men with high status, who often speak during public events and whose words carry weight in the village make up the first layer of the circle. Young men in their 20s form the last lines of the seats. Hidden in the dark corners of the room, they can make jokes without being recognised and rebuked by the elders. Matthew, my assistant, sits on my left and Deibor, the village headman, on my right in the first row. Deibor summoned the meeting the day before. Villagers wish to tell us about how the Bangladeshi government has sought to force them off their agricultural and residential land for the sake of an ecotourism park for more than a decade. For three hours, the

villagers narrate an exhausting struggle that has not yet ended and whose outcome is not decided either. 'Who knows' – some elders speculate – 'the government might succeed and then all of us need to go'. 'And then? What happens then?' – I ask – 'Would it not be easier searching for another place to live, already now?' My question is intentionally provocative. And I notice it stings, since James, one of the village elders sitting across from me, throws a withering look in my direction. 'We have been living here for many years.' – he wards my question off – 'Everything that we know is here. We grew up here. We do not have another place to go. But why should we go? We grew an affection for this land and a bond with it. We will live here even though we have troubles and problems. It is our *kchu* [soil]'. 'What is *kchu*?' – I ask. James spells out, '*Kchu* or *thaw* [place] is our life. It helps us to continue to live'. With these words, he concludes the discussion. The meeting soon afterwards dissolves. During the night, while I stare at the beams above my head, I chew for a while on James' last words, then I fall asleep. In the morning, I think about *kchu* and its connection to life once more, but then I discard James' explanation with the conclusion that it is too rhetorical and too obvious. Soon, Matthew enters my room, and we start with our usual visiting rounds in the village. For a while, I then forget James' enigmatic words until another person, at a different time and place, makes a similar assertion.

In the morning hours, the kitchen bustles with women. Agnes, the wife of the headman, gives short orders to three younger girls and two middle-aged women who regularly help her in preparing food. Agnes governs a large household. Cooking for over ten regular family members whose circle from time to time expands with occasional guests is a backbreaking task. Matthew and I try to stay out of the way in the corner while drinking our tea. Despite the rush, the women don't mind our presence. Gossiping while cooking belongs to the kitchen, just like the stove. Matthew and I use this opportunity to bring up the issues the village council debated a day before. Due to a border realignment agreement between Bangladesh and India, the villagers face the danger of losing their agricultural lands that lie between the official borderlines not far away from the point where the Bangladesh, Assam, and Meghalaya borders intersect. Agnes assures us that if the realignment materialises, 'we will be without garden and work. If we don't have land, it is useless to have only a house. And then we won't be able to stay together either'. She continues, 'If we have only a house, what we will do with a house?' She pauses for a moment then she concludes, 'We need a place that we can cultivate so that we can survive. We also need food. If we don't have land to cultivate, we won't live'.

Agnes' words struck me. They brought to my mind James' remarks expressed a few months before and that I cast aside all too quick. I wondered: What kind of living did Agnes and James imply when they spoke about the peril of losing land? At stake was more than just their livelihood, as Agnes made clear when she listed food and shelter as an addition to other aspects of living, such as cultivation and togetherness. She seemed to refer to multiple meanings and practices of living, all of which were sustained and nourished through a continuous access to land. Land loss threatened, therefore, not just the material means of Agnes' and James' existence, but the disintegration and collapse of their life in its entirety. This last point is one of the key themes of this book, which aims to analyse the dynamics and consequences of land dispossession in the north-eastern borderlands of Bangladesh from the perspective of small-scale farmers who have already lost or are threatened with losing their land. The agriculturalists in focus are all ethnic/indigenous minorities (in the vernacular, *adivasis*), differing from the majority Bengali population of the country – but also from each other. They live in four different places along the border of Bangladesh with Meghalaya, Assam, or Tripura (see Illustration 1). These localities – in terms of space, social constellation, and state-society relations – also differ from each other through the modes of land dispossession. The expropriation of the land of these farmers took shape through such state-induced programmes as the redrawing of the national border between India and Bangladesh (Chapter 3), the foundation of an ecotourism park (Chapter 4), the enactment of community forestry (Chapter 5), and the establishment of a military cantonment (Chapter 6). Despite these differences, certain elements have remained constant in all four cases. The main dispossessor in each instance was the Bangladeshi state, represented locally either by the district branch of the military, the border guards of both India and Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Forest Department, or regional government officials.

James's and Agnes's remark was not a singular reaction either, since I heard similar verbalisations from different people in different places repeatedly; but in the early stages of my research, I was not entirely aware of their importance. The assertion that land sustains life seemed too rhetorical, almost trivial to me. As my fieldwork progressed, however, my view changed. I gradually came to understand that the seemingly self-evident link between land and life creates an 'illusion of transparency' (Lefebvre 1991, 33). It conceals the on-going and intricate levels of cultural practices and social efforts that enable a relationship between land and life. The threat of losing land lifts this veil, disquieting the established regularity that made the tacit connection between life and land possible. Yet the danger of being

**Research Sites: (1) Nolikhai; (2) Latrymbai; (3) Madhupur Forest; (4) Ratargul.**



Illustration 1. Created by the author.

deprived of land raises another illusion of transparency obscuring the stakes that lie at the heart of struggles over land. To lay bare these stakes, I insist throughout this book on turning the perspective upside down and instead of land situating life at the centre of analysis. Such a change of view reveals that the struggles over land in the north-eastern borderlands of Bangladesh

are animated in a lesser degree by the capitalist desire of accumulation but more by politics that revolves around life and its multiple meanings.

The issue of land dispossession, or 'land grabbing' as it is more popularly known, has in the last ten years attained unprecedented global attention amongst activists, policy makers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and journalists as well as scholars from various academic fields. The critical momentum behind this renewed awareness of the processes and various practices of land deprivation worldwide derived from the 2007–2008 rise in food prices internationally and the subsequent global market crash in 2008 (Edelman et al. 2013; Li 2014b). Initial monitoring of mass media as well as NGOs such as GRAIN led to discoveries that numerous countries, including China and the Gulf States, are involved in buying off as well as appropriating land from local farmers in some of the sub-Saharan African countries to secure their own food supply (Borras et al. 2011; Edelman et al. 2013). The financial crisis, on the other hand, motivated market speculators and transnational companies to find secure investment opportunities. Investors begin considering agricultural land a reliable asset and potential profit generator through further investments (Cotula 2013; Li 2014b). These anticipations have prompted transnational corporations to purchase farmland, targeting countries that are often squeezed into the quotation marks of the 'Global South', which implies nation-states in Eastern Europe; the African continent; Central, South, and Southeast Asia; as well as Latin America and the Caribbean (Borras et al. 2011).

Although land expropriation is not new – especially if one considers the transformation of land into a commodity during industrialisation in Europe, as well as the quest and struggle for land during colonialism – most observers stress that the contemporary rush for land is a new phenomenon. Many analysts claim that under the sway of globalisation and neoliberalism, land dispossession has taken an accelerated pace and a novel appearance. Experts thus emphasise two peculiarities. First, the bulk of contemporary land exchanges are economically and legally regulated enterprises between states, or between states and transnational companies (Borras et al. 2011). Second, '[t]he characteristic feature of a rush is a sudden, hyped interest in a resource because of its newly enhanced value, and the spectacular riches it promises to investors who get into the business early' (Li 2014b, 595). Recent findings, however, refute both claims.

Since 2013 researchers have discovered that a significant number of large-scale expropriations within nation-state boundaries happen in the name of internationally and nationally instigated development schemes, agricultural and industrial investments, or environmental conservation

projects. The involvement of foreign states and transnational companies in these enterprises is minimal. The role of bilateral donor agencies (e.g. the World Bank, various United Nations organisations) and domestic players (e.g. state actors and other nationally powerful agencies or persons such as real estate speculators), on the other hand, is far greater (Ahasan and Gardner 2016; Levien 2018). These findings have facilitated the acknowledgement that current land appropriations are outcomes of preceding events and thus have historical continuity, raising doubts about the 'newness' and suddenness of land grabbing (Edelman et al. 2013). These recent observations apply to Bangladesh as well.

Bangladesh has a significantly high population density, with around 162 million people inhabiting a relatively small area (Lewis 2011, 13). For this reason and since agriculture is still considered as a principal life sustaining strategy for over 60 per cent of the population, access to land and natural resources represents one of the most imperative issues in the country (ibid., 137). Expropriations of land by the state and non-state actors in villages as well as in peri-urban areas are one of the main problems facing the country (S. Feldman and Geisler 2012, 973). Such expropriations have various reasons. The insufficient employment possibilities outside of agriculture in Bangladesh lead to excessive valorisation of land, which makes the property of small-scale farmers attractive for capture by local and national power holders. Numerous government programmes (rubber plantations, dam construction, and green initiatives such as reforestation and establishment of eco-zones) financed by international donors along with national support of large-scale industry (shrimp farms, garment) further facilitate land expropriation (see also Adnan and Dastidar 2011). At the same time, urban areas are growing at a rapid pace, and peri-urban sites are frequently occupied illegally (S. Feldman and Geisler 2012). Land dispossession most intensely affects disadvantaged population groups such as ethnic minorities and the rural as well as peri-urban poor. Yet, despite their vulnerability, these farmers often oppose expropriation attempts with surprising strength and artfulness. Accordingly, struggles over land lead not only to highly visible clashes between farmers and land grabbers, but also to more covert and diffused violent acts. As I was able to observe, such acts are part of the intimidation tactics of the Bangladeshi state either to force small scale landholders off their property or to coerce their participation in different government initiatives. These disputes represent the point where my research steps in.

During my 24 months of ethnographic research carried out between 2010 and 2016, I aimed to bring the course and dimension of conflicts related to struggles over land to the fore. I was interested in learning about manifold

manifestations and experiences of violence, as well as their effect on the daily life of farmers from their viewpoint. Additionally, I focused on how these small-scale landholders deal with critical circumstances that disconcert the regularity of local life, and thus I also worked out distinct modalities of agency. Due to this focus and due to my conviction that land dispossession must be approached from the analytic of life, I gradually drifted away from a solely political economy approach that has dominated the debate related to land dispossession until today.

According to Sherry Ortner, an exclusively capitalism-centred view of the world is questionable because it relies on over-materialistic and economic perspectives (1984, 142). In Marxist-oriented studies, specific cultural practices are treated either as secondary or are 'converted to "ideology" and considered from the point of view of [their] role in social reproduction' (ibid., 140). The symbolic meanings and values that one attaches to land and life are therefore left largely unexplored. Additionally, history is regarded as constructed from capitalist centres penetrating the peripheries. Political economy leaves, therefore, little space to address how people at the 'margins' are implicated in various ways in large events, let alone how they are actively involved in the making of their own histories (ibid., 143).

If one concentrates on the 'land grabbing' debate, the above critique can be expanded with further insights. Despite recent attention to politics from below, agrarian political economy still operates along the dichotomy of domination and resistance. It therefore overlooks the fact that defiance is just one possible mode of human action and ignores alternative ways of human agency that go beyond popular forms of political mobilisation. Additionally, the land grabbing literature considers only highly visible physical brutality as violence. As a result, micro-manifestations of violence that are embedded in the structure of everyday life and go beyond the binary of state-versus-people collision do not enter the analysis. This is because the question of experience – the only possible way through which the complexity of violence can be approached – is relegated to other areas of study. Added to this, capitalism is regarded as a totalising system. Yet if one abandons a Marxist approach with its internalised assumption of progress, capitalism will appear patchy (Tsing 2015, 5; Ortner 2016). This means not only that capitalism is incomplete but also that it is full of cracks, where alternative ways of living might strive to continue or to emerge (Tsing 2015, 5). This last point is especially important since intricate levels of existential issues provide key insights in understanding contemporary struggles over land in Bangladesh.

Throughout the book I will argue that the four dispossession cases observed in north-eastern borderlands of Bangladesh are best understood



as driven by political practices that revolve around questions of life. The Bangladeshi state at first glance indeed seems to target the land of farmers who inhabit national, political, and geographically defined margins. Nevertheless, what is really at stake in these conflicts is life. By life being at stake, I mean two things. First, land serves as a surface upon which state functionaries and indigenous farmers clash over 'acceptable' ways of life (i.e. how to live and under what conditions) and over what accounts for human life (i.e. recognitions of the worth of certain lives). Such disputes reveal, therefore, not simply disagreements about 'forms of life', but that the acknowledgement of being a human becomes uncertain (see also Das 2007).

Second, life at stake also involves the existence and legitimacy of the state along its margins, where state rule and law are especially volatile and thus require continuous re-establishment (Asad 2004). Biopolitics in this sense is not only about technologies and regulations of the life of populations, but also about assuring the survival of a political entity (Asad 2015). Bolstering state viability through dispossession in Bangladesh is achieved by sacrificing the lives of indigenous farmers whose lives, due to their minority status, are not even fully recognised as such. Land dispossession and the various forms of violent acts implicated in this process are, on the one hand, about winding up cultural differences and allowing the life forms of ethnic minorities, who threaten the image of political-national unity, to disappear. On the other hand, they are also about negating life that is already rejected and denied. Ordinarily, a double negation would result in the obsolescence of one of the refutations. Yet, those lives that are already negated 'have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). [...] Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object' (Butler 2006, 33).

Retrospectively, these state actions might appear to be carried out systematically; however, from the point of view of the affected farmers, the materialisation of state power through dispossession rests on inconsistent political practices in Bangladesh. Such politics are characterised by a series of confusing actions, offering hope and protecting lives but simultaneously denying them (Chapter 3); promising advantages while showing reluctance in fulfilling them (Chapter 4); soliciting cooperation while at the same time criminalising existence (Chapter 5); demanding loyalty while offering nothing in return (Chapter 6). These practices exhibit that the 'state itself is not a fixed object' (Asad 2004, 279; see also Hussain 2013; Schulz and Kuttig 2020) but rather is best understood as a series of procedures that 'oscillate between the rational mode and the magical mode of being'; between legibility and illegibility (Das 2004, 225). Such whimsicality rests at the heart of biopolitics.

Yet, 'the qualifier of *bio*' does not imply an interruption of older forms of politics (Han and Das 2015, 8, emphasis in original). The struggles over land, especially in the four places in focus, are neither sudden nor recent. They began during the colonial period and were carried further by the successive state powers after the British 'left' South Asia. The land politics of the contemporary Bangladeshi state along its national borders are continuations of older colonial practices of state formation. That is why I prefer the term 'dispossession' to 'grabbing'. While the latter implies a novel and abrupt practice, the former allows for emphasis on historical processes. This does not mean that the notion of 'land dispossession' is unproblematic. It suggests legalised ownership rights, while most of the farmers in focus have never had state-accepted land titles. However, a legal title is just one possible inscription device. The axe, the spade, the plough (Li 2014b), and the historical continuation of occupation represent other ways of claiming entitlements to land. This is what colonial and modern states continue to reject.

By following the waxing and waning of conflicts in the four land dispossession cases, I aim to address continuities and inconsistencies of state manifestation on the ground. Simultaneously, turning the lens away from land and towards life enables me to disclose that existential and political contestations represent not two separate realms, but rather entangled regions of the social world, where different ideas and legitimacies of living collide. Formulated differently, the entanglement of the existential and the political 'reveal the varied ways in which the biological and social are knitted into each other in the demand for recognition, [...] [thus] it may involve issues of the survival of culture, or of one's way of life, which is connected to the acknowledgment of worth' (Han and Das 2015, 9).

Questions fundamental to uncovering this entanglement are: what does it mean to attach life to land? What kinds of senses of lives are evoked through the interrelatedness of living and land? How are these senses affected or altered in cases where land becomes jeopardised? These questions are crucial because loss is not simply an expression of a deficit that can be replaced or substituted by something that has vanished (Butler 2006, 19–25). This observation is especially true for such a fixed belonging as land. Loss is a transformative experience. It alters the knowledge over and the relationship with the world, while it reshuffles subjectivity in ways that cannot be anticipated in advance (ibid., 21). Loss is fundamentally a life-altering experience because the relationships – material and social – do not simply stabilise or destabilise life, they constitute it (ibid., 22). To understand this relationality, it is not enough to describe the ties to land and how they are

constructed, but rather to develop a perspective that can capture life on the verge of being dispossessed.

This book, therefore, brings life under heightened uncertainty into the centre of analysis and begins at the point where land grab studies conclude. Consequently, the research is situated at the intersection of anthropology of life and violence. As a result, it leans on a body of literature that in the conventional sense does not deal with land dispossession yet offers analytical tools for interpreting collective and individual lives at a crossroad. It helps to understand that crisis situations are ingrained with unpredictable outcomes that on one hand come to the fore through manifold manifestations and experiences of violence, and on the other through the imaginative capacity of the parts of those who strive to survive. Life is therefore not simply determined but rather continuously emerging and becoming within social fields of unequal and ever shifting power relations. Yet, the plasticity of life does not mean that its different aspects are separable. In the imaginary of the farmers in focus, and as Agnes and James above accentuate, the multiple facets of life are interwoven. Only one aspect of life needs to be jeopardised to lead to the crumbling of life in its entirety.

### **Against a Divided Approach to Life**

Acknowledging the multiplicity of life and at the same time stressing that the different aspects of life cannot be separated from each other does not necessarily lead to a conceptual maze. On the contrary, it allows seeing how different social, political, economic, and cultural practices interlace around myriad aspects and meanings of life.

From a material perspective life appears as always fragile and precarious. This general vulnerability of life arises from the biological limit of the body. Vulnerability is, however, more than simply bodily exposure (Butler 2016). It must be juxtaposed with social and material dependency, which implies that 'life requires various social and economic conditions to be met to be sustained as a life' (ibid., 14). The social condition of maintaining life means that survival depends, from the moment of birth, on the care of others. Humans are not simply located socially – they are at the mercy of others. This draws attention to the fact that belonging is not simply a social and cultural but an existentially charged practice. Conversely, material dependency implies that survival is contingent upon access to food, shelter, land, or some forms of infrastructure. For the farmers in the focus of this book, land is the material prerequisite to sustaining their lives.

For these farmers, however, land represents social and cultural condition too, because the relationships that allow the web of obligations as well as protection to evolve and thus belonging to flourish are connected to and constituted by the continuous access to land. The emphasis on such basic conditions for assuring life might seem trivial, yet for most of the people around the globe, including indigenous farmers of Bangladesh, social and material circumstances are not automatically granted but differentially distributed, marking a juncture where the existential and the political become intertwined in two different ways.

First, as Didier Fassin (2018) emphasises, life is not simply regulated by, but rather is the central preoccupation of politics, which also concerns meanings and values attached to the question of existence. By extending Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Fassin (2009) suggests not limiting the attention to a single dimension of life, *bios* or *zoë*, but rather paying attention to its extensions from biological existence to its political form (2009, 47). With this broadening, he specifies that contemporary societies are characterised less by 'power *over* life' (ibid., 47 emphases added) – as Foucault's term biopower implies – and more by 'power *of* life', i.e. the 'sacredness of life' (ibid., 50, emphasis in original). The global circulation of human rights, humanitarianism, the continuous monitoring of mortality rates, life expectancy, and infectious diseases nationally and internationally are forms of public discourses and practices through which power of life can be observed in effect. Yet the ideology of the universal sanctity of life tends to mask the fact that not every existence has the same worth (Fassin 2014), marking the second aspect through which the entanglement of the existential and the political becomes visible. Despite the rise of global regimes stressing the 'sacredness' of life, contemporary politics paradoxically expresses an implicit hierarchical valorisation of lives not only within national contexts but also across the globe (Fassin 2009). The unequal worth of life means that biopolitics is more than a maximisation of life; it is also about the distribution of inequalities that have life-altering consequences. The social context in which one is born determines how and how long a person will live. These contexts can be seen as gatherings of distinct forms of political decisions from housing, education, and infrastructure to welfare, etc., that produce and dictate the circumstances of living, which in turn have repercussions for the quality and length of individual lives. The politics of 'make live' can often and easily flip into a rejection to death if a person is rendered undesirable (Fassin 2009, 53–54; Gomez-Temesio 2018). Such refusals, in which not only the state but also society at large, including the family, are sometimes complicit, do not necessarily indicate biological death

but the creation of 'zones of social abandonments' (Biehl 2005), where life according to one's own terms becomes difficult or even impossible to sustain. As I will show, land dispossession represents a critical situation for the *adivasi* landholders in Bangladesh. Through the practice of land dispossession, state functionaries not only unsettle the regularity of farmers' everyday life but also put the value and legitimacy of *adivasi* ways of life on trial. Moreover, by attempting displacement, and on other occasions using force, to pressure farmers into taking part in different government-initiated programmes, Bangladeshi state representatives are actively involved in creating zones where life on farmers' own terms becomes difficult to sustain.

These assaults question, however, not only the legitimacy and worth of culturally different constructions of life, but also raise doubts related to the sense of being recognised as human. Not accidentally, *adivasi* farmers repeatedly complaint about being disrespected, belittled, and ignored by Bangladeshi state officials as well as members of the majority society. Such injuries indicate that not even what counts as human is constant and universal (Han and Das 2015). By drawing upon Stanley Cavell's (1988) interpretation of 'form of life', Clara Han and Veena Das point out that form of life has a double connotation allowing horizontal and vertical interpretations (2015, 24). The horizontal meaning relates to forms in the ethnological sense and refers to heterogeneous constructions of living along cultural, historical, or generational differences that are contingent upon space and time (Han and Das 2015, 24). Life on the other hand draws attention to vertical contrasts between humans and other existences such as animals or machines (Das 2007, 88–89). Yet the boundary lines between human and non-human forms of life are unstable. A person can easily find herself pushed over into a realm where the criteria of being a human become unrecognisable or dismissed, legitimising neglect and in extreme cases even active destruction, as is the case in the context of land dispossession in Bangladesh. Interpreted from this angle, 'form of life' reveals that what counts as human is also not a settled issue for good (Han and Das 2015, 3). Debates and uncertainties may arise not only along horizontal forms of lives, i.e. cultural differences, but also along what counts as human (Das 2007, 89). The empirical cases presented in the book show that in such disputes not only communities but also individuals constantly struggle to find their voice and make it heard in the madding crowd. But this is not the end of *adivasi* farmers' story, since in the struggles over land they exhibit a remarkable will to live and creativity in defending their ways of life.

Disputations, therefore, at times mark discord; at other times they might signal new openings or possibilities of imagining a common future (Han

and Das 2015, 23). Thus, every limit holds the prospect of a threshold or an awakening to a new understanding and a new construction of life (ibid., 30). While in the contemporary world, precarity – ‘life without the promise of stability’ (Tsing 2015, 2) – has indeed become the general condition of all living beings on earth, this does not mean that all possibilities for future life are foreclosed. In every ‘ruin’, alternative ways of living may emerge and strive (ibid., 4). Thus, life, despite its fragility, is inexhaustible and unstoppable. Humans, regardless of structural constraints, are endowed by the desire to form their existence. The realisation of such desires is often accompanied by struggles where even the maintenance of the ordinary presents itself as continuous achievement (Das and Zengin 2010, 135). The idea that everyday life requires humble and often silent effort to be sustained stands in sharp contrast with the popular conceptualisation of human agency as a heroic act of opposition. Yet, it is not so much the transgression of rules as the struggle ‘to strike some kind of balance between being an actor and being acted upon’ (Jackson 2008, 143) which might be seen as a defining feature of human agency. Accordingly, agency as a struggle is best understood as an ever-changing course between ‘alternatives that promise more or less satisfactory solutions to the ever-changing situation at hand’ (Jackson 2008, xii). This can emerge in various forms in different contexts. In certain situations, waiting in silence is for instance more effective than opposition and loud representation. Thus, under extremely restricted conditions human agency is often a matter of endurance rather than transcendence, and ‘less a matter of freewill, but rather working within the limits’ (ibid., xxx–xxxii footnote 3). Agency understood in this way is an ‘endless experimentation in how the given world can be lived decisively, on one’s own terms’ through which viable forms of existence and coexistence can be created (ibid., xii). These observations apply also to all the actions indigenous farmers in Bangladesh are engaged in. Despite restrictions and repeated attacks, farmers’ responses rarely take laudable forms of political mobilisation or transgression. Their modalities of agency do not so much question the existing political and social system, but rather, moving within its frames, they try to enlarge the possibilities of everyday life.

To summarise the above discussion, I wish to emphasise five emerging themes around different aspects of life: (1) Life is generally precarious, which means that life cannot be regarded as an opposite condition to danger, but rather always in its potential shadow. (2) Life is not simply regulated by, but rather is the central issue at stake in politics that also concerns meanings and values attached to the question of existence (Fassin 2009). (3) Despite the rise of global regimes stressing the ‘sacredness’ of life (such as human

rights or humanitarianism), contemporary politics paradoxically expresses an implicit hierarchical valorisation of lives within national contexts but also across the globe (ibid.). (4) There is not one universal sense of life, but rather multiple and heterogeneous constructions of living, and what constitutes a human life is not a settled issue either. (5) Life is not given, but rather is an everyday and thus a constant achievement. This means that not only is life always emerging and never complete, but also that humans are endowed with a capacity and a desire to form their lives even if these lives are confined within the limits of historical, political, economic, or cultural orders.

All these above delineated reflections cover life that exhibits some form of signs of living. Yet how can one speak about viability of the state when the state in the strict sense is not a human subject or a living being? Talal Asad's answer to this question is pertinent here when he emphasises that 'Of course the state is not a living human individual, but it is accorded the sacred quality that individual human life has' (2015, 414). This is because the polity is originally imagined as the birth of a 'particular community with its own history' and the state as such is 'endowed with (a claim to) life eternal', assuring in this way the survival of a nation (ibid.). The state, therefore, must be defended at all costs, because its collapse would induce the disintegration of the nation upon which the idea of the polity was established. Moreover, the imagination of the sovereign state as a legal person justifies violence as a necessary means through which the survival of the state is assured (ibid., 420). As I will show in the following pages, land dispossession is one possible way of assuring the survival of the state by forcing *adivasi* farmers – who disturb the image of national unity – to integrate by renouncing their way of life. Land dispossession in Bangladesh is, therefore, part of the process of nation-state formation.

## Research Process: Mobile Fieldwork and the Analytic of Emotions

### Mobile Fieldwork

Spanning the years between 2010 and 2016, the actual time spent gathering data in the four field sites amounted to two years. Therefore, I distinguish three phases of fieldwork. The first fieldtrip, between July and October 2010, was pre-fieldwork searching for an appropriate research topic. The second research phase started in November 2011 and continued uninterrupted until December 2012. The third phase of research was characterised by four

follow-up visits (in 2013 and 2014 for three months each, and in 2015 and 2016 for three weeks each) to probe the previously gathered data and to refine and share with interlocutors the already written analysis.

In navigating the field successfully, the help and collaboration of my research assistant, Matthew, was crucial from the very beginning of the research. His involvement in the research was beyond valuable because on the one hand he facilitated my social integration, while on the other hand he acted also as 'power fixer' between the research participants and myself. However, since Mathew was inexperienced regarding the issue of land dispossession and anthropological fieldwork, his influence did not cross the line of assistance in such a significant way as to have changed the course of the research.

During the two years of research, the concrete methodological strategies that guided the data-gathering process were determined by a combination of extended case study and a method that I call *mobile fieldwork*. While extended case study was a conscious choice prior to the start of the fieldwork due to its relevance in analysing conflict and social crisis (see Evens and Handelman 2006), mobile fieldwork was an adaptive tactic to a sensitive and combative field. Since all the places where we worked are so-called nationally and internationally sensitive zones, our presence created suspicion and irritation among state representatives, who repeatedly limited our entry to the field sites. Concretely, this meant that it was simply impossible to carry out a classical village study – in which a researcher stays long-term at a field site – because state authorities did not allow us to stay for a longer period in the villages due to 'security reasons'. These restrictions forced us to embrace a pragmatic mobility. This meant in concrete terms that we divided our visits to the village sites into shorter stays of two to three weeks to remain as inconspicuous as possible to the eyes of the national and local authorities. However, to acquire informed knowledge, we kept returning to the same places, rotating in this way among the four different locations for two years.

To avoid any misunderstandings, I wish to underscore that this approach that I am calling mobile fieldwork is not like 'multi-sited methodology', which is an exercise in mapping different terrains across space and time without, however, adopting the goal of holistic representation (Marcus 1995, 99). It also differs from the type of 'multi-site ethnography' described by Ulf Hannerz (2003), where he clearly states that through this method he was 'not trying hard to get to know [...] individuals particularly intimately' (208). My multilocal approach emerged primarily due to state restrictions in accessing the four field sites and was therefore neither pre-planned nor opportunistic.



Through constant returning to a site, the aim was to observe the progress of conflicts while investing effort into knowing the research participants intimately. This means that the approach rather resembles the method that Tania Murray Li (2014a, 4) adopted and which she terms 'revisiting', with the aim of tracking 'subtle shifts in everyday ways of thinking and acting' 'that are hard to glean from one-shot research designs, whether based on surveys or ethnographic research'. Indeed, switching between sites provided us with the advantage of a far greater mindfulness towards variation and the subtle modifications of action (violence as well as agency), of spatial transformations, and of actors' fluctuating involvement that constitute important aspects of events in progress – all of which might have remained unnoticed if we had stayed in one place. Pragmatic mobility combined with an extended case study proved to be a useful combination for tracking processes in a comparative manner. Yet, all these tactics did not offer solutions on how to approach violence in all its complexity. At this point emotions or verbalisations with emotional content attained significance.

### **The Analytic of Emotions**

The interest in violence posed two methodological dilemmas. First, I was confronted with the limitations of participant observation, as the violent acts that shattered and simultaneously shaped the everyday life of the farmers in focus went beyond visible forms of physical brutality and instead lurked in the day-to-day structures of social life. This raised the question of how to observe something that is invisible. The only solution to this problem was complementing the observations with verbal data, yet asking direct questions about violence would have meant risking reification and emptying lived experiences. But even if I would have initiated straightforward discussions about violence, the overwhelming forms of violent acts were so deceitful that they lacked definition. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (2004) assert, violence is a 'slippery concept' and it 'can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality – force, assault, or infliction of pain – alone. Violence also includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value' (1). This simultaneously means that violence 'cannot be readily objectified and quantified so that a "check list" can be drawn up with positive criteria for defining any particular act as violent or not. [...] Violence defies easy categorisation. It can be everything and nothing' (ibid., 2). If violence is such a fluid phenomenon, how can one approach it?

Many researchers contend that violence can be empirically captured only through the eyes of the affected. That means it necessitates an approximation

through the experiences and narratives of those who tackle it. Yet, this is not a simple task; since when one comes to the problem of violence one is simultaneously confronted with what Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922) terms the 'limit of language'. The limit of language designates here not simply an inability to verbalise or an incapability of understanding narratives that describe specific experiences of violence, but 'the unknowability of the social world' (Das 1998, 184). The lived experience is characterised by unstructured knowledge and uncertainty. A person is rarely fully conscious at every moment of the implications that everyday occurrences confront her. How to breach this problem methodologically? How to gather evidence about something that is unclear, lacks definition, yet is still present? Confronting these questions was the point in my research where emotions came into the picture.

Concretely this means that while I was listening to the accounts of addressing land conflicts, I came to realise that there is a metalanguage emerging from the narratives, where the affected farmers were very preoccupied with describing how they felt to make me understand their situation. It took several months until I came to the realisation that the emotional narratives I collected were more than simple verbalisations of feelings, but instead concern particular experiences of violence embedded in the language of emotions. Gradually, I started to see emotions as 'concentrated vessels' of (hi)stories, or 'modalities through which people recall the sensorium of violence' (A. Feldman 1995, 238–243). Throughout the book I treat verbalisations with emotional content, therefore, as methodological lenses when zooming in on violence. Yet I also go one step further when I suggest seeing articulations with emotional components not as descriptions of subjective states but rather as performative utterances, and thus establishing a link between emotions and actions.

According to Stanley Cavell (2005), the interesting element in passionate utterances is that while they are formulated in the first person singular or plural, they nevertheless are not about 'me' or 'us' but are directed towards a second person, towards 'you'. Formulated differently, not the 'I' but the 'you' ends up as the centre when I utter the sentence 'I love you', because the phrase is not simply a declaration but simultaneously an expectation or maybe even a demand. This is like Wittgenstein's famous assertion that sentences such as 'I am sad' or 'I am in pain' are not descriptive statements of an inner state, but rather an invitation to share (Das 1995, 194). They indicate a request for reaction and therefore 'cannot be treated as purely personal experiences' but rather efforts towards establishing intersubjectivity or prompting acknowledgment (*ibid.*). If one takes this argumentation seriously, then it is possible to claim that emotions have a performative force, and thus

their expression might mark the beginning of a 'language game' in which the narrator and the listener become actively engaged through interactive exchange. However, they also reveal something about our relation to the world since emotions always involve others or circumstances incited by others. It is therefore not misplaced to borrow Catherine Lutz's (1988) assertion that emotions 'retain a value as a way of talking about the intensely meaningful that is culturally defined, socially enacted and personally articulated' (5). I therefore never ask if farmers in focus really feel what they say. This is beside the point. Rather, I am interested in what is revealed about their relationship with the world when they evoke specific idioms of emotion. Moreover, I also consider their performative force when I assert that emotions are claims for acknowledgment and recognition of an active subject position, which tends to get disrupted through the dehumanising forces of violent acts inherent in the process of land dispossession. Affected farmers directed such requests not necessarily towards me as a singular listener, but rather towards the larger world, soliciting a place in it. After all, the anthropologist is just a 'messenger' like Hermes (Crapanzano 1986), or a medium lending her or his own body for the other to speak through (Cavell 1997, 98). How convincing I am in mediating I leave open to be judged by the reader and let the four empirical chapters convey the message by themselves.

## Outline

In Chapter 2, I will briefly delineate the history of Bangladesh, paying special attention to the process of state formation, land politics, and social heterogeneity to provide a contextual framework for the following chapters. Chapter 3 investigates the situation of one village, Nolikhai, situated adjacent to the border of Assam, where residents face the peril of losing their agricultural holdings due to the realigning of the border between India and Bangladesh. Chapter 4 introduces the reader to the circumstances of Latrymbai. The concerns of the villagers here revolve around a government-initiated ecotourism park that threatens to incorporate them. Chapter 5 concentrates on Madhupur Forest where various forest protection and community forestry programmes serve as the main drivers forcing small-scale farmers out of their land. Chapter 6 takes up the issue of the inhabitants of a small village, Ratargul, situated a few kilometres away from Sylhet Town and in the immediate neighbourhood of the Sylhet Cantonment of the Bangladesh Army. Since 1977, residents of Ratargul have been confronted with the gradual alienation of their agricultural

land with the construction of the cantonment adjoining the settlement. This alienation seems close to full completion through the new plans for extension of the military base soon to be implemented. This means that in contrast to the cases analysed in previous chapters, in Ratargul, the process of land dispossession is almost entirely completed and has reached its final stage. Chapter 7 brings the main findings together. It will offer a discussion of violence along its temporality and explore the modalities of agency that go beyond popular forms of political mobilisations. It will also address the two most important modes of living – belonging and becoming – which materialised in the struggles over land. Power – understood as a multiple field of pressures – plays a determining role across these dynamics.

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## 2 State Formation and Land Tenure in Bangladesh – A Historical Sketch

### Abstract

Chapter 2 briefly describes the major political and social events of Bangladesh's past with special attention to the process of state formation and land politics. This chapter also addresses the question of social heterogeneity in Bangladesh, providing an answer to the question of who the indigenous minorities – *adivasis* in its vernacular formulation – of Bangladesh are.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, history, land tenure, state formation, *adivasis*

Strictly speaking, the history of Bangladesh as a nation-state dates back to the 1971 Liberation War when East Pakistan (today Bangladesh) separated from West Pakistan. However, Bengal as a region, encompassing West and East Bengal, looks back on a long and complicated past. Historians thereby distinguish four main intervals, the pre-imperial (500 BCE–1576 CE); the imperial (1576–1947); and the Pakistani eras (1947–1971), and finally the period when Bangladesh emerged as an independent country (1971–today). In this chapter I will reflect on these major periods. My aim is not to offer a comprehensive historical background of Bangladesh, but rather to sketch the major political and social events of the country's past while paying special attention to the process of state formation and land politics. In the final part of the chapter, I will address the question of social heterogeneity of Bangladesh. The goal is to provide an answer to the question of who the indigenous minorities of Bangladesh – *adivasis* in its vernacular formulation – in fact are. Since each empirical chapter of the book will depict the localities and their people in detail, the discussion concerning *adivasis* will be kept brief here.



## The Pre-Imperial Era

Historians have not reached a consensus about the pre-imperial history of the Bengal Delta. Some emphasise that the early dynasties such as the Maurya, Sunga, Gupta, Pala, and Sena may have extended their influence over the Bengal delta (see Baxter 1997, 12–16). Van Schendel (2009, 21–22), in contrast, claims that there is not enough archaeological evidence to support such views, and that it is unclear how far the political authority of these states expanded into the region. However, it is indisputable that between the third century BCE and the thirteenth century CE, Bengal ‘was mainly ruled by local chieftains’, who might have paid tribute to royal authorities in the Indian heartlands (Lewis 2011, 42). Along with exerting political influence, these early state powers also facilitated the rise and spread of either Buddhism or Hinduism in the major parts of the Indian subcontinent and thus had significant impact on the formation of religious subjectivities in the Bengal delta (Lewis 2011, 41–43). Since the seventh century onwards, due to Arab traders, Islam was also not unfamiliar to Bengalis. Muslim influence began to spread substantially in Bengal with the expansion of Afghans into the delta during the eleventh century. Nevertheless, major conversions to Islam in rural areas took place only after the sixteenth century (Eaton 1993, 227).

The first state power that made serious efforts to control Bengal was the Delhi Sultanate, established in 1206, and ‘by 1245, Bengal had been brought under Muslim rule’ (Lewis 2011, 43). Yet, while Bengal was ‘nominally under the rule of the Delhi sultanate, the region achieved significant political independence, possibly because of its geographic distance from the capital’ (Uddin 2006, 19). The rule of the Delhi Sultanate came to an end in 1346 when a Bengali named Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah ‘successfully rebelled’ against the authorities in Delhi (Lewis 2011, 44). Historians mark this revolt as the beginning of the Bengal Sultanate (1342–1538), the golden age of Bengal that brought independence to the delta for two consecutive centuries. During that time the territory under the sultans expanded to include a larger region stretching from the western states of Orissa and West Bengal to the eastern frontiers of Assam, Tripura, and Burma (Lewis 2011, 44).

## Imperial Era – The Mughal Period

The Bengal Sultanate ended when Afghan rulers captured power in 1538. The stability of Afghan domination was, however, threatened by a rising

power in the west when the Mughals, who defeated the last ruler of the Delhi Sultanate in 1526, began to expand their control towards the east. Bengal was nominally integrated into the Mughal Empire in 1576, when the emperor Akbar defeated the last Afghan sultan in Tukaroi. Despite this, it took more than 30 years for the Mughals to fully annex Bengal due to the rise of numerous resistance movements in the delta that challenged imperial expansion (Lewis 2011, 45). Meanwhile, around 1520, the first Europeans (Portuguese) reached the Bengal delta (van Schendel 2009, 50).

Mughals finally conquered Bengal in 1610. In the same year the Mughal governor, Islam Khan, pronounced Dhaka the capital of the province. The elevation of Dhaka into a central city was a strategic move. The town is positioned almost exactly in the middle of Bengal, providing an opportunity to control the territory much more effectively against local rebels whilst also holding Arakenese as well as Portuguese expansion from the south and south-east of the delta at bay. Thus, the regions of Chittagong as well as the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) eluded Mughal control not only due to Arakan and European domination but also due to the independent chiefdoms presiding in CHT (van Schendel 2009, 50). In addition, Sylhet, where the Tripura, Jantia, Bodo, and Kachari Kings dominated, remained only loosely integrated into the empire and hence represented the north-eastern frontier of the Mughal kingdom (Gait 2008, 326–331).

The degree and nature of the Mughal impact on Bengal is again a subject of debate among historians. Many highlight the positive effects of a rising centralised state power that facilitated economic exchange within the delta region (Baxter 1997; Uddin 2006). Van Schendel (2009, 52) asserts, however, that the Mughal rule rather brought the inhabitants of Bengal suffering in the form of increased violence and deepening rural inequalities. Moreover, those who stress the positive effects of the empire overlook the ‘fact that the Mughal structure of government was less uniform’ in Bengal than in the Indian heartland (van Schendel 2009, 51). Instead of introducing a uniform political system, Mughals built upon previous layers of local rule. ‘As a result, outside the urban areas local lords, of varying grandeur, were in charge of law and order. In many parts of the delta these lords – known to the Mughal as *zamindars* [...] – remained semi-independent’ (ibid.). Consequently, *zamindars* in Bengal during the Mughal era composed the landholding aristocracy and shared the political and military power with imperial officials who originated from outside of Bengal (van Schendel 2009, 51–52).

To assure a steady flow of revenue to sustain the lavish courtyards in mainland India, Mughals supported agricultural expansion in Bengal. The

top revenue official of the imperial court for the Bengal province was the *diwan*, appointed by the emperor himself. Agricultural expansion accelerated the pace at which forests were cleared. Ever more land came under sedentary farming when inhabitants from the west moved towards the east. Around this time, Islam also spread in rural Bengal at an unprecedented speed. As Eaton (1993) argues, Islam became popular in the region not because Mughals supported its proliferation but due to the expansion of agricultural areas. 'Bengali literary and folk traditions dating from the sixteenth century are replete with heroes associated with taming the forest, extending the cultivable area, and instituting new religious cults' (*ibid.*, 226). These heroes, who were holy men belonging to Sufism, established not only mosques and shrines, but also transferred the knowledge necessary for establishing new agrarian territories. The spread of Islam in Bengal was therefore related to the increase of sedentary farming practices. The Mughals contributed to the transformation of religious identities only indirectly through their revenue policies.

### Imperial Era – The British Colonial Period

By the middle of seventeenth century, the influence of the Mughal Empire started to decline in Bengal. This coincided with the rise of another authority, the British East India Company (BEIC; van Schendel 2009, 56). The BEIC was able to take hold of the subcontinent and simultaneously drive out the preceding Portuguese competition by negotiating their trade entry into the Indian market with the Mughal court (van Schendel 2009, 56). Although the company set up its first warehouse in Surat (Western India) in 1612, by the end of the seventeenth century Bengal had become the centre of British trade.

In 1707, the last Mughal emperor died (Lewis 2011, 45–46). His death afforded the sovereign princes (*nawabs*) from Dhaka the opportunity to gain independence from Delhi. Concurrently, the British seized the chance to expand their influence over Bengal. The competition over control of the delta was finally determined in the Battle of Polashi in 1757, when the BEIC army defeated the *nawab's* armed forces. Soon after the battle, in 1765, the British gained land revenue collection rights (*diwani*) in Bengal, Orissa, and Bihar through a treaty signed with the Mughal court (van Schendel 2009, 56). These two events mark the beginning of European colonial rule in Bengal and the end of Mughal authority. For the British, the victory at Polashi was significant. It 'meant the beginning of empire. They used Bengal's riches to conquer the rest of India and other parts of Asia' (*ibid.*, 57). On the

other hand, British control entailed ‘new forms of capitalist exploitation, a racially ordered society and profound cultural change’ for the people in the delta (*ibid.*, 56).

The most far-reaching change that the British advanced in Bengal came with the introduction of the Permanent Settlement Act 1793 (van Schendel 2009, 58). The act was promulgated with the intention of increasing tax collection to finance imperial ambitions. Through the decree, the *zamindars* – former overlords who acted as revenue collector intermediaries between the Mughal emperor and the tillers of the land – obtained *de facto* landowner rights (van Schendel 2009, 58). *Zamindars*, on the other hand, had to pay the previously fixed taxes punctually or risk losing their holding. Alongside this, the act reduced farmers to the status of simple tenants without any property rights. The amount and form of the payment tenants were bound to pay depended on the *zamindar*, who often misused his power by raising the demands and simply expelling farmers if they refused to pay higher rents. Previously in Bengal ‘there had been complex and locally variable bundles of property rights vested in both peasant producers and landlords. Now these rights were granted only to the landlords who could freely sell, mortgage or gift their land’ (*ibid.*, 59). Consequently, the act paved the way for the rise of an exploitive gentry class in the figure of the *zamindar*. Many of them became lavishly rich, which facilitated their detachment from agriculture. Instead of having a direct connection with their tenants, *zamindars* appointed intermediaries who would collect the revenues on their behalf. Tax collection turned out to be a lucrative business. Even the *zamindar*’s intermediaries could afford another person to represent his interest. A system of sub-infeudation evolved with numerous layers (sometimes up to twelve) of ‘leisured tenure-holders’ (*ibid.*, 59). Moreover, under the governance of the BEIC, many high-caste Hindus in Bengal were able to rise to the rank of the *zamindars*, presiding over predominantly Muslim cultivators (*ibid.*, 60). These structural imbalances had far-reaching consequences, leading to a Hindu-Muslim divide in Bengal that continues to haunt its history today.

To stop the chain of rural exploitations, the British tried to increase cultivators’ rights to land in 1859. According to the new act, tenants who tilled the same land for twelve uninterrupted years gained occupancy or *raiyyat* rights. While the land could not be sold, it could be transferred through inheritance. However, the act remained poorly implemented and did not lead to an extensive improvement of the peasants’ situation (Jannuzi and Peach 1980, 3). As a result, several resistance movements arose between 1760 and 1790, which in the eastern part of Bengal were mainly but not

exclusively organised by Muslim religious leaders inspired by Wahabi ideas learnt from their time in Mecca. These leaders, known under the name *fakirs* (religious mendicant), organised their resistance movements towards the British rulers and high-caste Hindu landlords (Lewis 2011, 51). This is the reason one of the largest revolts – the ‘great Mutiny’ that broke out in 1857 in northern and central India and almost terminated British rule in the subcontinent – gained little support in Bengal (van Schendel 2009, 77). Despite this, the rebellion hastened changes felt across the delta. After the revolt, the British Parliament terminated the BEIC’s rights over India, and in 1858, the government took over the administration of the colony, initiating the period of the British Raj (Lewis 2011, 52).

The British went on to rule Bengal and India for more than 80 years until 1947. Many different changes occurred in the delta during this time, yet only three of these are important for this book’s purposes. The first was the introduction of the Bengal Tenancy Act 1885. The second was the deepening Hindu-Muslim divide, which was politically consolidated by separating West and East Bengal in 1905. Finally, the third event was the Partition in 1947 that marked the withdrawal of the British from India and the secession of the colony based upon the two-nation theory of Hindustan and Pakistan.

The significance of the 1885 Bengal Tenancy Act was that it introduced an overly stratified land holding system to Bengal which is still manifest in contemporary Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, for the first time the decree acknowledged an ‘early system of local government’ that possessed a relatively independent administrative and legislative power in Bengal (Lewis 2011, 53). Accordingly, the Provincial Government was the highest ruling authority and *zamindars*, while remaining formal proprietors of their landholding, were placed under the government and acted as intermediaries in the collection of rent from tenants. Parallel to the *zamindars*, ‘tenure holders’ and ‘under tenure holders’ also enjoyed rights to revenue collection. ‘Occupancy’ and the ‘non-occupancy *raiyats*’ followed the rent collecting authorities. These two different categories meant that the law provided *de jure* rights to occupancy *raiyats* on the count of proof of continuous possession of some land in a village for twelve years. This clause differed from the former act introduced in 1859, which required an uninterrupted occupation of the same land. Prior to this, *zamindars* could break this continuation by simply shifting farmers from one plot to another, hence denying them the granting of occupancy rights. Under the Bengal Tenancy Act, this was no longer possible. Additionally, the occupancy *raiyat* had also

1 The Sylhet Tenancy Act 1936 stipulated similar criteria as the Bengal Tenancy Act 1885.

the right to sell the land. Non-occupancy *raiyyats* in contrast could remain in possession of their land so long as they paid regular rent established by the landlord (Jannuzi and Peach 1980, 3–9).

The differing rights of the two categories of *raiyyats* were also established by providing them with distinct documents. Occupancy *raiyyats* obtained so-called *pattan* papers, whereas non-occupancy *raiyyats* received *patta* credentials. *Zamindars* issued *pattan* papers only for agricultural lands outside of forested areas where wet rice cultivation was possible. Shifting cultivators, who by practice tilled land in the forested areas, could not acquire the position of an occupancy *raiyyat* (Khaleque 1992, 114). Both classifications of *raiyyats* did not constitute the lowest strata of the agrarian society, for below them were the ‘under *raiyyats*’, who had temporary possession and paid rent to farmers above them. Finally, at the bottom of the agrarian order were the sharecroppers (*bargadars*) and the wage-labourers. In practice, these classifications were hard to maintain in full rigour. Thus, a *raiyyat* could be simultaneously a tenure holder and a rent-paying cultivator (Jannuzi and Peach 1980, 3–9).

The act partially acknowledged tenants’ rights to land; however, it could not hold economic exploitation in the rural areas at bay because it introduced a rigid stratification that facilitated oppression. As a result, anti-colonial movements – in the form of ‘civil disobedience campaigns’ and ‘communist-inspired tenant’ revolts – thrived across Bengal during the last period of the British rule (van Schendel 2009, 78–79). The hub of nationalist movements demanding the withdrawal of the British from India was in West Bengal, where its members were mainly high-caste Hindus. In eastern Bengal, conversely, the overwhelmingly Muslim tenants positioned themselves not only towards the colonial rulers but also towards the Hindu landlords and moneylenders (ibid., 83). The British consolidated these social and religious frictions by separating West and East Bengal in 1905. According to some historians, the 1905 separation was a conscious decision by the British government to divide and silence the various resistance movements in both parts of the delta. Although the division of the provinces was lifted in 1911, [a]fter 1905 “Muslims” and “Hindus” became clear-cut political categories and these categories have figured very prominently in Bengal political life ever since’ (ibid., 80).

## The Pakistani Era

One of the most spectacular outcomes of the religious divide between Hindus and Muslims was the Partition in 1947, which ended British colonial rule but

it also separated India from Pakistan. The former consisted of predominantly Hindu inhabitants while the latter comprised the largest Muslim population of the colony. West and East Pakistan (today Bangladesh) did not, however, form a connected territory. In between lay India, setting them apart by more than 1900 km (Lewis 2011, 12). Additionally, the Partition represented not simply a territorial secession but also one of the most violent events in the history of South Asia. It prompted a mass exodus of populations in which most of the Hindus from both sides of Pakistan left their home and migrated to India, whereas many Muslims resettled in West or East Pakistan. The different waves of migration were accompanied by violent clashes directed towards either Hindus or Muslims. The hastily drawn borderline, popularly known under name the 'Radcliffe Line' between India and Pakistan amplified these antagonisms further, and its consequences continue to disturb politics at the national and ground level even today (see Chapter 3).

With the Partition, a new era began for East Bengal which became known as the 'Pakistani experiment' (van Schendel 2009, 107). Given that after 1947 most of the administrative and industrial resources went to India, 'Pakistan was uniquely experimental, no other postcolonial state combined the loss of its administrative hub, the need to govern two unconnected territories and the ambition to found a national identity on a religious one' (ibid.). Soon after the formation of Pakistan, conflicts began to take shape. Thus, 'the two elements that most Pakistanis shared – an Islamic identity and a fear of India – proved insufficient to keep them united' (ibid., 109).

The first schism that flared up revolved around the determination of the national language. West Pakistani leaders aimed to introduce Urdu as the official state language, though spoken by only three per cent of Pakistanis. East Pakistan, where most of the population lived (56 per cent), predominantly spoke Bengali, and they rejected this proposition completely. The disagreement about the national language culminated in a language movement (*Bhasha Andolon*) in 1952 in the form of mass demonstrations throughout East Pakistan that continued until 1956. In the end, the Pakistani government acknowledged both Urdu and Bengali as the official languages of the state. The language movement was a significant moment in Bengal's history, not only due to this success but also because it set the stage for the imagination of an independent nation-state. The idea of autonomy was facilitated by further disappointments, the failure to bring agrarian change to the delta's predominantly rural population and the unwillingness of the West Pakistani elite to share political power with Bengali officials.

In 1950, the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act came into force and repealed the rules laid out by the previous decrees. Most prominently, it

abolished the rent-receiving rights of the *zamindars* and other land revenue collecting intermediaries. According to the new act, only the state had the right to collect land tax. Also, former tenants, who had permanent occupancy rights (*pattan* papers), could claim the land directly from the state to be registered in their name. Yet, as Jannuzi and Peach argue, the act did 'little to modify the traditional system. The role of rent-receiving landholder (loosely classified as zamindar [...]) was not in fact abolished' (1980, 9). On the contrary, the former rent-receivers became tenants (*maliks*) of the state and continued to keep the land under their possession (ibid., 10). Added to this, the law abolished even the little security that the Bengal Tenancy Act 1885 provided for sharecroppers. The rule of twelve years of continuous cultivation through which one could obtain occupancy right no longer applied.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, although the act did introduce a land ceiling (33 acres), this could be easily circumvented through several provisions in the law. Landholders who managed large-scale farming as a cooperative or a dairy were 'exempted from the operation of the ceiling provision' (ibid., 11). Excess land in return was declared state (*khas*) land. Many of these lands belonged to Hindu landholders, who migrated to India during the Partition and 'abandoned' their properties. In principle, the state was duty bound to redistribute *khas* land to farmers who owned less than three acres; however, this did not happen. Many powerful Muslim families acquired these *khas* lands by portraying 'intermediary rights as direct tenancies' and circumventing 'the land ceiling by registering the fields in the name of dependents' (van Schendel 2009, 139). The other portion of *khas* land (in the Sylhet area) was leased out to large corporations such as tea estates. Furthermore, the forest-covered lands, where most of the *adivasis* lived and still live, became state-owned properties (see section 20 subsection 2a of the Act) and were placed under the auspices of the Forest Department (see Chapters 4 and 5). In other words, the land act of 1950 'fell far short of the expectations of the smallholders and landless peasants who had expected to receive the excess land previously held by large land holders' (ibid., 139). The law, under the name of State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, is still in force in Bangladesh and protected by the constitution.<sup>3</sup>

2 Another law – the Limitation Act 1908 – does recognise an acquisition of ownership through continuous occupation of 20 years in cases where the land is private property and 60 years in cases where it is in the possession of the state (see section 26 of the Act). The act gives the occupier legal security in relation to the documented owner in case he wants to expel the tiller.

3 A few ordinances promulgated since 1972 added small modifications, without, however, changing the main character of the law. The Land Reform Ordinance 1984 for instance reduced the ceiling of land to 24 acres and acknowledged sharecroppers' rights.



During the first ten years after Partition, West and East Pakistani politicians made several attempts to unify the two territories politically and culturally. All these efforts failed. In 1958, a military *coup d'état* terminated democratic rule in Pakistan. General Ayub Khan became the head of the state. During Khan's rule, the military along with bureaucracy rose to political and economic power and served as a model for the consecutive military regimes in Bangladesh following independence. Khan also pursued economic development through industrial and agrarian modernisation. He sought this not by the mobilisation of internal resources but through foreign aid. 'Between 1959 and 1969 the inflow of external aid resources grew sixfold. From 1960 onwards, most foreign aid [...] was channelled through the World Bank's Aid-to-Pakistan consortium' (van Schendel 2009, 147). These economic programmes paved the way towards the aid dependency that continues to determine the Bangladeshi economy today. Meanwhile, East Pakistan's riches, obtained mostly through jute exports, continued to be channelled towards West Pakistan without reinvestment in Bengal. As a result, the delta's economy went into sharp decline and pauperisation of the population rose (*ibid.*, 136).

In 1969, General Yahya Khan took over the state office. In 1970, he announced 'Pakistan's first general elections for the National Assembly' (van Schendel 2009, 123). These events prompted East Pakistani politicians to mobilise their forces. At that time the major political party of East Pakistan was the Awami League (AL), led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. During the elections, most of the seats went to the AL (*ibid.*, 125). Owing to this victory at the ballot, Bengali politicians attained for the first time the opportunity to build a government and lead Pakistan. This idea was, however, unacceptable for the West Pakistani elites and they boycotted the first session of the National Assembly. Consequently, protests broke out in Bengal which saw demonstrators demanding independence. Yahya flew to Dhaka in the spring of 1971 to negotiate with the AL. 'On 25 March, while keeping the Awami League engaged in talks, the Yahya regime decided on a preplanned military solution to the crisis' (*ibid.*, 129). With this the Bangladesh Liberation War broke out.

## Bangladesh

After nine months at war, during which more than one million people died, East Pakistan gained autonomy from West Pakistan with intervention by the Indian army (Saikia 2011, 44–46). In December 1971 a new state was born

under the name of Bangladesh – the ‘country of Bengalis’ – and it set forth on the road to becoming an independent nation-state. This effort, which continues today, is no less turbulent than in previous periods; rather, it is characterised by the ups and downs of different political systems such as military regimes (1975–1990; 2006–2008); parliamentary democracy (1991–2014); and the one-party system (2014–today). Attempts to stabilise the country, economically as well as politically, continue.

After 1971, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib), Bangladesh accorded to the guiding principles of a secular, national, democratic, and social state. Secularism was, next to the Bengali language, one of the most important components of the Liberation War and it served as a suitable instrument to accommodate the diverse religious groups of the country within one territory (Chowdhury Fink 2010, 94). Yet, Mujib’s regime grew predominantly autocratic and alienated its political base. In August 1975, Mujib was assassinated along with his family (just two daughters, who were abroad, survived) by a group of army officers. General Ziaur Rahman (Zia), a well-known liberation war fighter and the founder of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), seized the leadership of the country (Datta 2005, 432). The political scene in Bangladesh changed. The leaders of the coup had registered the growing support of most of the population for the introduction of Islamic norms into society. To secure their position, they declared the coup executed in the name of the ‘Islamic Republic of Bangladesh’. With this move, Bangladesh distanced itself from the ideal of a secular state and changed its course towards strengthening the role of Islam in politics as well as in society (Mohsin 2004, 472–473).

Next to this, Zia’s economic policy rested on liberalisation. He introduced several changes that ‘favoured the private sector and export-oriented growth and sought to boost agriculture by introducing subsidies and a wide range of development projects’ financed by international aid (van Schendel 2009, 193–194). Bangladesh has remained on this economic path ever since. Additionally, Zia’s regime strengthened the emergence of military dominance in the delta for almost two decades. Even after the restoration of democracy in 1990, ‘the army never really went back to the barracks. It has continued to loom as the life-or-death-dispensing power behind the throne of successive civilian governments to the present’ (ibid., 194; see Chapter 6).

In May 1981 there followed another army coup in which Zia was killed. His successor, General H. M. Ershad, captured state power in March 1982. Ershad replaced Zia’s ‘liberal Islamic nationalism’ with a rigid and totalitarian ‘Islamic nationalism’ (Mohsin 2004, 475). In December 1990, a political revolt in which the major political parties and many civil society members participated ousted

Ershad from office. The aim of the peaceful revolution was the abolition of the corrupt military dictatorship and the restoration of democracy. Since then, the two leading political parties, the BNP, headed by Khaleda Zia (the widow of Zia), and the AL led by Sheikh Hasina (the daughter of Mujib), alternately formed governments. Parliamentary democracy was interrupted only between 2006 and 2008 when a military-backed caretaker government assumed power. In 2009, Bangladesh returned to parliamentary democracy when the AL won the elections. This was followed by the elections held in 2014, when the AL came out victorious, not because of democratic votes but because the BNP did not participate in the general polls. The reason behind the BNP boycott was that the AL initiated the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution in 2011, which abolished the caretaker government (CTG). The CTG was established in 1996 and assumed power from the renouncing government for 90 days during the elections. The BNP's rejection of participating in the polls contributed involuntarily towards the AL's success. Many observers consider this election non-democratic. During the last general elections held in 2018, AL declared victory once more. According to independent observers, these elections were far from being independent and fair either, since the BNP leader Khaleda Zia was banned from running due to corruption charges.

Beside the above outlined political instabilities, the swing between competing Bengali and Bangladeshi visions of the nation continues to divide the country. While the former, following the spirit of the 1952 language movement, accentuates Bengali language and culture, the latter stresses the religious identity that materialised during the Pakistani time, reinforced during the military regimes between 1975 and 1990. These different visions of the nation are strengthened by the rivalry of the two major political parties. AL rhetoric encourages Bengali nationalism, while BNP emphasises Islamic identity. Yet, despite these differences, both parties share a common political practice when it comes to the question of ethnic minorities. The second obstacle to stability surfaces, therefore, in the unwillingness of Bangladeshi political elite to accommodate the religious and ethnic minorities of the country (van Schendel 2009, 198). For these reasons, the political and national frontiers of Bangladesh, where ethnic minorities live, are characterised by deep tensions.

### **Who are the Adivasis? – The Social Heterogeneity of Bangladesh**

East Bengal was not a cohesive territory until the British annexed the region and brought it under its power. The area is naturally divided by the

Brahmaputra into western and eastern terrains. While the western part was approachable by people migrating and slowly expanding from India, the eastern part was more accessible to populations coming from China, Burma, or more distant regions of East Asia. Little is known about the pre-history of the Bengal delta, partly because archaeological remains consist of clay and wood and thus could not resist the hot and humid weather conditions, and partly because archaeologists from South Asia gave greater importance to Indo-European languages such as Sanskrit and Prakrit, from which Bengali also originates, neglecting languages from other families such as Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, and Dravidian. As a result, knowledge about the Bengal Delta dates back only until the end of the fifth century BCE. During this time, populations from the west moved into the delta and spread Sanskrit into the region, slowly pushing inhabitants from the east, who spoke Tibeto-Burman (Garo, Koch), Austro-Asiatic (Khasi), and Dravidian (Oraon) languages further eastward (van Schendel 2009, 16–19). ‘From the fifth century BCE, when Sanskrit culture first reached the Bengal delta from the west, Bangladesh has been the frontier zone where Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic worldviews met, clashed and intermingled. [...] Even today the clash between Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic can be observed in Bangladesh’s culture’ (ibid., 20). Accordingly, van Schendel (2009) designates Bangladesh as a region of ‘multiple frontiers’, a meeting point of different cultural traditions originating from both west and east.

This civilisational convergence is still observable when one pays attention not only to the Bengali-speaking majority but also to ethnic minorities. Even today the latter follow cultural traditions different from most of the Indian subcontinent; they speak non-Indo-European languages, have different religious practices (i.e. Hinduism, Christianity, and a variety of native religions), and apply different agricultural methods than sedentary farming. Most of them still populate the north-eastern (Sylhet, Mymensingh, and Tangail), south-eastern (Chittagong Hill Tracts) and north-western (Rajshahi) parts of the country. This means that next to the overwhelming Bengali population (98 per cent, of whom 90 per cent follow Islam), approximately two to three million Bangladesh inhabitants – ‘encompassing more than fifty different groups’ (Lewis 2011, 28) – are non-Bengali speakers and non-Muslims. Since these minorities fall into multiple categories of distinction (religion, ethnicity, language etc.), it is hard to define their actual numbers. Many suspect that due to these reasons, national censuses have more room to manoeuvre by dividing certain categories, thus playing down the actual number of minorities. During the colonial era, the British classified these minorities as ‘tribals’, while the majority population of Bangladesh calls

them '*upojati*' (sub caste/sub nation). Since the 1980s, two terms – '*adivasi*' and 'indigenous peoples' – have gained wider usage as self-applied and interchangeable categories. All these labels are problematic due to their ideological underpinnings resulting from the convergence of state formation and identity politics as well as the competition for access to resources.

During the early years of the British Raj, colonial administrators used the word 'tribe' interchangeably with clan, caste, class, and race. From the nineteenth century onwards, tribe was separated from the qualifier caste and attained more of a racial overtone. While caste designated a particular South Asian phenomenon, tribe was assigned to a universal civilisational category. Colonial officials applied the term tribe to people they regarded as underdeveloped, uncivilised, and pre-modern because they practiced non-sedentary farming in wild and remote territories amidst hills and forests. Such categorisations were more than simply groupings of different people with very distinct cultural markers into one arbitrary set category. The British trend of population classifications served as a tool as well as justification to unequally distribute state and other resources among people now sorted into different groups. South Asian elites often demonstrated active complicity when they accepted European ideas of stratification and administration. Additionally, tribalisation was a process of primitivisation during which the term marked a difference between sedentary farmers and swidden cultivators, fixing a relationship of unequal power. To be tribal meant that one was subordinate to a superior power with an often violent civilising mission which included mass conversions to Christianity (van Schendel 2010). Although Christian missionaries had already arrived in the Bengal Bay during the seventeenth century along with the Portuguese, the first Catholic and Presbyterian missions in the areas where ethnic minorities live in today's Bangladesh were set up at the peak of British colonialism.

After the British withdrew from South Asia, the consecutive state powers not only inherited an administrative structure that consolidated inequalities along ethnic categories but also continued with these politics. The Bengali term *upojati* marks not only Bengali civilisational superiority but also justifies the political marginalisation of people who speak a different language than the majority and who follow different religions to Islam. Additionally, *upojati* carries the overtone of subordinating the needs and demands of minorities *vis à vis* national necessities. Following the Pakistani pattern, Bangladeshi politicians demonstrated little flexibility in declaring Bengali the only national language, side-lining those people whose mother tongue was different. This uncompromising politics led to the outbreak of the 1975

civil war in the CHT, a region where ethnic minorities outnumber Bengalis even today (van Schendel 2009, 211–215).

Although the CHT war ended in 1997 with a peace treaty, the crisis was an important driver of momentum for the consolidation of identity politics that increased all over Bangladesh during the last 20 years. This was also the time when the notion of *adivasi* – in the literal sense ‘first people’ (Schleiter and de Maaker 2010, 16; see also Rycroft and Dasgupta 2010) – was adopted from Indian discourse and gained wider popularity in the country. Moreover, ethnic activists from 2000 onwards began to use *adivasi* interchangeably with the term indigenous peoples. The culmination of the indigenous movement in Bangladesh reached a peak in 2001 when an umbrella organisation under the name Bangladesh Adivasi Forum was established, which aimed to represent and bring the plain and hill *adivasis* of the country together (see Chapter 4 for a more in-depth discussion of this organisation).

Until today it is common in political discourse, as well as in the scientific literature, to make a distinction between hill and plain *adivasis* according to their regional distribution in the flat and mountain regions (see Mohsin 2007, 445). The first term refers to the inhabitants of the CHT, while the second refers to ethnic minorities who live outside the CHT. This book will focus on people belonging to this latter category. More specifically, it will address the situation of the Pnar Khasis (Chapter 3) and War Khasis (Chapter 4) living next to the Assam border; the Garos (Chapter 5) residing in Madhupur Forest in the Tangail District, and the Lalengs (Chapter 6) populating the region neighbouring Sylhet Town.

While the number of Khasis and Garos in Bangladesh are estimated to be between 20,000 and 30,000, most of whom follow Christianity, Hindu Lalengs number is less than 4,000. The situation of these minorities, due to several discriminatory state practices, is indeed difficult and it is hard not to sympathise with their plight. Yet, identity politics poses several problems and dangers that must be critically addressed. (Chapter 7 will specifically explore these broader issues of indigenous identity politics.)

The recent emergence of the two synonymously used idioms – *adivasi* and indigenous peoples – is not accidental in Bangladesh. It is the regional manifestation of increased global fascination with autochthony. Yet world-wide concerns with the local are only partly preoccupied with the ‘natives’ being native and more about their struggle to gain access to the global arena (Geschiere 2009). This is also true for Bangladesh. Thus, the concomitant appearance of indigeneity and *adivasi*ness is a strategic approach of ethnic activists not only to force their demands for recognition in Bangladesh but also to obtain entrance into world politics within the framework of indigenous rights

discourse. Yet, these activities seldom provide help for those who inhabit the political and economic margins. Such activities often counterproductively reinforce the position of a few elites who profit from such politics. Moreover, indigeneity often facilitates violent politics of exclusion towards those who are marked as non-native, while silencing and repressing those who occupy internally vulnerable positions (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2010, 106–107). From this perspective, indigenous politics in many instances promotes the emergency of centralised ‘regimes of belonging’ (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2012, 32), a practice linked to the refusal and removal of alternative perspectives perceived as threatening to internal cohesion. Safeguarding ethnic boundaries may therefore flip into policing and silencing individual desires that deviate from the imaginations of what constitutes a shared ground upon which a sense of solidarity is constructed (for further discussion of this see Chapter 7). In this sense, voice ‘turned into the plural [...] can also be lethal’ (Das 2007, 9). In addition, as van Schendel (2010, 28–31) asserts, the demand for territorial exclusivity based upon the claim of ‘firstness’ is questionable in a South Asian context, not only because it prompts an increase in violence and societal and regional fragmentation, but also because South Asian migratory practices since pre-historic times are so complicated that determining who arrived when is not just difficult but futile.

Considering this critique, the following work at many points will attempt to break out from the seductive vocabulary of indigeneity by focusing not only on collisions of the state versus people, but also on internal dynamics. This will be possible by paying attention to the double character of the everyday – i.e. not only as a site of recovery and habit but also as a site of doubt and betrayal (Das 2007).

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### 3 Between Fear and Hope at the Bangladesh-Assam Border

#### Abstract

Chapter 3 examines the situation of a village, Nolikhai, located next to the Assam border. Due to an interstate agreement to realign the borderline between Bangladesh and India, villagers are threatened with losing their farmland. Additionally, since the agreement, confrontations between the villagers and the Border Security Force of India (BSF), who restrict villager's free movement, have also multiplied. Both threats, losing land and confronting the border guards, induce high levels of fear among the villagers. Yet, since there is a chance that the realignment of the borderline might not materialise, villagers maintain the hope of keeping their farmland. Consequently, the villagers' everyday life is charged with fear and hope, shedding light on ambiguous state practices oscillating between threat and protection.

**Keywords:** hope, fear, Assam-Bangladesh border, 'bipolar' state practices

When I heard about the problems in Nolikhai for the first time, I was still in Dhaka at the beginning of my second period of fieldwork in November 2011. A local activist told me the story of the settlement, 'You know these people are caught in between two states and there is not much hope for their survival' (November 2011, fieldnotes). The notion of being caught in-between states captured my interest, and in January 2012 I travelled with my assistant, Matthew, to the region for the first time. From a small town, we travelled by car on a very narrow and twisting road towards the village. We approached Nolikhai as far as we could by car until the road went abruptly uphill and we had to continue on foot. When we reached the north-eastern edge of the village on top of the hill, we looked around. We could 'see' Assam on the other side of the hill. The building of the Border Security Force of India (BSF) camp was just a few kilometres away from the base of Boarder

Guards Bangladesh (BGB). In between the camps stretched the betel leaf gardens (*pan jhums*) tended by residents of Nolikhai, which are easily recognizable due to their high trees and dense vegetation. Our position was only few metres away from 'zero point', where the national borderline of Bangladesh ends and the international zone of 'no man's land' starts. The headman's brother-in-law, David, stood next to me. He extended his arm and, describing a semicircle, explained, 'These are our *pan jhums*. You see? And now they want to take them away from us', pointing towards the BSF camp (January 2012). I looked at his face for a few moments without saying anything. What captured my attention was not his words, but the tension of the restrained resentment and fear colouring his expression.

Nolikhai is a small border village located in the Greater Sylhet of Bangladesh next to the Assam border. Most of the residents are Pnar and War Khasis. While their houses are in Bangladesh, their agricultural lands lie on a 300-acre stretch of territory between Bangladesh and India – a veritable *no man's land*. The villagers have not possessed any official land titles over their residential area or over their farmlands since the colonial period, but instead have been leasing the land from a privately owned tea estate since the 1920s. Because of the border, their lives have always been volatile, but in the last five years their problems relating to tenancy have become even more acute. In 2011, Bangladesh and India signed a land boundary agreement (LBA) to solve their territorial conflicts along the border. According to the LBA, at some point soon the border will be realigned in the area of Nolikhai a few metres towards Bangladesh. This means that while the residential area will remain in Bangladesh, the agricultural lands will fall into Assam territory. Thus, the execution of the LBA threatens residents with the loss of their farmland and their livelihood. This is just one part of their problem. Since the erection of a barbed wire fence in 2010, the BSF has restricted the villagers from approaching their farmlands. Therefore, it has become increasingly difficult for the residents to cultivate *pan* without risking verbal or physical confrontations with the BSF.<sup>1</sup>

Both threats, losing land and confronting the border guards on an everyday basis, instigate high levels of fear among the villagers. Yet since there is a slight chance that this present-day LBA, like previous border agreements, might not materialise, it allows the Nolikhai people to hope that in the end

1 The violent activities of the BSF are well documented by the Bangladeshi media, human rights organisations, and scholars. One of the most publicised cases was the 2011 killing of Felani Khatun, a fifteen-year-old girl who was shot by the BSF as she was crossing the Bangladesh-India border and her body left hanging on the barbed wire fence (Cons 2016, 14–15).

their farmlands will be spared. Also, the Bangladeshi state facilitates such hopes when it allows residents opposing voices that question the legitimacy of the LBA and when through the BGB it occasionally provides protection for the inhabitants from the BSF. Consequently, the villagers' everyday reality is charged with high levels of both fear and hope. The latter materialises through a particular language of dissidence as well as demands directed towards the Bangladeshi state. How to explain the equally high levels of fear and hope among the residents of Nolikhai?

First, I suggest that the simultaneous appearance of fear and hope sheds light on 'bipolar' state practices on the ground (Singh 2015, 44). By 'bipolar', I mean that on the one hand the state acts as a guardian as well as an enabler permitting dissident voices to arise, yet on the other the state is a source of arbitrary power, targeting and denying the same lives that it intends to protect and allow to coexist. Being targeted and protected are not two separate alternatives that must be mutually exclusive, even if they are antithetical: 'targeting and protecting are practices that belong to the same rationale of power' (Butler 2015, 144). Such contradictory state practices represent not the exception but rather the norm in contemporary Bangladesh and are connected to what Didier Fassin (2009) terms the 'politics of life'; a political practice that is concerned not only with state formation through the management and regulation of existences, but also with contestations about the meanings and values of life. Despite its novelty at first sight, politics of life in Bangladesh does not indicate an interruption of former political practices that came to the fore during colonialism. After all, the Bangladeshi state links recognition of occupancy rights to the existence of legal land papers while rejecting and ignoring different claims for land, e.g. the historical continuation of occupation. Such alternative entitlements were rejected during British colonial rule and continue to be disregarded by the Bangladeshi state. This practice of rejection enables not only legal and political repudiation on the part of state officials but also physical abuse by the BSF.

Second, fear reveals in Nolikhai a heightened sense of vulnerability, materialised through physical exposure and the potential collapse of material and social conditions that sustain life. Inhabitants' hope, in contrast, stands for searching for viable possibilities, but also a move away from an increasingly marginalised position towards a demand for recognition. Through the concomitant surfacing of fear and hope, I wish to show how existential and political matters become entangled. Moreover, that such emotional intensities and contradictions emerge exactly at nation-state margins is not accidental. Borderlands as 'sensitive spaces' (Cons 2016, 7)

accumulate intense uncertainties on the part of both the state and their inhabitants (see also Sur 2021). Such uncertainties, even if they play out in the present, are deeply rooted in history. This is true in the case of Nolikhai too, as the contemporary borderline between Sylhet (the northeast division of Bangladesh) and the northeast Indian states of Meghalaya and Assam has a complex history. It gradually came into being through long socio-political transformations (Ludden 2003a).

### **The Formation of the Sylhet-Meghalaya-Assam Border**

Throughout the centuries, many empires have expanded and declined in South Asia. Sylhet constituted the eastern frontier of both the Gupta and the Mughal Empires, while it was the western frontier of the kingdoms in Assam. Up until the thirteenth century, dense forests and massive floods separated Sylhet from the rest of Bengal, and the region was therefore more approachable from the east. The first populations from the west arrived during the thirteenth century after the Afghans defeated the Sena Rajas (Ludden 2003b). Nevertheless, there is no historical evidence that 'a definite Sylhet region' would have existed under the Bengal Sultanate up until the Mughal conquest (*ibid.*, 2). The area included rather different territories comprising Khasis, Bengali-Hindus, and Muslims, a population composition that characterises Sylhet up to the present (Ludden 2003b). Only later during the British era, when increasing numbers of settlers moved from the west to the east and cleared the forest for farming to a greater extent did Sylhet become a separate region fully integrated into a larger state power (Rahman 1999). The border between Meghalaya and Sylhet was therefore a direct result of British expansion and a stricter governance of population movements (Ludden 2003b). It nevertheless took more than two decades for British colonial authority to be fully established in Sylhet, which means that between 1757 and 1780, the East India Company had only sporadic control over the region (Islam 2007, 117). The appointment of Robert Lindsay as Sylhet's official revenue collector in 1772 was explicitly intended to bring the shifting cultivators of the region, particularly Khasis, under state control (*ibid.*, 116). Khasis originally inhabited Vietnam's Red River delta in ancient times, and when the Vietnamese defeated them, they were forced to migrate northwest 'into Yunnan (China), across Burma into Assam, Bengal and the Ganga river basin', where they established settlements in today's Meghalaya, Assam, and Sylhet (Ludden 2003b, 5081).

Lindsay, however, cooperated extensively with Khasi and Jaintia/Pnar Rajas throughout his appointment. This cooperation ended in 1793, when a series of armed conflicts over the control of the mountain trade broke out between colonial soldiers and Khasis. Lindsay's successor, John Willes, assumed the office in 1788 with the explicit mission of breaking down the Khasi resistance movements. While Willes succeeded on the battlefield next to Sylhet Town (Islam 2007, 117), he could not conquer the Khasis, residing in what is today known as Meghalaya. Willes therefore suggested drawing a boundary line between Meghalaya and Sylhet to protect British imperial interests in Bengal. Following these developments, Sylhet became part of British Bengal in 1791 (Ludden 2003b). This first modern border between Meghalaya and Sylhet not only separated territories from each other but also divided lowland and highland people (sedentary farmers, i.e. Bengalis, and shifting cultivators, i.e. Khasis), thus solidifying the social boundaries between them. The subsequent Assam-Sylhet borderline has hardened these divisions further. This later established border, too, was the result of a longer socio-political transformation process between 1826 and 1947.

Up until 1826, the British Empire had grown further and annexed Assam after the successful war against Burma. Both territories, Sylhet and Assam, became part of imperial Bengal until 1873. In the following year, British officials separated Assam and Sylhet from Bengal, and both gained province status. With the separation of West and East Bengal in 1905, the British government attached the provinces to East Bengal until Sylhet and Assam, as separated provinces, were reunited once more in 1912 and remained so up until 1947 (Mohsin and Haroon 1999, 3–13). In addition to these changes, the migration of Muslim Bengalis to Assam, which began in 1873, continued to drive transformations in the population composition of the province. By 1920, the Muslim population in some of the subdivisions of Sylhet already outnumbered the Hindu and Christian inhabitants. This development turned the question of Assam's ethnic and religious composition into a political issue (Ludden 2005, 27) and slowly fuelled Assamese resentment towards Bengali-speaking Muslims. As dissatisfaction from the Assam side grew, in 1920 the British government introduced a law that became known as 'Line System'. According to the law, all the migrants from East Bengal who had entered Assam after 1918 had to return to their place of origin (Chakrabarty 2002, 319). This line additionally separated the Muslim majority areas of West Sylhet from the Hindu regions of East Sylhet and the rest of Assam for the first time. Hence, it can be viewed as a prior borderline between Sylhet and Assam that finally materialised during the partition of British India.

When the Bengal borderline, popularly known as the Radcliffe Line, was drawn in August 1947 and British India was divided (van Schendel 2005, 51), out of all the divisions, only in Sylhet could residents decide through a vote, known also as the 'Sylhet referendum' (Hossain 2012), on where they wanted to belong. In the Western subdivisions, the Muslim Bengali majority voted for incorporation into East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), whereas in the Eastern part the Hindu majority decided for integration into Assam. This newly drawn borderline between India and East Pakistan posed several problems at various points along the border since officials in charge of border delineation (both British and native bureaucrats) disregarded the composition of the population and the historical and geographical units on the ground (van Schendel 2005). These circumstances created territorial ambiguities at many locations along the border and sparked inter-state conflicts between 1950 and 1971, not just at a diplomatic level but also at a local level when border guards exchanged crossfire due to territorial disagreements (*ibid.*, 69). Van Schendel (2007, 53–86) identifies five forms of territorial ambiguities along the Bengal border. One form is land in adverse possession where one state claims a given area and this demand is recognised despite the territory being occupied by the other state, be it Bangladesh or India. The contested land in Nolikhai falls under this category.

Due to the conflicting relationship between India and Pakistan (East and West), such territorial problems had remained largely unresolved between 1947 and 1971. When Bangladesh (East Pakistan) gained independence from West Pakistan in 1971, the diplomatic relations with India also changed. The then head of Bangladesh – Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – and the prime minister of India – Indira Gandhi – not only signed a friendship treaty in 1972, but also ratified a land boundary agreement to settle the territorial disputes for the first time in 1974. However, this boundary deal failed due to vetoes in the Indian assembly (Datta 2011). After the assassination of Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and with the emergence of military rule in Bangladesh, international affairs between the two countries began to cool once more as the Bangladeshi military elite fostered a close relationship with Pakistan. The political distance between India and Bangladesh persisted until the end of military rule in 1990.

After the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh in 1991, international relations between the two countries began to improve. The establishment of a Joint Boundary Working Group (JBWG) in December 2000 is an example of such positive change. The duty of the JBWG is to delineate the un-demarcated boundary between India and Bangladesh to resolve territorial disputes, especially the problem of adverse possession (Ministry of External Affairs

2010). This cooperation led to the second LBA in September 2011, when the two prime ministers signed an agreement about exchanging the adversely possessed territories, also affecting the *pan* gardens in Nolikhai. However, the land transfer was once more interrupted due to a lack of consensus in the Indian assembly. Only in 2015 did the two countries finally come to an agreement. With this decision, the fate of Nolikhai seems to be sealed: While their homesteads will remain Bangladeshi territory, their agricultural lands will belong to Assam. To better understand how this situation affects the everyday life of the residents, in the next section I wish to take a closer look at the circumstances of everyday life of the Nolikhai people.

### Dwelling at 'Zero Point'

Nolikhai is located directly on the Bangladesh side of the Assam border and was established during the 1920s. Since then, five generations of headmen (*montrys*) have administered the village. Despite a long occupation, residents have since the period of British rule had no formal land titles.<sup>2</sup> They cultivate approximately 300 acres of land leased from a tea garden by paying a monthly fee to the estate. The tea garden land has conversely been classified as state land since 1950. The first boundary pillars that separated the village from Assam were set up after a confrontation with border guards in 1958–1959, when the Pakistani Rifles exchanged fire with the Assam Rifles over a border control disagreement. During this time, the village had to shift a few metres towards Bangladesh out of immediate crossfire. After the conflict, the villagers moved back to the original position of the settlement. The bunkers of the Pakistani soldiers still exist at the end of the village, marking the zero point of Bangladesh as well as the end of the residential area of Nolikhai. Today, a three-layered barbed wire fence constructed in 2010 separates the village from Assam. Despite the fence, cross-border movement remains an everyday activity along the Bengal borderline (see also Boyle and Rahman 2018). In Nolikhai, even currently, it is not unusual to traverse the border by taking a path through the forest, where there are neither fences nor outposts.

<sup>2</sup> According to David Ludden (2003a, 5084), the missing land titles of Khasis in Sylhet were a direct result of the armed conflicts between the colonial soldiers and Khasis. Following the conflict officials not only drew a boundary line between Meghalaya and Sylhet, but also prohibited land occupancy rights for Khasis in Sylhet, while the previously owned lands were confiscated and auctioned in Kolkata.



Approximately 300 inhabitants in 32 households live in the settlement. The native language of the majority is Pnar Khasi. Some speak War Khasi, and two families belong to Garos.<sup>3</sup> Most of the inhabitants in Nolikhai are Presbyterian; three families are Catholic; and one family follows the traditional religion of Khasis, *niem chnong*. Religion occupies an important place in the local order, which is also reflected by the central position of the Presbyterian Church. Located exactly in the middle of the village, it divides the line of houses into two parts: following the borderline, they are arranged in a half circle from south to north, with almost all of them facing Assam. The greater parts of these homesteads are brick constructs with tin or straw roof, while a few of them are built from bamboo with straw tops.

Since it is located not only between hillocks but also seven kilometres away from the first Bengali settlement, Nolikhai is relatively isolated from other villages throughout the plains. Nevertheless, residents do interact with Bengalis daily; traders visit Nolikhai to buy and transport *pan* to the markets, and the inhabitants themselves travel to the nearest city for administrative or health purposes. Interaction with the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) happens on an almost daily basis. The larger shopping areas in nearby cities represent another opportunity for mingling outside the village. Before the barbed wire fence was erected, residents frequented the bazaars in India due to their proximity. However, even now, Indian goods, especially fruits and vegetables, regularly appear in households. This illustrates well that cross border communication is a routine practice despite the fence, with the complicated traversal of the border being the only change.

Since Nolikhai also has a school, positioned at the entrance of the village at the foot of the hill, children between the ages of six and ten do not have to leave the settlement. Young persons above ten attend missionary schools either in Assam or Meghalaya or in a small Bangladeshi town near the Tripura border. These adolescents usually come home during the holidays, and they stay in hostels during the school year. Due to these schooling arrangements, many of the young residents speak satisfactory English, whereas an education in India confronts them with the problem of not

3 Khasis are, due to linguistic dissimilarities and geographical concentration, categorised into five subdivisions: Kynriam (residents of Upland Khasi in Meghalaya), Bhoi (residents of the Bhoi area north to Khasi Hills in Meghalaya), Pnar or Jaintia (residents of Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya and in Bangladesh), War (residents of the southern Khasi and Jaintia Hills reaching into the slopes of Greater Sylhet now part of Bangladesh) and finally Lynngam (residents of the Hills east to Upland Khasi Hills; Nakane 1967, 96–97). All these subdivisions indicate different practices regarding inheritance rules and matrilineal customs, but most importantly differences in the language.

being fluent in Bengali. This represents an obstacle in situations when good Bengali is required.

Religious services are also performed locally, even though they do not have an official reverend. The weekly worships are conducted by a person nominated by the church for such services. The parish priests visit the Catholic families one weekend per month, and on the other weekends practising Catholics go to neighbouring villages for services, or they visit the nearest mission (7 kilometres) in the plains.

The electricity supply of Nolikhai is poor, which is no surprise since Bangladeshi settlements outside urban areas are rarely connected to the central power network. Only three houses in Nolikhai have a few hours electricity per day owing to their proximity to the BGB camp. The rest of the households have solar collectors. Problems of water supply are solved at each house individually through water tanks, where rain is collected for use in showering as well as cleaning. For cooking and drinking purposes, water is fetched from the tube wells, which are situated at the lower points of the village, with young children carrying it in pots up to the houses daily.

The differentiation along economic lines in Nolikhai shows little variation. The average size of the gardens owned by one family is about ten acres, and only six families hold less than this amount. While such a size of land may appear exceptional in the plain lands, it is not extraordinary in the Khasi settlements all along the Bangladesh-India border. These are hilly regions, with rugged soil yet dense vegetation. Rice or tea cultivation would necessitate tree removal and establishing terraces, which is prohibited by the Bangladesh Forest Department. Additionally, such landscape alteration would require a larger investment without guarantee of profit, as farmers would still face the dilemma of proper irrigation. Rainwater flows down quickly from the hills to the plains. This is why *zamindars* during the colonial time leased these lands out to Khasis in such large amounts and also why, after independence, the tea estates in the area followed this prior practice. Land in these hilly areas is suitable for *pan* cultivation but not for other agricultural activities. Consequently, the market value of these hilly lands is less than that of the farmlands in the plains.

The more or less same size of landholdings does not imply equal distribution of power in Nolikhai. Social and political dominance is, in each Khasi village, strictly regulated along matrilineal clan (*kur*) affiliations. The clan who founds the settlement and invites other Khasis to form a community assumes the highest social position. The *montry* (village head), who acts as a political authority, is usually the husband of the heiress (*kahddhu*) of the founding clan. The *montry* represents the interest of the villagers externally,

yet the *u-kñi*, the uncle or eldest brother of the heiress, reserves a veto right in all matters. Each family must pay a monthly tribute from their production to the founding *kur*. These payments reinforce the authority of the 'original' clan further. Yet, this is a fragile dominance. If the *montry* fails to protect the residents' interests and if taxation is excessive, villagers could withdraw their loyalty by moving out of the village. Internal disputes emerging from struggles over authority and taxation are, therefore, not rare.

As I was able to observe, additional periodic tensions arise from gender conflicts stemming from the collision of patriarchal Christian values and matrilineal principles. Men often complain about their inferior position in their marital family. Adult males not only continue to belong to their mother's clan following marriage, but their children are also included in the wife's kin, resulting in diminished rights to their offspring. Inheritance discrimination against males on the part of the consanguine kin is another issue discussed frequently, since according to the matrilineal rule, men do not fall heir to their *kur's* land. Women strongly contest such critique because, in practice, men occupy a prominent position in their marital family along with the *u-kñi*. Land is indeed inherited by women, but decisions about selling and buying farmland are the responsibility of the husband and *u-kñi*. Men's status is further reinforced by their dominance in local politics. Women rarely appear in the monthly village meetings. These gender-specific divisions are further fortified through work distribution. While men do the farming, women perform the household labour.

In Nolikhai, all residents of the older generations are involved in the production of *pan*. Due to their higher educational status, a few members of the younger generation seek alternative occupations in larger cities in India or Bangladesh. Yet schooling is not granted to all children. Sons and the youngest daughter receive a lower level of education. This is because sons are considered as an important labour force in the *pan* gardens, while the youngest daughter is the heir of the *kur's* land and remains in the parental home, fulfilling her duties as caretaker of her parents and the family's land.

Marriage and inheritance rules still substantially regulate the occupational choices within Khasi families in Bangladesh. Another factor for not seeking out alternative sources of income is that *pan* production is a highly profitable livelihood strategy. Compared to an average rural Bangladeshi household income (9,648 Taka according to the survey report of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2010), about 80 per cent of families (with an average of six members) in Nolikhai earn three times as much per month from *pan* production, and thus, can be considered middle-income families in Bangladesh. Additional incomes are secured from the cultivation of lemon, turmeric, ginger, and betel nut.

Nevertheless, according to the residents, *pan* cultivation has become an increasingly volatile occupation due to different external factors. The amount of annual rainfall subsides yearly, which heavily affects the growth of *pan*. Furthermore, the life span of the betel plant has shortened considerably. Originally shifting cultivators, Khasis conditioned their relocation on the lifetime of the *pan*. Accordingly, after twelve to fifteen years of living in one place, a whole village moved to a neighbouring hillock while letting the 'old' land rejuvenate. Today, this practice has been abandoned due to land shortage. Since Khasi farmers do not use chemical fertilisers and repellents, the life span of the betel leaf has shortened as well (eight to ten years) due to sedentary agriculture. Despite this change, they nevertheless adopted a rotating style of farming that bears resemblance to the previous practice. Accordingly, the land is parcelled into smaller units, and the actual collection happens in only half of the gardens. In the remaining gardens, either saplings are planted or the land is left to revitalise.

The chain of production of *pan* is divided into eight different steps. (1) *Pan*, as a creeper, requires high trees and half-shade as well as a humid and rich soil. Tropical natural forests are the best habitat for the plant. If, however, a garden lacks tall trees, the first step is to plant some. It takes four to five years for a tree to reach the minimum required height of three to four metres. (2) Farmers reproduce *pan* not through seeds but through stem cuttings. (3) When the forest trees reach the desired height, the planting of the betel starts, and within three to four weeks the saplings spring out. Despite this fast growth, a newly established garden needs three years to mature for collection. (4) During maturation, *pan* needs nursing. The foliage of the trees is trimmed to let sunlight and more air into the garden, thus stimulating the *pan's* growth. Additionally, the stems are tightened to the trees on which the betel can grow. (5) When *pan* is fully matured, harvesting can begin. During the harvest, a bamboo ladder is used to climb up the tree. At the top, the collectors bind themselves to the tree trunk and use their long thumbnails to pluck the *pan* and collect it in baskets on their backs. (6) The collected betel is then carried back to the village, where it is washed to secure longer freshness. (7) The next step is sorting the *pan* according to size and arranging them into bundles, which is done exclusively by women. One bundle contains 144 leaves, and 20 bundles make up one *kuri*. (8) The *kuris* are sold the next day to Bengali traders who come to the village. Since the men are in the gardens, the bargaining and selling is also the women's duty. Three *kuri* per day is considered a good amount of production when the price of the *kuri* is at a minimum of 500 Taka. After selling, Bengali porters manually carry the *pan* down to the plains.

Although *pan* cultivation is practised daily and throughout the year, it is nevertheless seasonal work regulated by the amount of annual rainfall. During the monsoon season from May to July, the main work in the gardens is cutting off branches as well as trimming the tops of the trees. At this time of the year, the jungle is cleared from undergrowth plants, and new saplings are planted. *Pan* is collected, but not in such large amounts as in the following season. When rainfall moderates between August and the end of October, the main harvest arrives. The crop in this season is extensive, but since *pan* is easily available all over the country, its market value drops. Villagers must collect larger amounts to cover household expenses. Correspondingly, men work in the gardens from dawn until dusk. The collected *pan* must be bundled for sale on the same day, and women therefore often work from six o'clock in the evening until four or five o'clock in the morning. The sleeping hours are consequently different for men and women in this season. From November until the end of January, *pan* collection decreases and therefore does not require such strenuous work as during the main harvesting period. Sleeping hours are adjusted again. The main work in the gardens is cutting the branches off the big trees and gathering them around the roots of the *pan* to protect them from strong sunlight during the following dry season. From February until April, the main activity is working around the house, repairing smaller items, or building new houses, since the crop yield is very low due to the dry climate. The high price of *pan* in this season compensates for the reduced collection. Harvesting starts again slowly as the amount of rain gradually rises towards the end of April.

In contrast to these seasonal and daily rhythms of work, the weekly flows are determined not by farming activities but by religious duties and leisure time. Each Sunday morning starts with church, and the rest of the day is usually free, which is why Sunday afternoons are spent visiting relatives in other villages or going to the market. These seasonal, weekly, and daily rhythms correspond to the day-to-day life in other Khasi settlements along the border of India and Bangladesh, and at a first glance, the everyday in Nolikhai does not reveal any particularity. However, a deeper look exposes that it is precisely these regularities that are interrupted by the threat of future land transfer as well as through the restriction of movement into the gardens by BSF.

## Narratives of Fear

To spend the night in Nolikhai, visitors need special permission from the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB). During our first few visits, the nearby Catholic mission provided us shelter, and we travelled to the village each day.

However, during our fourth stay in 2013, we had the chance to stay overnight in Nolikhai, since the *montry* arranged a permit from the BGB. On the first day after breakfast, a few close friends from the village came to greet us while the *montry's* brother-in-law, David, was entertaining everyone with his new border adventure (I will return to this story later below). While we were joking and laughing, we heard noises from outside. Somebody requested that the *montry* come out. Suddenly, the room fell silent and attentive. David, who was sitting next to me, whispered, 'BGB came'. After a few moments, the *montry* entered the room again and asked me to come out to the porch because the border guards wanted to see me. I noticed that his face had turned stiff, and his slim moustache had become even narrower by way of pushing his lips forcefully together. The traces of the previous smiles and laughs disappeared altogether from his facial expression. In the room, the earlier relaxed atmosphere had given over to an abrupt silence. Without saying anything, I stood up from the wooden bank and walked out to the entrance. In front of the house, eight young men were waiting in uniform, rifles on their backs. They informed me that since Nolikhai is situated on an internationally sensitive area, they are bound to take my information, and they would guard me during the nights for the duration of my stay. At that moment I understood why the *montry* was reluctant to arrange a permit during my previous stays. The continuous presence of BGB caused not only a passing inconvenience but also disrupted their everyday activities in an area where smuggling is an additional source of income.

The event described above brings two elements to the fore. First, this specific region, in contrast to other border areas I have visited, is strictly monitored.<sup>4</sup> Second, borders are not just attached to distinct narratives but also to specific emotional experiences as well. Thus, the *montry's* altered face, the suddenly interrupted laughter, and the subsequent silence in the room are not simply momentary reactions but embodiments of caution, vigilance, and fear triggered by state-employed practices of intimidation and control.

'Fear is always here' was a repeated expression of the residents during conversations, affirming the ubiquity of the emotion. In Pnar and War Khasi, fear is expressed by the word *ktiang*. It also means being afraid, and it describes a strong and active emotion. Despite its negative nuance, *ktiang* remains ambivalent, as it is sometimes linked to stress and disruption and at other times it is seen as a vital sentiment connected to the perceptiveness crucial for survival. Closely linked to *ktiang* is *jingjar*, expressing worry

4 In the other border villages where I worked, not only was I never controlled, but I also never met border guards.

and tension.<sup>5</sup> While hope (*kyrmen*) is not considered an antonym of fear, *suk*, a combined concept of peace, safety, happiness, and joy, is regarded as inconsistent with *ktiāng* and *jingjar*. *Ktiāng* and *jingjar* appear as an antonym of *suk* because both feelings signal that something is wrong in life.

Despite its omnipresence, fear did not surface uniformly; fear of losing the gardens due to the LBA differed narratively from the fear of confronting the BSF. The following sections, therefore, are concerned with how residents address the threat of losing land and the physical intimidation employed by the BSF through the concepts of fear. As I hope to show, fear proves to be a multi-layered emotion. Its examination will shed light on the social, material, and physical vulnerabilities of the villagers that are perceived to be the result of arbitrary state force.

### Fear of Land Loss

Though both types of fear – losing land and physical intimidation – were articulated in a way of mediating possibility, the danger of land loss seemed to weigh heavier, fomenting a deeper and more persistent concern, as David drew my attention to this during a private conversation, ‘This problem [land transfer] became a tension [*jingjar*] for everyone. When we go to each other’s houses, we are talking only about this matter [...]. When we go to sleep, we are thinking about it. I discuss it with my wife until we fall asleep’ (22 June 2012). David’s words deliver insights into how the threat of losing land turns into a collective distress and a constant feeling of agitation. Since the potential peril of losing land affects every individual in the village, this form of fear is shared collectively. Furthermore, a group discussion with women illustrates that the fear of losing land is a complex sentiment encompassing additional concerns:

These gardens were gifted by our ancestors and are really good gifts from them. Our ancestors were living here for many years and now we are living here, so why should we lose this land, which was given by our ancestors to us and on which they lived for many years? [...] If we lose this land, we won’t be able to get land in another place because [...] the price of the land is very high now [...] and we will have to work for others, instead of working in our own gardens. [...] We like to stay together; we call it *imlan sahlāng*. How will we be able to live and stay together, if we lose our land (24 May 2012)?

5 As villagers in Nolikhai explained, *jingjar* originates from *ktiāng*: ‘We feel *ktiāng* to lose the land or to go to the gardens, from this comes *jingjar*’ (18 December 2016, field notes). *Jingjar* expresses a worry about the future of not being able to sustain themselves.

The women express three different forms of disquiet. All these are connected to and grow out of the worry of separation from land. The evocative term of land as a gift resembles the Maussian (1954) notion of exchange and turns land into an inalienable possession generating a 'web of commitment' through which 'reciprocity can be reproduced' and 'a moral community underpinned' (Eriksen 2007, 5). Land as a gift 'can be circulated, but only within the group, usually through some form of inheritance' (ibid., 8), which reinforces the link between attachment and responsibility. 'Where the gift is a place passed between generations' the current holder is morally obliged to take care of it (Bennett 2014, 661). Such a commitment is well illustrated through the practice of cultivation. Tilling land in Pnar Khasi is expressed through the word *sumar*, which literally means 'taking care'. Taking care of the land is a social responsibility. According to Khasi customary law, ownership does not guarantee anyone absolute authority over a property. Wasted land is considered a social sin and sanctioned by removing the property from negligent persons and transferring it to others who are willing to attend to it. Careless persons are publicly scorned and disrespected. From this angle, the planned land transfer would interrupt reciprocity, leading to a break in the continuity of the line of descent inscribed into this specific place. Thus, uninterrupted access to land enables the maintenance of that lineage. Land as an 'ancestral gift' represents a nodal point in the connection of past, present, and future generations.

The second dimension of the above quotation highlights the fear of a destined state of dependency. 'We will have to work for others' expresses a worry over losing status and economic independence if the land transfer materialises. Losing land might therefore intersect with downward economic and social mobility. The third type of concern is communicated as a feeling of being disconnected from each other, elucidated through the vernacular form of belonging: *imlan sahlang*.<sup>6</sup> In the course of an informal discussion with a small number of men and women, I inquired as to the meaning of *imlan sahlang*. Several people responded by expanding and clarifying the term:

*Imlan sahlang* means to include all. If you live together, you must look after each other. To take care. To make sure that there is peace in the village. To work together. To help each other. *Imlan sahlang* is hard work. It does not happen from one day to another. We live together for a long time. There is affection. (22 August 2013)

6 *Im* means 'to live', *sah* stands for 'to feel', and *lang* means 'together'.



As Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (2012) argues, belonging is a merged social phenomenon of *commonality* through shared practices and values, of *mutuality* through reciprocated support and obligations, and of *attachment* through social and material anchoring. She accentuates that belonging is an everyday experience of being in the world, and during moments of tranquillity it represents a tacit practice. Nevertheless, the moment belonging is put into jeopardy, it not only turns into an audible social experience but becomes intensely vital as well. The emphasis and the intricate description of *imlan sahlang* in the quotation above displays how aware residents in Nolikhai are of the worth of their social bonds. Togetherness indicates here an interpersonal relatedness and not simply a 'being with' but also a 'being for', evoking commitment and 'emotional engagement' while enacted by care and responsibility for the other (Bauman 1995, 49–61). *Imlan sahlang* describes a mutual acknowledgment and affirmation of the life of the other. It also means providing help in times of hardship to survive, and survival is 'not just physical survival; it is the ability to survive socially' (Jackson 2013, 113). This means that the fears of separation from land in Nolikhai do not echo exclusively with the worry of a loss of subsistence but also with a fear of disintegration, a suspension of togetherness. The land transfer is feared because it might translate into a collapse of social survival, which is based on the uninterrupted access to land.

Social survival is also connected to a need to make plans and envision a common future. This is well illustrated through David's words in the context of an informal conversation, 'If we have to leave, we will become aimless persons, like a ship without rudders. It will be difficult for us to maintain *imlan sahlang*' (22 June 2012). David's metaphor suggests that losing land seems to instigate a fear of the suspension of a common horizon. Life, through his words, appears to be imagined as navigation by means of mutual effort, linking the two contrasting notions of belonging and becoming to each other. While becoming steers attention to movement and change, belonging, in contrast, is linked to the human need for rootedness and for emotional bonds with others, which is best understood through the concept of *home*.

In Pnar Khasi, home is expressed by the two words *iing* and *chnong*. *Iing* literally describes the extended household, but it additionally means a home place, where one rests and makes love: a place of marital affection. The exact translation of *chnong* is 'village', but it also means a place where one's parents live, where one is born, and where one can return for comfort. The boundaries of *chnong* are extended, since it includes the parental home, the kin, and the wider social net of a village, but also the wider environs: the forest, where one cultivates and where sacred places lie. The forest is

therefore not simply a site of subsistence but a location ‘around which social, cultural and religious activities revolve’ (Shangpliang 2013, 38). The forest is seen to have a spirit (*lei khlaw*), and it is imbued with ambiguities.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, it is conceived as a living and nurturing place, evoked by the expression that the ‘forest is like our mother, she takes care of us’. On the other hand, it is also a place where unknown dangers lurk and where evil spirits may reside, which in turn determines where one is allowed to enter, and which locations are better left undisturbed. But the forest is also a place where the spirits of the ancestors reside, and it is therefore marked by the ‘memory of their absence’ (Jackson 1995, 251). All three notions, living place, place of danger, and site of memory, evoke the sacredness of the forest, and ‘sacredness [...] describes what matters most to people’ (Milton 2002, 104). It does not mean a stronger spiritual connection to the environment as opposed to materialistic conceptions, as is often argued in works claiming that indigenous people foster a particular relationship with nature and land. Rather, the sacredness of the forest expresses different notions of values. Thus, ‘what gives value to a so-called sacred site is the generative activity that went on there [...] and is continued by people in the here and now’ (Jackson 1995, 402). This is in accord with an argument by Bengt Karlsson (2006, 190) who, rejecting ‘green primitivism’, asserts that ‘people who live in and by the forest acquire skills and perceptions of the environment that differ from those possessed by people living under other circumstances. And as “enskillment” is an ongoing process of learning through active engagement with one’s surroundings, these skills and perceptions change as life circumstances change.’

The multiple expressions of fear (interruption of local history, economic dependence, collapse of social survival, suspension of future horizons, and a loss of home) illustrate well the myriad ways separation from land is regarded in Nolikhai. The distinct shades of concern illuminate potential consequences and help to dismantle what is at stake if the land is lost. The threat of future land transfer translates into the present through these different expressions of fear. Nevertheless, danger, paired with frequent articulations of fear, also has immediate and more concrete consequences by creating ruptures in the flow of life and by constructing a reality where the extraordinary turns out to be ordinary (Das 2007, 7). The following quotation from a group discussion with the women exemplifies this, ‘Now we are always tense. Since we do not have peace (*suk*) of mind, we do not have the wish to perform our daily work like eating, sleeping, or working in the house and gardens. This problem is

7 *Lei* means ‘spirit’, whereas *khlaw* means ‘forest’.

always manipulating our thoughts and activities' (24 May 2012). The everyday in the citation emerges as a site of tension that does not serve as a location for escape and relief but instead is overloaded with a generalised sense of worry. Veena Das (2010) emphasises that even though the ordinary and the everyday hold similar connotations, they are nevertheless distinct. Thus, the everyday is 'a space where the life of the other is engaged' and where routine activities occur, but it is also a space 'in which the ordinary and the extraordinary are in some ways woven into each other' (ibid., 4). The high level of tension and fear in Nolikhai are simultaneously extraordinary and ordinary. They do not simply penetrate the everyday as something coming from outside, but through constant repetition villagers reproduce and circulate fear during the day-to-day (Barker 2009; Green 1995). This process, consequently, transforms the relationship people have with their daily life. The regular and the familial lose their appeal ('we do not wish to perform our daily work').

These agitations are further deepened since the people of Nolikhai struggle to identify and directly address the stakeholders involved in the land transfer deal. These officials are not only distant, but their particularity is blurred into categories representative of both the Bangladesh government and Indian state. Even concretely identifiable state actors – like the two prime ministers of Bangladesh and India – are located remotely where the voices of disapproval and complaint diminish in the vague range between the centre and the margins. Residents of Nolikhai are confronted with the dilemma of accountability that stems from the fact that authorities involved in the LBA are out of reach and that in such decisions, a range of state actors from different institutions are involved. This is the point where the distribution of power flips over to a diffusion of responsibility, complicating the question of rectification for those who inhabit state margins. Moreover, the villagers' dissatisfaction can be easily ignored based on the principle of state sovereignty and legitimised on the ground of resolving historical interstate conflicts, whilst also serving the interest of the majority in the country and assuring state viability. Sovereignty here is less about protecting territorial integrity than about the 'monopoly of decision' (Ferme 2004, 87). The right to decide is akin to the right to determine what is considered more crucial at a national level. Consequently, this practice opens the door for sacrificing the interests of the few. Moreover, the consequences of such decisions have implications regarding national belonging. Thus, the borderlanders of Nolikhai are located not simply on the margins of a state but in a vacuum zone, where questions regarding which state they will belong to in the future remains undetermined, as the following words of the *montry* in the context of a group discussion with men exemplifies:

If she [Bangladesh] gives this land to India, it means the government does not care for us, even as dogs. The other thing is that there is no agreement between the Bangladeshi and Indian governments that if our area falls under Indian territory whether the Indian government will take care of us or not. (23 May 2012)

As I found out later from David, the dog analogy in the quotation is a reference to the biblical conversation between the Canaanite Woman and Jesus, when she begs him for help. Jesus refuses to help her with the following words, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (Matthew 15:26–28). Villagers often made such biblical references to illustrate their situation. The analogy above can be read as a reference to the Khasis’ minority status in Bangladesh. Yet, even if they are not part of the Bengali majority, they expect acknowledgement of their existence from the government based on their residence in the here and now.

### Fear of the BSF

Residents of Nolikhai face a second difficulty directly connected to the notion of land in adverse possession. The moment it became clear internationally that the land on which the *pan* gardens were situated belonged to India, the BSF began to restrict residents from approaching their farmland. BSF patrolling activities increased, and their path started to transgress the existing boundary concretised by the barbed wire fence. Thus, the border guards performatively began including the *pan* gardens in Indian territory through patrols which previously marked out the area of no man’s land. Consequently, the BSF patrolling routes and the villagers’ working area now intersect, which has led to physical and verbal confrontations between the two groups. These incidents have created not just occasional agitation in Nolikhai but have transformed farming into an everyday trepidation. Currently, going to work in the gardens brings a fear of a potential confrontation with BSF. Since the BSF who trigger this emotion are identifiable and in proximity, they represent a more immediate threat than the danger of losing land, as the following discussion segment with men illustrates:

Just after putting up the pillars, we started to have problems, created by BSF. They chase after us when we go to our gardens. [...] When we go to work and BSF also comes to patrol in that area, they forbid us to work [...]. They say that if we come again, they will shoot us dead because this land

did not belong to our forefathers but belongs to India. They also say that we do not have the right to cultivate betel leaf here. Now if they catch us, I think they would not let us to come back home. [...] We feel fear of beating and torturing. (23 May 2012)

This encounter with the BSF is rendered as a direct experience in the quotation, and the fear attached to it is also made explicit. The verbs *chasing*, *forbidding*, *shooting*, *catching*, *beating*, and *torturing* illustrate intimidation tactics and create an impression of intense sensations on the surface of the bodies. At moment of narration, the threat of physical injury is virtual, but the active imagination of it prepares the body for alertness to avoid possible pain. Furthermore, residents of Nolikhai discern that the aim of the BSF is not to enact actual physical violence, but through the threat of corporal injury they aim to restrict movement to a zone that is believed to be Indian territory. The historical possession of the land and the residents' right to cultivate it is denied by the BSF based on a greater authoritative power. The villagers' fragile position comes from this unequal distribution of power and from the legitimacy of determining who has the right to access a particular territory.

But how frequent are the confrontations between the residents and the BSF? How many of them have experienced physical abuse? And how does a confrontation occur? These questions were cleared up during a group discussion with some men, where I met Simon, a man in his fifties, who had experienced a confrontation. The following day after the discussion I visited Simon at his house, where we sat down in the middle room to talk about the incident with the BSF. While sitting down, I could observe that his back was curved abnormally along the spine, which he later affirmed was the result of the beating. I asked him to tell me what happened on the day of the incident:

On that day my son and I went to pluck *pan* in the garden very near to the Indian border. We were collecting *pan* in a basket on the ground. We were not ready, and we did not know that BSF would come. When they came and caught us, they started to beat us seriously so that we would be afraid of them and would never go again to work in those gardens. Then I had to say that I would never go to those gardens because they were beating me without stopping. I thought if I did not say that they would have killed me on that day there. They hit me under my feet several times. When I was almost senseless, they threw me in the bush [nettle]. My whole body was burning, itching, and paining. I still have the pain in my bones. Sometimes I can still feel the pain. (23 May 2012)

The segment above was a singular account, during which Simon was talking without interruption and during which he articulated the experience of the physical abuse directly. In what follows, my aim is not to analyse his actual words but instead to examine his way of communicating to go beyond content and semantics.

Simon was talking to me with a quiet voice. His narration was sluggish, as if he was struggling to find the right words or to remember the event. He made frequent pauses to expose the marks on his body, starting from the feet up to the legs through the ribs and spine to the head, while frequently looking at me to check if my eyes followed where he pointed. It was like showing me a map of his experience inscribed onto his body. It seemed also as if he was indicating that the signs of the injury express more than his words. Both kinds of articulations, pointing to the marks and the actual words, I interpret as a particular language of the body complementing each other. The alternative sequencing between showing and talking could be explained as incompatibility between signs and words or as an inability of verbal communication to mediate experience beyond the individual body. But I hold a different conviction: while the alternative use of signs and words indeed suggests a split, recalling the old assumption of the mind and body dichotomy, they fuse again in the medium of pain. Thus, 'pain is the medium through which memory is created' and 'the mark becomes an obstacle to forgetting – the body thus becomes memory' (Das 1995, 179). Moreover, saying 'I am in pain' is not a descriptive statement, but rather is 'an invitation to share' and therefore 'cannot be treated as a purely personal experience' (*ibid.*, 194). In this sense, communicating pain is a request for acknowledgment and reaction. Or, as formulated in the terms of Wittgenstein, it is the beginning of a language game, in which the sufferer and the listener become actively engaged through complaining and comforting, thus perhaps opening further chain of acts. Indeed, what Simon did by sharing, I reacted to with consoling. Moreover, by repeatedly pointing to his wounds, it seemed to me that Simon was going beyond establishing a field of intersubjectivity. Through the repeated exposure of his wounds, it appeared to me that Simon moved towards establishing intercorporeality. Thus, embodiment too 'is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies' (Weiss 1999, 5). Even though no actual physical contact occurred between Simon and me, by seeing him uncovering his body parts one after the other, I felt a sensation in the form of little electric shocks running from my spine towards my legs and arms: his pain translated in my body as a shudder.

The marks on Simon's body and the way he spoke reveal a complex interplay between a synthesis of three bodies: the individual, the social, and

the political (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 7–8). On the individual level, Simon's pain is subjective and singular. The injuries on his body represent the personal injustice he has suffered. On the social level, his wounds are grazes on the skin of the whole community to which he belongs, whereas the BSF embodies a political armature. As I was able to observe many times, whenever he spoke the other men were silent. At the beginning, I interpreted this silence as respect for an older person with more experience; however, Simon is not related to anybody and does not hold a high rank in the village.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the silence following his speech is the result of him being a constant reminder of what can happen to someone if they are not alert or prepared enough. His body is the materialisation of the threat and additionally symbolises the vulnerability of all others in the settlement. As the locus of injury and pain, Simon's body is collective, and his suffering is a 'price of belonging' (Das 1995, 181), to which everybody in Nolikhai can eventually be subjected if the person is not alert or prepared enough. The abuse from the BSF then, as representative of the body politic, is 'the appropriation of the body of the victim for *making* memory through the infliction of pain' (Das 1995, 188; emphasis in original). Simon's injuries signify a warning towards other villagers; if they do not obey the restrictive rule on no man's land, they might suffer a similar fate.

Simon's story of his physical abuse proved to be a singular and individual event even though other men from Nolikhai have suffered verbal abuse from the BSF. Yet only those whose gardens directly adjoin the Indian barbed wire fence, or accidentally intersect the routes of patrolling, face the danger of being physically abused. The perception of danger is therefore spatial and measured according to closeness or distance from the fence. Today, only young and daring men who have enough capital to appoint guards for security hold a garden in the immediate neighbourhood of the barbed wire fence.

Furthermore, physical exposure is also gendered. Women are spared such kinds of occurrences by avoiding the gardens. Despite being out of immediate danger, women, too, have an experience of physical danger, although it differs from the experiences of the men. While men articulate their fear of confronting the BSF, women speak about the fear of the safety of their men:

We always worry for our men when they go to the betel gardens. [...] We don't know what will happen to them. There is always a fear that they will be caught and beaten by BSF. There is always a tension for them till

8 Social status in Khasi villages is distributed according to belonging or being related through the maternal line to a particularly affluent or politically influential *kur* (clan).

they come back home. But when they come back safe, we feel peace in our mind. We have this anxiety every day. (24 May 2012)

This quote is also interesting from another perspective. The fear of the BSF, in contrast to the fear of losing land, is presented as transitive. From the moment the men are out of the danger zone, the levels of alarm (*maham*) appear to decrease and a return to peace (*suk*) is possible.

How can the BSF act in such manner without worrying about being held accountable? From the point of view of the residents, the repeated conflicts with the BSF are the effects of the exclusionist national politics of Bangladesh.<sup>9</sup> According to the villagers' explanation, since they differ from the portrayal of the 'ideal Bangladeshi citizen' in being non-Muslim and non-Bengali, the Bangladeshi state demonstrates low interest in the security problems along the Assam border. Borderlanders in Nolikhai directly accuse the government of indifference, claiming, 'The Bangladesh government does not give importance to our problems. The government does not value us, Khasis, as citizens. [...] If we were Bengalis living here for hundred years the government would of course protect the land and the people here' (23 May 2012).

These claims are not without basis since the Bangladeshi government officially denies not only the problems with the BSF at this juncture of the border but the existence of a human settlement as well. During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to make contact with military personnel as well as officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>10</sup> In both places, the reference to Nolikhai triggered an immediate reaction, and I was warned to stay away from the locality due to its international sensitivity. These reactions are evidence that in both the military as well as in the Ministry, authorities are aware of the problem in Nolikhai. Yet, the existence of Nolikhai was denied and discussions about the residents' difficulties were refused as false information, with assertions that, according to the official land survey of 2011, no human settlement exists in the area. One of the female employees in the Ministry insisted, 'There is no scope to be in tension. Everybody was considered. No cultivatable land will be handed over to India. We made absolute precautions. You have wrong information' (21 November 2012).

Officially, Nolikhai is a floating village with equally floating residents, and the notion of 'zero point' described above gains not only a geographical but also a symbolic significance. Residents of Nolikhai can be rendered

9 For further reading regarding the nexus of Bangladeshi/Bengali nationalism and identity politics of ethnic minorities see Bal 2010; Mohsin 2010; van Schendel 2010.

10 Border Guards of Bangladesh as a paramilitary unit ranks below the army.



non-existent since they do not have an official land title, although they applied for permanent settlement during the Pakistani time. Their case has been pending in the Ministry of Land since then. Their situation regarding land title is not unique since none of the approximately 90 Khasi settlements in Bangladesh have official land status, for two reasons. First, during British rule, the colonial government abolished all the land titles of Khasi settlers in Sylhet and prohibited them from acquiring legal status so as to block a coalition between Bengalis and Khasis, which could have resulted in resistance movements undermining colonial expansion (Ludden 2003b). Second, Khasi farmers originally practicing shifting cultivation were also less interested in obtaining legal land documents, as such a status would have fixed them to one location. By disallowing alternative ways of cultivation and by attaching recognition to official land titles, the contemporary Bangladeshi state not only maintains colonial practices but also effectively employs law to deny existence and justify abandonment.

Therefore, in the case of Nolikhai, law represents not a guarantee but rather a threat. This sheds light on how the maintenance of law and order and the insistence of authentication through official documents can widen the space for violence. Thus, 'violence and law are, from their very inception, conjoined' (Spencer 2007, 137). Deborah Poole (2004, 35–65), in the context of Peru, draws attention to the ambiguity of law, which stems from the fact that law in practice is a guarantee for the protection of rights and the distribution of justice, but it also contains within itself a threat of an arbitrary power enabling violence. Being invisible in the eyes of the law in Nolikhai explains why the BSF feel entitled to safeguard an 'Indian territory' and restrict residents' movements across the border by any means they choose, without worry of being held accountable.

Fear related to both forms of peril, the loss of land and confrontation with the BSF, are expressions of vulnerability facilitated by an arbitrary state power. Yet vulnerability 'cannot be associated exclusively with injurability' (Butler 2015, 149). Even if fear articulates exposure, its repetition helps to identify threat and to prepare the field for collective responses and strategies to eliminate danger (Bourke 2003). In this sense, fear is not simply an expression of vulnerability but also involves understanding the situation and formulating concrete solutions, which is why verbalisations of fear and agency cannot be strictly separated. Nevertheless, villagers' modalities of agency are substantiated more clearly in their concrete actions and in the language of hope. In the following pages, the Bangladeshi state will also appear in its alternative avatar: as a guardian while permitting oppositional politics and providing space for dissident voices to arise.

## Modalities of Action and Politics of Hope

Let me start this section with an anecdote that David told us when our laughing and joking was interrupted by the Bangladeshi border guards' visit:

Last month I had to go to Assam because my niece was submitted to a school. I started around three o'clock in the night by crawling between the barbed wire fences. When I saw lights or heard noises, I stopped, and when everything was clear, I continued. By the morning I reached the BOP [border crossing post] at the Assam side, and I was waiting for my niece [she had a passport] to cross the border. While I was waiting at the BOP, I also had the chance to talk with a few BSF guys there. They were asking me what I am doing there, and I explained that I am waiting for my relatives from Bangladesh. Then one of them asked me: And you? You do not want to visit your relatives in Bangladesh? I answered honestly: No because I have no passport. (22 August 2013)

David's account is interesting for three different interpretative reasons. The first is that the Bangladesh-Assam border, despite closure and control, is permeable. Residents of Nolikhai react to practices of constraint with creativity and therefore can determine leaking points at the border and restore mobility. Second, monitoring is an everyday practice not only of the border guards but also of the borderlanders. While border guards change from one post to another, residents remain constant. Consequently, they gather an extensive understanding of the border and its attached practices. Their power of knowledge diminishes the authoritative power of the border guards. The creativity and expertise of the borderlanders exceed their vulnerability subverting the power of the BSF to their gain. Third, excesses of coercion and power often turn into ridiculous situations. Humour is frequently conceptualised as the weapon of the weak who, through the medium of laughter, criticise superiority and resist subordination. But here humour 'is less a site of resistance than a site where existence itself is made possible. Humor not only allows one to live but it contains within itself a refusal of the demand to suffer. Humor, then, is a way of bearing witness to tragic realities without succumbing to them' (Scheper-Hughes 2008, 49). Furthermore, in the case of Nolikhai, humour is an alternative channel to express repressed anger (*chrai*) and resentment.<sup>11</sup> Thus, according to Khasi

<sup>11</sup> *Chrai* means showing annoyance, displeasure, or hostility; it is not identical but close to the English word 'angry'.

etiquette, expressions of anger must be strictly controlled in public places. Persons who lose their head due to anger are sanctioned to pay a fee (100 Taka) and are often publicly ridiculed as well. 'No one takes an angry person seriously', Mathew my assistant told me once, which means that showing anger equals losing status and credibility.

Besides circumventing border control, residents of Nolikhai have developed three different practices to deal with their situation. Borrowing from management vocabulary, I term them *operational*, *tactical*, and *strategic*. Let me illustrate what I mean with operational practice by quoting from a personal discussion with a man in his thirties, Anton, who owns gardens directly adjoining the barbed wire fence:

One day my brother-in-law went to collect *pan* from my garden. While he was collecting *pan*, the BSF came silently to catch him. They were surrounding him. But he realised they were coming and ran away. While he was running, he attacked them with his knife. But he hurt nobody. After that incident for many days, we did not go to work there. Now if we go there to work, we do it hiding like thieves. (23 May 2012)

Workers in the gardens react instantly through hiding, running, and counterattacking if the BSF surprise them. These are immediate reactions to danger that do not require planning, and therefore they are short-term and rapid responses. They are employed if something goes wrong on the tactical level. Thus, tactical practices as middle-range actions require information and planning. Nevertheless, these too offer just momentary solutions since the problem is momentarily avoided but not solved. Two tactical practices prevalent in Nolikhai demonstrate this. Appointing guards while working in the garden represents the first. The guards' only task is to signal if the BSF is approaching to minimise confrontation: 'We employ two guards for security in the gardens. These two guards always keep watching from both sides to see which ways the BSF are coming from. If the BSF is coming, the guards make a sound that we can understand' (23 May 2012). Gathering information beforehand about when and where the BSF plan to patrol is the second tactical practice. Nolikhai residents usually have prior knowledge of the time and route of the patrol so that those gardens that intersect the path of the BSF are left unattended on that respective day. As the men explain,

Suppose one of our people knows that the BSF are coming to the territory where his garden is situated, and then he hides if he goes there, or he is not going to the garden at all. But the person who does not know that

news and he goes to the garden to work, then he is caught by the BSF. This is how we are caught. (23 May 2012)

In Nolikhai, being well-informed, alert, watchful and even fearful is vital and not necessarily negative. Throughout my fieldwork, I was curious as to how and from whom information is obtained about BSF routes. My repeated questions were met with laughter, never receiving a straight reply. Only later when I visited the Khasi village Mubhathol on the Assam side located just a few kilometres away from Nolikhai directly bordering the barbed wire fence was my question answered. Mubhathol looked very much like Nolikhai; the villagers' houses had the same shape, and its people spoke the same language. In the days following my arrival, I was going around the settlement, visiting each family one by one. I was surprised to discover that most of the inhabitants were related to Nolikhai residents. At this point, it became clear that relatives from Mubhathol provided the people in Nolikhai with information about the time and route of BSF activities, as the border guards frequently pass through the village before they enter the official borderline.

Both forms of action, tactical and operational, are reactions to the danger presented by the BSF. Although none of these practices result in solutions, confrontations become manageable through precautions. The threat of losing land, conversely, is outside the control of the villagers. Nevertheless, since the danger of losing land is a potentiality, it also entails a possibility that it will not happen, opening a space for hope. This means that in Nolikhai, the levels of fear and hope are both high.

In Pnar Khasi, hope (*kyrmen*) and desire (*kwah*) are separated semantically. While the former designates anticipation and dreaming, the latter corresponds to the English notions of wishing and wanting. Despite semantic differences, hope and desire in the Nolikhai people's accounts appear to be linked to each other, as the following discussion with David and Simon's wife suggests:

We don't need so many facilities. We only want that the government solves our problem. We want the government to settle this very peacefully. They [...] must consider or to let us live here because we have been occupying this land generation after generation. That is the only thing that I can hope for. (22 June 2012)

The quotation reveals an expectation, but the language indicates waiting, thus expressing a feeling of something being outside of one's own control and

influence. While hope in the quotation remains brief, the needs and desires, in contrast, are articulated concretely. They are directed to the Bangladeshi government, as the solution to the problem rests with them. Therefore, the Bangladeshi state, despite repeated critique, is not only thought of as the source of all evil but also represents a space of hope. In addition, the quote entails a demand for recognition and acknowledgment for the right to dwell and cultivate, illuminating the local understanding of ownership, not by an official land title but based on uninterrupted occupation of the land. Agnes, the wife of the *montry*, highlights the interconnection of hope and land even more explicitly during a discussion amongst the women: 'We have a lot of hopes and dreams with land. [...] If we lose this land, we lose all our hopes and dreams because this is not a new place we try to get, we have been here for many years' (24 May 2012).

These hopes do not remain on the level of rhetoric but are further stressed by concrete and strategic actions which differ from the operational and tactical practices discussed above, because they require long term planning and patience. The following discussion with the *montry* sheds light on their strategies:

We have already informed the UP chairman here and the local MP, who made an objection by writing an official letter to the Home Ministry so that the land should not be handed over to India. We also arranged a human chain and demonstration to stop the surveyors from coming to this area and submitting the survey papers to the Indian officials.  
(23 May 2012)

The *montry* highlights two forms of strategic action. The first is *political mobilisation* through publicity in demonstrations or human chains and through counter violence (blocking the access of surveyors, fighting back). The second is *legal action* through submitting a letter of objection and contacting local officials. Such strategic practices illustrate that even if the problem of land transfer can only be solved by the government, residents will not passively wait. On the contrary, they act on their demands by investing effort in ways of drawing the government's attention to their problems. These ways of pressurising the state and party officials can be viewed as one form of democratic politics from below (Appadurai 2007, 33).

Both, political mobilisation and legal action, are supplemented by political alliances. In their effort to develop resistance, they made a surprising alliance with local political representatives who belong to Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). The party is well known for its ultra-nationalistic rhetoric directed towards

non-Muslims and non-Bengalis, while opposing the current Awami League government. The alliance of the residents with JI illustrates their knowledge regarding the advantages of oppositional politics. Such oppositional politics does not, however, rule out other forms of alliances. They also often collaborate with state actors, fostering, for example, a close relationship with the BGB. Concretely, this means that they seek help from the BGB once a year during the main harvest season. At this time, upon their request, the fully armed BGB protects the residents from possible BSF attacks to work in the gardens adjacent to the barbed wire fence without fear. The state, through these practices, appears once more not a coercer but a protector.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I sought to explain the equally high levels of fear and hope of the residents of Nolikhai. In answering this question, I suggested two arguments. First, I proposed that the simultaneous appearance of fear and hope in Nolikhai can be seen as symptoms of 'bipolar' state practices, where the modes of protecting and targeting coexist. The concomitant high levels of fear and hopes in the example of Nolikhai enable one to see the two seemingly incompatible manifestations of state power as not two separate alternatives but rather in conjunction with each other. Through narratives of fear, the Bangladeshi state appears not only elusive but also a threat, willing to sacrifice the lives of the few for a higher classified political interest that the LBA promises. Yet its truly violent quality comes to the fore by relying on the absence of land titles to deny the existence of the people from Nolikhai. By rejecting alternative ways of entitlements for land, the contemporary Bangladeshi state furthers previous colonial practices that placed subjects outside the realm of legal status. The missing land papers provide a space for the state to render the people of Nolikhai non-existent and to evade responsibility regarding security problems that the intimidation practices of the BSF pose in this juncture of the border. However, residents of Nolikhai contemplate the Bangladeshi state not only as a threat, but also as a guardian. Their mobilisation of hope rests on a belief that relevant stakeholders will eventually listen to their complaints and demands. Their hopes are grounded in this knowledge and find articulations in performances of popular forms of political mobilisation. While at times they directly criticise the exclusionist politics of the Bangladeshi state and defy it by making use of oppositional party coalitions, the state nevertheless represents to them a space of hope and a provider of security.

Through my second argument I suggested that the concomitant appearance of fear and hope in the narratives of the residents illuminates that existential and political matters represent not two separate realms, but rather intertwined domains of the social world. On the one hand, the intricate layers of fear shed light on what is at stake existentially and socially in Nolikhai if the land is lost. Thus, the fears of separation from land not only reflect the worry of a loss of subsistence, but are also linked to a fear of disintegration, a suspension of togetherness, a rupture of reciprocity, and the destruction of a sense of home. What is at stake here is a sociality not only of the present but also of a longer timespan that connects past, present, and future generations together. In contrast to the narratives of fear, their hope materialises as a political language of demands for recognition, for a right to a particular style of life and for a right to stay. Consequently, the simultaneous emergence of fear and hope sheds light on how the existential – a need of securing and building a future based on what one already has – and the political, ‘a strategy for transforming private into public meanings’ (Jackson 2013, 34), are interwoven. This link has only recently gained attention in anthropology. Studies in the anthropology of science and technique are well equipped to explain the complicated layers of biological existence, yet they often neglect that politics at times can surpass the imperative of biological life. On the other hand, political anthropology overlooks that politics is more than a series of regulations or arts of governing (Fassin 2009). It also involves issues whose stakes are existentially charged. In the example of Nolikhai, such issues revolve around material (i.e. attachments to land) and social (i.e. togetherness) conditions. The assurance of these circumstances is vital because they do not simply stabilise or destabilise life; they constitute it.

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## 4 The Intolerable Dullness of Ecotourism in Sylhet

### Abstract

Chapter 4 focuses on the circumstances of Latrymbai, a village in the immediate vicinity of Assam. The concerns of the villagers revolve around a government-initiated ecotourism park that threatens to slowly incorporate them. Simultaneously, villagers are confronted with restrictions on free movement through the park and several attempts at negotiating with the government to develop an alternative road have failed. Villagers react to the slow expansion of the state in their living space with a mixture of weariness and anxiety. To shake off the yoke of state power they increasingly abandon any sense of attachment connecting them to Latrymbai.

**Keywords:** ecotourism, slow encroachment, bureaucratic prolongation, boredom, anxiety, waiting

This chapter concentrates on the living circumstances of Latrymbai, a small village situated on the north-eastern side of Bangladesh about one kilometre from the Assam border. Latrymbai awakened my curiosity even before I began fieldwork there, as several national newspapers had reported about the village. According to these headlines, the Bangladeshi government had designated the village for the development of an ecotourism park (ETP) in 2000. Since most of the inhabitants of Latrymbai are War-Khasis, indigenous minorities of Bangladesh reacted with nationwide protests (that in the vernacular became known as the 'anti-eco-park movement') soon after the government announced the project. The protestors demanded withdrawal of the plans, which they interpreted as a pretext for the government's displacement aims specifically targeting *adivasis* in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi authorities rejected the accusations. They justified the choice of location on the grounds of the natural beauty surrounding Latrymbai, which they said offered rest for Bangladeshi urbanites, but which also needed protection by

competent experts. Indeed, the landscape enclosing Latrymbai is entrancing; the village is located on a small hillock a few metres from an eye-catching waterfall surrounded by thick evergreen forest.

The protests, in the end, could not stop the ETP, as the Environmental Minister officially inaugurated it in April 2001. However, due to the demonstrations, the government promised to set up the ETP a few metres from Latrymbai on the opposite side of the river that separates the village from the highway leading to the closest Bangladeshi cities. Following this governmental proposition, public agitation cooled, and a sense of relaxation returned to the area, especially since the government completely suspended the development of the ETP. When I travelled to Latrymbai in 2010 for the first time, I saw no signs of ecotourism and it appeared that the government had abandoned the initiative altogether. At that time, the residents of Latrymbai also hoped that the government had renounced its plans for the project after all. These hopes, however, were short-lived, as in 2011 state authorities resumed construction of the ETP. From that time until 2016, I returned to Latrymbai every year to follow the progress of the ETP and its impact on the village.

This is how I could capture the way the surroundings around Latrymbai slowly changed. Until the end of 2011, the government entirely enclosed the park with a fence, cutting off the only road that led to Latrymbai and thus obstructing the free movement of the villagers in and out of their settlement. Furthermore, by 2016, park authorities crossed the river-boundary at many points, coming alarmingly close to Latrymbai. Next to these changes, the Forest Department (FD) also strengthened its jurisdiction in the area by introducing social forestry and actively seeking out some families from Latrymbai to enter the social forestry programme by leasing out land to them for a period of ten to fifteen years. These activities of the FD undermine not only the village headman and elders' traditional right of determining who gets what amount of land, but also increase economic competition among the people of Latrymbai leading to internal conflicts.

As years passed, I could observe how villagers perceived these changes and how they became increasingly disillusioned by the repeated but failed negotiations with the government for access to the ETP road. They gradually gave up their hopes of obtaining official land documents for the residential and agricultural areas where they had lived and worked since the 1920s, a legal recognition that governments persistently denied them since the time of British expansion. They also renounced securing an alternative road and bridge to the village bypassing the ETP and thus assuring their free

movement, a request that local government officials repeatedly promised to fulfil only to postpone it each year. Moreover, they began to doubt that they would be able to safeguard their autonomy by remaining outside the park. While some of the villagers, especially the older generation, are still waiting, nourishing thereby a modicum of hope, others, the young, discreetly began to establish a new settlement a few kilometres away from Latrymbai and slowly started to move out to avoid incorporation into the ETP.

While to territorial intrusions villagers react with anxiety, bureaucratic prolongation prompts among them a sense of exhaustion and boredom, vernacularly expressed with the word *de-kot*. Internal conflicts, on the other hand, induce a sense of estrangement among villagers. In making sense of these different emotional reactions, I will suggest that anxiety, *de-kot* and estrangement are symptoms of uncertainty and destabilisation induced by ambiguous government practices. Thus, all above-described governmental practices – which I summarise under the terms ‘territorial intrusions’, ‘bureaucratic prolongation’, and ‘disruption of unity’ – aim to wear down villagers’ resistance in an obscured and protracted way. Concealment and slowness, on the other hand, reveal that the primary aim of the government is to make people from Latrymbai remain instead of prompting them to leave. For this reason, the ETP is extended slowly and for this reason officials never reject villagers’ requests, but rather feed them promises. In this sense, the government’s aim is not to dispossess the people of Latrymbai from their land but rather to extend its authority by slowly incorporating them into the ETP. This is done through a more insidious form of population management which falls in line with the long-term plans for the region. A successful incorporation would mean determining villagers’ way of life, based less on practices of *pan* (betel leaf) cultivation and more on being involved in entertaining tourists as well as participating in government programmes such as social forestry. At first glance, and through the articulation of the above-mentioned emotions as well as by the fact that villagers today prefer to wait or to move out from the village instead of directly defying the ETP, it seems that the government has indeed managed to wear down the opposition of the residents. Yet, these first impressions are misleading, as villagers’ waiting can be interpreted as a strategic action on the ‘not yet known’, while moving on is about evading incorporation into the ETP and thus liberating themselves from the grip of state power. The chapter sets out to discuss the issues outlined above in more detail, but first I wish to give a sense of the place.

## Living in the Vicinity of an Ecotourism Park

To reach Latrymbai, visitors must drive seven kilometres on an unpaved, patchy, and muddy secondary road in the direction of the Assam border. At the beginning of this minor road, several Bengali Muslim villages form a line. After passing these settlements, tea gardens follow one after another. The landscape is dynamic; small patches of forest come into sight and small hills block the eye from panoramic views of the distance. As one approaches the Assam border, the forest-covered areas expand, and the dense vegetation of tall trees overshadows the green of the tea gardens. In the immediate neighbourhood of Latrymbai, just one kilometre from the Assam border, the road becomes narrow and steep. The village is located at the foot of a small hillock and is surrounded by thick evergreen vegetation. Most houses are hidden behind the trees and are easy to miss. Yet, among the numerous sounds of the forest, distant noises of laughter and occasional shouting mix and echo, revealing the presence of a human settlement.

To access the village, one must cross a small river by foot that even at its deepest point reaches just a little above the knee. It is also just seven metres wide. On the other side are three to four bamboo houses lined along the river. Between these houses a slippery stairway leads up to the centre of the village. This middle point of the settlement is a round open space formed by a circle of houses facing each other and serves not only as the centre but also as the common gathering spot for adults and children. From the centre outwards and with one's back to the river, the village is built in three directions, and from a bird's-eye view it resembles a half star.

On the left side, one finds a line of houses, and walking in this direction one reaches the building of the Presbyterian church surrounded by tall trees. Right behind the church is the elementary school, marking the left end of the settlement and the beginning of the *pan* gardens. In the middle, a steep stairway leads up to the top. Both sides of the stairway have houses tightly built behind each other in cascade style until they reach the end of the village, where the *pan* gardens begin anew. During winter, the top affords the viewer a clear sight of the village, but during the monsoon period the opulent green obscures the contours of the houses, with only rooftops identifiable here and there. Exactly at the middle of this stairway is the building of the Catholic church with only its larger courtyard distinguishing it from ordinary houses. To the right side of the houses is the outset of a state-owned tea garden. Following this path leads one to another entry road of Latrymbai and to the cemetery. To reach the graveyards, one must make a detour and walk behind the village. From the cemetery, another

path leads down to the river. This is an alternative route for leaving or entering the village.

After abandoning shifting cultivation, residents of Latrymbai settled in this place at the beginning of the twentieth century. In all, 350 individuals (52 families) in 43 households live in the village, of which two families are Garos and the rest are exclusively War-Khasis. With respect to religious belonging, Latrymbai is diverse as 20 families are Catholic, including the two Garo families; 22 are Presbyterians; eight families practice *niam chnong* (the pre-Christian religion of Khasis); and two belong to the Church of God. Similar to Nolikhai, War-Khasis in Latrymbai have an uxorilocal and matrilineal social structure, which means that after marriage it is not the woman but the man who moves to the wife's house, with the female offspring inheriting the land.

Each household consists of more than one generation and, therefore, extended family is common in Latrymbai. The households are organised around the eldest female member: the grandmother. Those family members who are forced to form a separate nuclear family, or *iing*, due to tight space build their dwelling in the immediate neighbourhood of the original household. The logic of this organisation is that the gardens for *pan* production are not split between the nuclear families but belong to one kinship group, symbolically led by the eldest female member. Accordingly, more than one generation takes part in the *pan* cultivation and works in tandem for the family income.

Most of the houses in Latrymbai are brick buildings, which reveals that many of the inhabitants have a good economic position based on *pan* production (which is like that described in Chapter 3 in the case of Nolikhai). The brick construction additionally discloses that villagers now prefer permanent settlements to shifting from one place to another. The amount of land of each household is difficult to estimate because the gardens are measured not according to acres but according to the number of trees. A garden with 50 to 200 trees is considered a very small holding, and nine families from Latrymbai, including the two Garo families, have such an amount. A garden with 200 to 500 trees is considered an average-sized land holding. This is also the most common amount; the majority – around 30 families – have such sized plots. A garden with 500 to 1,000 counts as a little above a mid-size allotment, and in Latrymbai, eight families possess such a holding, whereas a garden above 1,000 trees is considered a large possession. Five families have such parcels, and they represent also the most influential clans in Latrymbai. However, this distribution of the land holdings is based on an older estimation by the *montry*. As to the size of lands some families hold under the social forestry programme, there are no official records at hand at least not in the hands of the *montry*.



Even though villagers have occupied and cultivated their land for more than 90 years, the government of Bangladesh does not recognise their right to land ownership, either residential or of farmland. The area was classified as a state-owned reserve forest after the abolishment of the landlord system in 1950 and later placed under the jurisdiction of Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF; see Chapter 2). Although the residents of Latrymbai do not have official land titles, they took several steps after the formation of the Bangladeshi state towards legalising their status. In 1976, the then *montry* managed to obtain a one-year settlement from the government, with the residents of Latrymbai paying more than fifteen *lakh*<sup>1</sup> for this lease. In the same year, the village was registered at the *upazila* (subdistrict) level as a horticulture cooperative. This procedure was vital to securing their settler status as a community in the eyes of the Bangladeshi state. Following this, in 1997 they applied at the Ministry of Land for permanent settlement as a 'cooperative', which was supported by an additional recommendation from the Deputy Commissioner (DC) in 1999. Following their application for permanent settlement, the government of Bangladesh stopped accepting land taxes from the residents, and since then, their case has been pending in the ministry. Today they pay a yearly development tax worth nine *lakhs* at the level of the union council. Tax payment is vital in proving the duration of their permanent occupation. Thus, according to the Limitation Act 1908, individuals or communities who occupy a territory continuously for 20 years when it is a private property, or for 60 years when it is state property, cannot be expelled from the land without a court order (see Limitation Act 1908 section 26).

Despite these insecurities, *pan* production is still the principal livelihood of the villagers and regulates the patterns of day-to-day life. Getting up early in the morning to go to the gardens to cultivate *pan* determines the daily rhythm for men. Before entering the gardens, they usually take a shower to prevent the spread of epidemics that would destroy the betel plant. Clothing, for the same reason, is also very modest. Many men only wear short pants, wrap a towel around their waist, carry a basket on their backs, and hold a large, curved machete for cleaning undergrowth plants. Later in the morning, after the men's departure, children between eight and twelve years of age carry clothes and dishes on top of their heads to wash in the river. Younger women meanwhile sweep the rooms and the courtyards. When the sun rises high in the sky, the activities in the village subside. The hot and humid air sticks to the skin and makes it hard to breath or move. Women and children take refuge in the shadow of the houses. Only in the

1 *Lakh* is one hundred thousand.

late afternoon when the men return from the gardens and the sun starts to sink does the village slowly regain its vitality. During the evening hours, the men rest and get together on the porches, where women are bundling leaves to be sold the next day. Larger events such as village meetings are organised during this time as well.

The political organisation of Latrymbai is different from that of other Khasi villages in Bangladesh. The *montryship* is not inherited but rather is elected based on one's abilities, such as an aptitude for negotiating and solving internal as well as external problems and representational qualities. Additionally, an extended network of governmental and political personalities outside the village increases the possibility of being elected as a village head. *Montryship* is an important position; however, the *montry* does not have exclusive political power. He is instead the representational head of Latrymbai. Next to him there are two political bodies: a committee of twelve members who are nominated and elected by the village, and a council formed by the eldest members of the settlement. While the *montry* and committee members can technically also be female (there was however no female committee member at the time of my fieldwork), the elder's council is assembled exclusively from male residents. To belong to this latter formation, one must be at least 50 years old. However, not everyone who reaches this age is automatically included in the council of elders – only those individuals who have an economically influential *kur* (clan) are asked to join the circle. This assignment lasts for the remainder of one's lifetime and represents the most prestigious political position in Latrymbai. The political influence of the elders is further underscored by the fact that they can force a *montry* or a committee member to step down if they do not agree with their political conduct. In this way, the *montry* does not simply seek advice from the elder's council but also relies on their support. If a conflict arises in the village, first the *montry*, the committee, and the elder's council come together to find a solution. Once a result is reached, the *montry* convenes a meeting with all the adult male and female residents in order to announce their decision and seek public support.

The infrastructural supply of Latrymbai is, in contrast to other Khasi villages, good. All the houses are connected to the central power line, and though they have just four hours of electricity daily due to frequent power cuts, this is nevertheless considered a regular flow of electricity. In some homes, residents collect water from tube wells that are situated in the courtyards. In a great number of the households, water comes from a nearby waterfall, to which several plastic pipelines are connected. Because the waterfall is situated at a higher altitude than the houses, the water pressure is continuous and many of the households therefore have 'running' water.

The waterfall is located a few metres from the village. During the monsoon season, its water flows down loudly with great force from the 50-metre-high rocks. In winter, the amount of water is modest, narrowing down to a stream. Nevertheless, the waterfall attracts many visitors yearly, in all seasons. Officially, this is one of the reasons why the government has declared the 657 acres of forest around the waterfall a protected area and established the ecotourism park adjacent to Latrymbai. The merging of the village with the park would have enhanced the touristic appeal of the recreational area. Yet, due to the 'anti-eco-park movement' – as it is rendered in the vernacular – the government was forced to temporarily withdraw its plans.

### **Anti-Eco-Park Movement**

The narrative of the anti-eco-park movement is a chronicle of events common to the seven Khasi villages of the Moulvibazar District. All these villages participated in the mobilisation against the park from the beginning. The movement that occurred from August 2000 to April 2001 was, therefore, a joint undertaking of these village residents. Yet only Latrymbai was directly affected by the ecotourism park initiative, and thus represents the main location of the movement.

To maintain clarity through several points of the following reconstruction, I will use collectivising categories. It is important to note, however, that the intensity of the protestors' involvement varied according to their position in the hierarchical structure of the movement. Residents of each village made up the common participants in the political mobilisation. The middle position belonged to the seven village headmen, who led the dwellers during the movement and collaborated with as well as sought advice from the two main non-Khasi activists. The leading activist, Rajas, a 45-year-old man from Dhaka, served as the national head of the campaign. He resided in the capital city and cooperated with several rights-based organisations there. Rajas mediated between these organisations and the second activist, Jacob, a 55-year-old man and the superior priest of one of the Catholic missions in the district. Jacob represented the regional head of the movement and occupied an intermediary position between Dhaka and the local level. Different government agencies from the regional up to the national levels made up the opposition. Among these organisations, the most important government body was the Forest Department (FD), which had authorisation from the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) to implement and manage the ecotourism park project. In the

following depiction of the events, I do not directly include the position of these government agencies, as many officials have denied or claimed to not remember that such a movement took place.

My aim below is to reconstruct the chain of events that unfolded after the announcement of the ETP by paraphrasing the narratives without analytical interruptions. The story told here of the anti-eco-park movement serves as the historical context for the present situation. To recreate the events, I will draw upon several sources: the retrospective narratives of Jacob and Rajas, group discussions with men and women from Lakhai another village involved in the movement, and most notably, a village meeting in Latrymbai in which more than 30 adult males and females participated.<sup>2</sup> Despite my hearing and recording the story of the anti-eco-park movement on four different occasions, in each retelling, the narration of the events followed a strict chronological order and the stories featured similar structures and manners of telling. The narration style reminded me of the sonata, a musical form that has an introductory part, an acceleratory middle section, and a climatic ending – though in this case, the conclusion does not quite achieve a climax. For this reason, I chose to structure the following events in the three-layered form of a sonata.

### Exposition

Towards the end of 1999, rumours began to circulate in Latrymbai about a government plan to establish an ecotourism park. In the following year, the land-surveying activities of the FD seemed to confirm the gossip. Finally, in July 2000, the residents of Latrymbai learned with certainty that the government did indeed plan to open a park from a newspaper press release.<sup>3</sup> Shortly after the official announcement, FD officers and government surveyors started demarcating the area. Residents from Latrymbai observed red letters, EP (ecotourism park), drawn on tree trunks delineating the contours of the park area. Witnessing these activities, the *montrys* of Latrymbai and Lakhai first contacted Jacob, who sought the help and support of Rajas. Ultimately, following the advice of Rajas and Jacob, the villagers stopped the progression of the demarcation by demanding that the surveyors present

2 The anti eco park movement was documented in Lakhai in September 2010 and in Latrymbai in January 2012.

3 At the time of the ecotourism park's establishment, the 'Right to Information Act' had not yet been introduced in Bangladesh, which is why the government was not obliged to inform citizens about major development plans. The Right to Information Act came into force on 1 July 2009. Additionally, according to the constitution, Article 42, the government has the right to acquire even private land if it is for public purposes, such as national security or development.

their authorisation. Given the absence of official documents, surveyors suspended the demarcation. However, after a few days, the FD began clearing passages needed to establish roads through the planned park. For this work, the FD hired tea estate workers. Residents from both villages reacted with protests, and as a result, the tea garden workers were also intimidated into stopping their work.

Following this, the villagers organised, with the support of the Catholic and Presbyterian churches, meetings and seminars in two district towns. To these meetings they invited local Bengali farmers from neighbouring settlements to gain their support. These actions generated attention from government officials, who then requested a meeting with the leading *montrys*. Because the first meeting proposal would have been held in the local FD office and the second in a nearby rural town next to the police station, the *montrys* suspected arrest and refused these meeting proposals. Ultimately, the headmen of the villages did meet with the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) in Lakhai, a village next to the Tripura border. The meeting, however, was unsuccessful.

### Acceleration

Since at the district level negotiations with the government representatives failed, movement leaders decided to proceed at the national and international levels. They sent letters to all the foreign embassies and consulates to draw attention to the problem and thus to pressurise the government. The national and international media were also mobilised. Additionally, to stabilise the movement on more than one front, the protesters asked for legal support. Two lawyers accepted their request and soon prepared a petition against the government.

Following these events and by the end of the year 2000, a small number of men from both villages requested an audience from the Minister of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Affairs. In response to their exposition, the minister issued a letter to the Prime Minister (PM) soliciting the office to investigate. As a result, the Assistant Private Secretary (APS) of the PM requested the MoEF revise their plan and heed the appeals of the residents of Latrymbai. Soon, an inter-ministerial team was formed, and in January 2001, this team conducted an enquiry during which they visited Latrymbai.

Since the inter-ministerial team excluded from the investigation representatives from the affected villages, in February 2001 Rajas and Jacob organised a rally in Dhaka to give voice to their disapproval. In the demonstrations, *adivasis* from other regions, such as the CHT, North Bengal, and

Mymensingh, also participated. In response to these demonstrations, the MoEF sent a letter to the headmen of the seven Khasi villages of Moulvibazar, requesting to meet them in Dhaka in March 2001. During this meeting, the officials of the Ministry informed the headmen that the inauguration of the park would take place despite their objections. Following this, on the 31 March, activists organised a national gathering in Dhaka where they jointly formed the Bangladesh Adivasi Forum (BAF), which still today serves as the umbrella organisation for all *adivasis* in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the government announced the date of the park's inauguration, which fell on 15 April 2001, Easter Sunday. Villagers and activists regarded the choice of the date as a deliberate signal by the government to disrespect not just land rights but also religious practices. After the announcement of the inauguration date, trees were soon felled to clear the roads and a launching spot was erected near the village. Seeing these preparations, Jacob and Rajas, together with the respective headmen of the seven villages, decided to organise a demonstration on the day of the park inauguration.

### An Ending without Climax

On the day of the inauguration, the MoEF minister arrived around noon, and before she headed to the ceremony location, she requested to see the village headmen one more time. According to the headmen, this was a last attempt by the government to persuade the protesters. She handed over a five-page brochure to the *montrys*, which described the park as being situated within a wasteland, with no mention of Latrymbai's existence. The headmen in response refused to talk. After this meeting, the minister unveiled the inauguration stone while doves were released. According to Jacob, everyone was waiting for an inaugural speech, but instead the minister got in her car and drove away.

Three elements are particularly interesting in the retelling of these events: the ascending structure; the similarity in how the events were retold regardless of the narrator, and the ending without a climax. The first two features suggest that the story consolidated and now represents an important part of the local history. The ending without climax, in contrast, implies that the anti-eco-park movement is – from the perspectives of both the government and the demonstrators – unfinished and likely to continue. Indeed, the present context exhibits several signs of external (i.e. bureaucratic prolongation and covert territorial intrusions) as well as internal (i.e. estrangement due to competition) conflicts pointing towards irresolution.

### ***De-kot*, Anxiety, and Estrangement: Responses to Bureaucratic Prolongation, Territorial Intrusions, and Internal Disintegration**

Although the protests successfully slowed down the development of the park, the Bangladeshi government did not suspend its plan but continued with the construction of the ecotourism park in 2011. This involved several alterations of the landscape around and inside the park.

Since 2011, the park area has been surrounded by a fence. Entry is possible only through a three-metre-high gate constructed from bricks and steel. Every visitor must pay to gain access to the park. About 1,000 tourists, mainly urban Bengalis, visit the park daily (11 September 2012, discussion with a beat officer). In front of the entrance, boutiques form a line along the road and Bengali shopkeepers sell various items, from clothes to food. Inside the park, a paved road leads visitors to the major attraction spots. Restaurants and observation towers enhance the touristic appeal. The ETP displays a brand-new look: the colour of the pavement is fresh, and the metal of the handrails is still shiny. Artificially raised levels of terrain are supported by a retaining wall, a vulnerable construct because plants and tree roots can break through it. Additionally, the rain during the monsoon season hits the ground with great power every summer, posing problems for the structure's stability.

Latrymbai is approachable by first passing through the park's gate. After going through the park entrance, a paved road leads towards the settlement. A small dam erected in 2012 by the FD connects the village to the ecotourism park, and during the wintertime when the level of the water is low, the dam can be used as a bridge. At first glance, the structure of the park discloses nothing unusual. Yet, the gate and the dam are the first cursory signs of two dominant forms of violence in Latrymbai: the restriction of free movement and the gradual encroachment of the government via infrastructural development, within which further violent practices lurk. To disentangle the different patterns of violence as well as to understand how residents of Latrymbai perceive them, I will concentrate in the following analysis on emotional expressions, bringing to attention two sentiments in particular: *de-kot* and anxiety. My intention is to not only show that expressions of *de-kot* and anxiety are connected to different forms of violence, but also illustrate how residents of Latrymbai are set into an extended state of suspense and how they struggle to specify what is happening in their everyday life because of the absence of tangible evidence to hand. In the third part of this subsection, I will address estrangement due to internal disputes.

### Bureaucratic Prolongation and *De-kot*

One January afternoon in 2012, we were sitting on the porch of a house belonging to James, a 64-year-old man who is also a member of the elder's council. Deibor, the *montry*, and Lop, another elderly man in his late 60s, were present as well. The general topic centred on the ETP, but Lop, in the middle of the conversation, suddenly changed the subject and steered our discussion towards the issue of permanent settlement while formulating the following words:

Since the time your father [with a nod towards Deibor] was still alive, we have been trying to get the documents for our land up until now. We only spent the money, but we did not see the results of the work, and even now we do not see it. That is why we, the people, but especially the elders, are already feeling bored/fed up (*sah de-kot*) with it.<sup>4</sup> So how many times will we contribute to this matter if we do not see a small portion of the work that has been done? (6 January 2012)

The War-Khasi word *de-kot* is not completely identical to the concept of boredom; nevertheless, whenever residents of Latrymbai referred to *de-kot* in English they used the word 'boredom', accentuating less a sense of idleness and more a feeling of annoyance, irritation, or being fed up. Additionally, *de-kot* is connected to a particular experience of time, as the little adverb *de* with the exact meaning of 'already' indicates. *De-kot* was never used to describe things, situations, or other persons; it was always used in a self-referential manner. After the above conversation with Lop, the expression *sah de-kot* cropped up in future discussions in relation to three concrete matters: (1) the periodic restriction of free movement due to the ETP, (2) the repeated and futile efforts to negotiate with the local government for an alternative road, and (3) the unsuccessful attempts for permanent settlement. Although all three issues mentioned above seem to address different problems, they nevertheless relate more generally to practices of bureaucratic prolongation. While these state practices at first glance might appear to signify governmental incompetence, a closer look reveals that they are rather part of wearing down villagers' resistance, acting simultaneously as a tactic of humiliation. Consequently, *de-kot* can be read as a response to bureaucratic prolongation but also as a general feeling of inability to implement change and a symptom of an injured sense of self.

4 *De* means 'already', *sah* 'to feel', and *kot* 'bored' or 'fed up'.



Ever since the erection of the gate and the construction of the paved road, forest guards of the ETP began prohibiting villagers from moving around and through the recreational area. The forest guards' practices are met with disapproval on the part of the residents since the road was their former communication route. James reflects on the current ban as follows, 'Earlier, we could use this road freely and nobody stopped us from using it. But now we need to get permission from the forest department' (8 January 2012). The ban is seen not only as an injustice but also as a disturbance because the execution of everyday activities is impeded. Visitor's access is routinely hindered, and the entrance of vehicles into the park area is prohibited. The latter issue creates problems when large amounts of goods need to be taken in and out of the village or when medical emergencies arise. What creates dissatisfaction is, however, that whenever residents of Latrymbai complain to the government offices about the prohibition, the ban is lifted, but after some time it is once again reinstated. James's words exemplify this: 'And still [*dang*] they stop us from entering the gate and using the road. But we talked to the MP and chairman about this. When we talk to the MP or chairman, they let us enter and use it. But after a few days they stop us again [*ban*]' (8 January 2012). Although James's account does not make *de-kot* explicit, the little words *dang* (still) and *ban* (again) nonetheless are meant to emphasise the continuation of the prohibition despite repeated complaints.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, what triggers *de-kot* is not the restriction per se but the repetitive approval and subsequent withdrawal. Such acts of reapproval become stripped of meaning in the eyes of the residents. Their meaninglessness, however, does not imply that people in Latrymbai are not aware of the tactic of humiliation. On the contrary, this practice raises doubts in their self-worth, confirmed by Lop when he says, 'when I think about this, I feel very bad and sad. That means that I feel that I am a person who is small' (6 January 2012). The recurring ban is therefore not simply an act of harassment but also one of humiliation. Humiliation and *de-kot* also appear entangled in the negotiations for an alternative road into and out of the village.

To overcome the provocative wrangling with the forest guards about the right to use the ETP road, residents of Latrymbai requested from the representatives of the local government the construction of an alternative road and bridge. This road would bypass the ecotourism park area as it goes through the nearby tea garden behind the residential area of the village.

5 *Dang* is used in relation to a continuation of an act. *Ban* means 'over and over' indicating repetition.

Deibor, as a *montry*, was responsible for making this request, such that during our discussions he frequently talked about his experience of repeatedly going to the government offices to file appeals. In the following discussion segment, he describes the repetitive but futile governmental responses to requests for establishing a road:

We asked the MP [Member of Parliament] to make a bridge where the road comes through the tea garden and towards our village but not through the ecotourism park. After we had talked with the MP, surveyors came to survey and to select the place to make the bridge. [...] They surveyed the land three times already. And we thought that last time they would make the bridge. [...] Later they again surveyed another place to make the bridge, and it was a location before the ecotourism park gate. And we thought that this time they would not mess up and that they would make the bridge. [...] When the surveyors came [...] again at the end of 2011, we thought again that the bridge would surely be made. [...] And if the bridge is built in the place where the road leads through the tea garden to our village it will be better because [...] we will have our own bridge and road to communicate, and we won't have problems with the forest department and obtaining permission to use the ecotourism park road. (17 July 2012)

Through Deibor's account one gets a glimpse into the repetitive governmental activities, which each time instigates and, since no outcome follows, terminates villagers' expectations. Although Deibor does not name it concretely, one can feel a hint of hope in his utterance each time he recalls the surveyors' appearance to select a possible area for the road. Similarly, as in the case of Nolikhai, hope here is connected to outside circumstances that are not directly controllable by the villagers. Thus, the construction of the road rests not in the hands of the residents, but rather is the responsibility of the local government officials, who must apply for a permit at the Local Government Division (LGD), a branch appointed to oversee the management of infrastructural networks in the rural areas. Hope emerges in the case of Latrymbai as something fragile as well as transient. In the moment it is materialised, it vanishes, since the survey work is never followed with any direct, tangible result. The notion of hope resurfaces more concretely in the next quotation, stemming again from Deibor. This time he names it explicitly and connects it to the concept of an empty promise:

When we go to the MP, he never disheartens us. He always gives us hope that he will make the road and the bridge for us. [...] But I understand

that he is just giving us words. [...] As I go to them, I know that this thing [promising] is always the same. [...] It has no meaning whether we tell our problems to the MP or others because we do not get results. [...] We, especially I, really feel bored/fed up (*sah de-kot*) of this. [...] That means [referring to *de-kot*] that we hate (*sah ching*) it because that thing comes again and again although we do not want it. When I go to the MP for one thing again and again, I mean for many times, and I do not get it from him, I feel ashamed (*sah mera*) of it. [...] You see, they just say that they will give us this and that thing. The word is only in their mouth, but they do not do it in action. This means that they humiliate us (*khein poh*). It is like we have no value (*dor*) to them. [...] So, they just promise (*kular*) to give us consolation, but they have not yet done anything for us. (2 September 2014)

The first sentence of Deibor's explanation shows a willingness to believe that meetings with the MP will lead to action. Yet this hope gives way to something else – the injustice of the repeated empty promises. The encouragement ('he never disheartens us'; 'he always gives us hope') of the MP interpreted from the angle of the empty promise is not a positive act but rather represents a negation that excludes the possibility of a direct reaction. An explicit and straightforward rejection would acknowledge the residents in a negative but equal relationship and would open a door for a response or contestation. An empty promise, however, obstructs all communication and hinders dialogue. Empty ('a word in the mouth') and repetitive promises are therefore not simply agonising, but as Deibor explicitly explains, humiliating. This reappears also in the problem of permanent settlement. Consider the following discussion segments first with Deibor, and afterwards with Lop:

Deibor: So, when the government promises that they will build us the bridge and the road, but they do not do that, we then feel *de-kot*. And it is not only about the bridge or road but also regarding other issues like making the record of land to us. (2 September 2014)

Lop: You see, all the governments, now and in the past, they do not want to do us this favour [granting permanent settlement]. [...] Whoever comes in the government does the same. They think we are mad and deaf. (6 January 2012)

What does it mean here to be treated as mad and deaf? I interpret Lop's words as expressions not simply of discrimination and exclusion but also of refusals to be 'part of life itself'. Veena Das (2007) notices in relation to the

question of forms of life that ‘the dangers that human beings pose to each other [...] relate to not only disputations over *forms* but also disputations over what constitutes *life*. The blurring between what is human and what is not human shades into the blurring what is life and what is not life’ (16). Das establishes her argument based on the Wittgenstein notion of ‘forms of life’, which means not simply horizontal contrasts or variations of constructing existences in space and time, but also a vertical distinction between being a human and being an animal or a machine (ibid., 88–89). Thus, what constitutes human life is ‘not fixed in advance’ (ibid., 89). In the vertical forms of contestations, the ‘limits of the idea of being human is tested’, and these limits ‘evoke the sense that life itself has been put into question, as if one cannot fall from being human without bringing this larger sense of life into jeopardy’ (ibid.). Thus, the sequenced approval and withdrawal to use the road, the repeated promises to establish an alternative road without fulfilment, and the waiting for a grant of permanent settlement hold residents of Latrymbai in an extended state of anticipation, where possibilities are visible but ‘lie inactive’ (Agamben 2004, 66). These acts are humiliating not only in the sense of teasing but mostly because they withhold ‘specific possibilities’ by neutralising action (ibid., 67). Humiliation in this context means not only questioning a sense of self-worth but also ‘deactivation’ (ibid.). Formulated differently, it is rendering the other *im-potent*. Humiliation and bureaucratic prolongation do not mark the end of the story in Latrymbai, however. Residents are also confronted with intrusions.

### **Intrusions and Anxiety**

By July 2014, further construction has altered the landscape around Latrymbai. The mud road, which in the past led through the tea gardens towards the ETP, is now paved with asphalt on one side while on the other side construction workers are currently excavating and widening the highway. Compared to the previous years, the road is now very busy. Buses, minibuses, and small private cars filled with people come and go to the ecotourism park. In front of the park, the number of shops has multiplied. Two or three large construction sites indicate that soon hotels and guesthouses will enrich the scene. The next change confronts visitors at the entrance of the village. A two-metre-high steel gate signals the beginning of Latrymbai. On both sides are signposts. One prohibits tourists from entering the village. The other states that this place is not part of the ecotourism park and requests visitors to be silent and undisruptive.



Illustration 2. Photograph taken by the author.

There are also signs of destruction. The dam previously erected by the FD is, for example, broken. Officially, the dam was washed away during the monsoon season. Unofficially, however, the dam was broken with a little human help to avoid flooding in the lower level of the village. There are also other signs of distress. Deibor explains, 'Recently, we had some trouble with the UNO and park people because one of their [clay] birds on our side of the river was destroyed and they immediately accused us. There are new decorations in the park now' (2 September 2014). Indeed, construction changes are visible also within the park. The road is, for instance, paved up until the waterfall. Picnic spots have been erected along the river. Next to such sites, playgrounds for children have been built. In the middle of the road near the waterfall, a group of wooden animals are arranged: giraffes, flamingos, rhinos, and zebras are placed in a circle depicting the scenery of African wildlife. Some bird statues are also placed on the other side of the river in the area of Latrymbai (see Illustration 2).

At first glance these wooden animals look harmless, but not to the people of Latrymbai. They suspect that these decorations are attempts to sneak into their area. These small, seemingly insignificant intrusions are the topic of this section. I am interested in how residents talk about and perceive the activities of the Forest Department (FD) in and around the park. Such intrusions generate among the villagers not only anxiety but also doubt. Slow encroachment via decoration – similarly to bureaucratic prolongation – aims

to neutralise action. Additionally, since these practices are ambiguous and concealed, they raise doubts among the residents of Larymbai. Doubt signifies here uncertainty related to an inability to determine what the real intention of the government is with the decorations. This uncertain knowledge is the source of their anxiety – not the decoration practices per se. Towards the end of the section I will also include the justifications and logics of the FD, focusing on a conversation with the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) from Sylhet.

Let me first start with the perspective of the residents. The following long extract is a discussion that took place in 2012 between James, Deibor, Che, and Silas (the latter two men are in their late 50s).

James: We suspect [*sondo*] that the government has a secret plan. [...] According to the government's explanation, they wanted to make the ecotourism park here because of the waterfalls. But the area of the waterfall is very small. And one day when they will see that they will need more land for the ecotourism park, they will also include our land under the ecotourism park area. This is the target of the government. And I think this is what the government wanted from the beginning.

Che: Yes. You are right. [...] Actually, the government is greedy.

Deibor: You know, if we really see the situation until now, we can see that every year the ecotourism park area is slowly encroaching on our area.

Silas: So, this ecotourism park is just to take away our land and it is very dangerous for us.

James: If you think very simply, you just see that the ecotourism park was established because of the waterfall. But if you think seriously, their intention in their mind is to take away our land and chase us out from this place. (7 January 2012)

What is interesting in this conversation is how the four men seem to assure and convince each other about the real reason behind the ecotourism park, generating a performance of persuasion. The recurring question of why the government established an ecotourism park in Latrymbai further intensifies the persuasive characteristic of the scene. Moreover, the first and powerful word 'suspect' directs attention to the problem of uncertain knowledge and delivers an explanation as to why convincing is needed in the first place. The residents of Latrymbai continually struggle to hold the government responsible for encroachment because there is no tangible evidence on hand to prove the true intention of the FD. Uncertainty over the plans of the government, and especially over the actual intent of the

decorations, is elucidated even more significantly in the account of Eric, the former *montry*, during a personal discussion:

One day they will include our land under the ecotourism park area. This is their target. Yes! They are telling us that they will not take away our land and nothing will happen to us. But one day it will happen. You see, they are not decorating the ecotourism park far away from our area. They are decorating the area of the ecotourism park that is adjacent to our area. We will have to find ways to stop this. But it is difficult to go against the government because we do not directly see any fault of the government regarding this. I mean, we do not see that they have already entered our area. But according to their activities like decorating the ecotourism park, especially beside the waterfall, we can realise that they have a plan to enter our area. [...] We must understand that the more they decorate this place, the more danger we will encounter in the future. (7 January 2012)

What is interesting in this account is the vacillation between seeing and not seeing, between knowing and uncertainty, as if the boundary between reality and imagination has dissolved. Eric's words are charged with torment originating from the tension between conviction and doubt. Where does one draw the line between harmless and dangerous activities? Where is the point where doubt turns into definite knowledge justifying disagreement or protest? The reflection suggests an inner struggle in addressing and labelling the problem and shows a hesitation to make accusations without evidence.

As revealed later, the ecotourism park extension initiatives go beyond acts such as placing statues outside of the official range of the park. They include a variety of encroachment attempts: the construction of two bridges that would directly connect the village to the ETP and would allow tourists to enter the settlement; the erection of the dam, which was initially conceived as a bridge but due to opposition from Latrymbai was modified into a barrier; the recurring propositions from government officials to build eco-cottages inside the village for the tourists and thus actively integrate the villagers into the ecotourism park; and the setting up of a cable railway between the two hills, with one on the side of the ecotourism park and the other in Latrymbai. Residents immediately oppose and refuse all such plans. Nonetheless, against ambiguous activities such as placing bird statues, no counteraction can be undertaken because the purpose is unclear. Criticism can easily be dismissed as unsubstantiated or irrational. Ambiguity generates, however, not only doubt but anxiety as well. This feeling, as the cited accounts above illustrate, often remains tacit. Nevertheless, there are also

instances when anxiety explicitly emerges in verbalisations. Consider, for example, the following conversation with Deibor:

Everyone in our village is anxious/worried [*sah jingjar*] about when they will do something against us because we see that they are taking care of the ecotourism park area by decorating it every year. We always have worry, but we are not sure what the government will do with us in the future: whether they will take away our land or not. (2 September 2014)

War-Khasis draw a distinction between fear (*ktiang*) and anxiety (*jingjar*). While the former is a stronger and more concrete feeling, the latter emotion is diffuse and vague. *Jingjar* also means worry, tension and confusion. It is associated with a bodily feeling of restlessness. As Deibor's words above imply, *jingjar* is not an individuated feeling; rather, it is shared collectively. Most of the residents are uncertain whether they will be able to hold on to the territory upon which their sociality is based. Their anxiety indicates here a lack of certainty about the exact intention of the government. Due to this unpredictability, villagers in Latrymbai continuously speculate and thus generate a discourse of conjecture. Instead of bringing them clarity and relief, the discourse of conjecture paradoxically reanimates their anxiety and, through speech, transmits it socially.

In contrast to these governmental activities, the intrusion of the tourists at first glance seems to provoke more annoyance. The arrival of tourists foments anxiety as well, but of a different kind than the government initiatives. During a hiking tour in January 2012, David, a younger man in his early 20s, explicates the sort of danger tourists pose:

This ecotourism park is trouble. If our land goes inside the area of the ecotourism park there will be a lot of tourists who will come to explore. And we don't like this. Every day the tourists come and go inside the garden and start touching and plucking the betel leaves without knowing. Day by day, the production decreases. (8 January 2012)

David explains that the greatest danger tourists represent is the diminishment of betel leaf production due to epidemics, because visitors are unaware of the diseases one can carry from one garden to another. Local farmers never enter agricultural areas without showering first. Through this practice they attempt to lessen the possibility of spreading two types of illnesses, *uklam* and *uttram*, from sick gardens to healthy ones. While *uklam* causes a yellowing of the leaves that, after infection, quickly fall off



the main plant, *uttram* is a rotting of the roots of the betel plant. Indeed, plague represents one possible concern, but David's next words reveal another layer of worry:

There are more disturbances the Bengalis will do. They may create problems with our women. They may take away the women by making relationships. And we do not want our women to get married out of our society because the woman carries the lineage of the family. If she marries outside the society, we will lose our lineage. So, this type of incident can happen when the tourists can get access in our area. [...] This happened once. A girl had an affair with a Bengali. First, he came as a tourist. Later they kept communicating. At last, the girl went away with that Bengali. Then the girl was excommunicated from the *punji* [village]. And now she is no more. (7 January 2012)

Marriage outside ethnic ties represents a danger for male Khasis, deepening their anxieties over social reproduction. This threat reinforces gendered control as well as suspicion towards 'outsiders' as dangerous intruders. Matrilineality, in contrast to popular belief, does not grant women more power. To the contrary, because females carry the lineage and inherit the family property, the social policing of Khasi women is extensive. Women who marry without the consent of their *kur* risk the termination of social contacts. Excommunication from the *kur* and the village is indeed one of the harshest sanctions. As David implies with his last words, the excluded person ceases to exist in the eyes of her kin and other Khasis. Excommunication and social policing reveal the darker side of belonging. I will return to this aspect of belonging in the next section. Allow me to now shift perspective and show the logic of the FD as represented by the DFO.

I meet the DFO in his office in Sylhet one afternoon in September 2012. He is a friendly man in his late 40s. In contrast to the villager's narrations, the DFO is straightforward with his formulations regarding the goal of establishing an ecotourism park in Latrymbai. He says, 'The forest was encroached on by the local people here and the government cannot evict them. So, the government tried to recover this land with this method. [...] Tribal people are residing in this forest. They also reside on some other portions of my land'. He does not notice the implication the first-person possessive pronoun ('my land') creates, so he carries on further, 'Within the national park nobody can live, but in the eco-park in some parts of the forest, I think you visited Latrymbai, and you see there are many families living within this eco-park. They are Khashia. They are under

the ecotourism park.’<sup>6</sup> At this point he corrects himself quickly, ‘No, no. They are not under the ecotourism park.’ I pretend not to notice the slip of the tongue, yet the DFO noticeably loses his focus. For a moment, the discussion falters. To save the conversation, I divert attention back towards the goals of the ETP. The DFO shows relief, so with renewed confidence he continues, ‘The objectives of this eco-park are to develop the area, to conserve biodiversity, to extend the ecotourism facilities.’ He goes further with the clarification by contrasting the ETP with the idea of a national park. In his explanation, he merges the idea of development with the idea of economic sustainability and thus reproduces the general understanding of the ETP:

People can go inside the ecotourism park and enjoy watching nature. And we have done much development work there. We have made trails, watchtowers, and many other sitting arrangements. But in a national park these are prohibited. Ecotourism parks are made from the economic point of view. We can earn through tourism.

At this point I ask him whether the commercial goal of the park collides with the aim of nature conservation and if the residents of Latrymbai would protect the forest in a more effective way. He shakes his head,

You know, these Khashia are residing in the forest and cultivate betel leaf. It is a climber. I mean the betel leaf. Needs light to grow. And these Khashia cut all the leaves of the trees. Then plants cannot synthesise food. So, they are damaging the forest slowly. Another problem is that they clear everything on the ground. When they clear everything the eco system is lost and there will be no biodiversity. And ultimately the ecosystem will be lost. [...] You see, they are doing this practice. I want to teach them that they can cultivate betel leaf another way. There is another way to cultivate betel leaf, that is, by making a high platform that the betel leaf can creep on. [...] Our main objective is to restore life, that is, the biodiversity of the ecosystem. [...] In the Sylhet Division, the main problem is that within the forest Khashia occupied a major part of the forestland. [...] We cannot remove them. Now I am trying to implement social forestry. Still, I am not successful because people are not coming.

6 The majority of Bengalis in Bangladesh often refer to Khasis as Khashia. However, most of the Khasis in Bangladesh reject this label, insisting that it has derogatory connotations of inferiority and ‘backwardness’.



Illustration 3. Photograph taken by the author.

[...] My assumption is that they do not believe us. They do not understand what we want to do. [...] But there is no mechanism to compromise with the environment.

The discussion with the DFO lasts one hour. Before I leave his office, he shows me several maps that depict the last remaining forest patches in Bangladesh. I look at the small green spots dispersed along the borders of Tripura, Assam, Meghalaya, and Sundarbans. The rest of the map is predominantly grey: humans populate 90% of Bangladesh territory. Therefore, reforestation and conservation can be framed as an urgent need in Bangladesh, legitimising the position as well as the activities of the FD as the exclusive proprietor and preserver of the forest. People from Latrymbai are depicted in this rhetoric not only as illegal inhabitants but also as destroyers of the forest and biodiversity. Two different views and legitimacies of living clash here, one represents the human, e.g. Khasis, and the other the non-human, e.g. the forest and more generally biodiversity. In his narrative the DFO places biodiversity and its protection above the survival of Khasi, which in turn justifies not only territorial encroachments into their land, but also attempts to delegitimise their established ways of life and to compel them to change. The disputes here therefore revolve around not only who is the rightful owner of the forestland, but also how the people of Latrymbai should live and cultivate.



Illustration 4. Photograph taken by the author.

Residents of Latrymbai are aware of this argumentation. For this reason, Deibor takes me on a tour one day. After two hours of climbing, we arrive at the top of a hill. He draws my attention to the two opposite sides of the neighbouring hills, one covered by high trees and the other by ground bushes. The tree-covered side is the betel leaf gardens (see Illustration 3), whereas the bushy part is under the care of the FD (see Illustration 4). Deibor reveals his intentions with the following words, 'They keep telling us that we, the Khasis, destroy the forest. Now you can see and understand whether we are taking care of the forest or destroying it' (January 2012).

Fencing, gate erection, road paving, and decoration signify territorialisation practices of the FD. They are symbols of possession. Additionally, they reveal the tactic of slow and concealed incorporation. James emphasises, 'All of us know these are the signs of small attempts. Surely, they won't take our land away in a day. They start with small initiatives' (8 January 2012). He continues by highlighting the collective anxiety these small attempts create, 'how can we sleep without tension during the night? And how can we live in peace [*suk*] here?' Thus, the Khasi word *suk* or peace denotes more than tranquillity: it is a synonym for joy and safety, saturated with the desire of living and securing the future, not just for the present generation but also for the next generation. Permanent settlement and an alternative road are the only expressed wishes of the people in Latrymbai. These are the conditions that are imagined bringing *ke jingsuk*, peace of mind, a state of being highly

aspired to. Yet *ke jingsuk* is endangered not only by outside pressures but also by internal disputes originating from struggles over authority and economic competition, both of which cropped up after the introduction of social forestry and the establishment of the ETP. In what follows, I move away from the interface of external and internal confrontations and take a look at the 'dark side of' belonging (Geschiere 2013).

### Whispers and Cries

With the construction of the ETP, Latrymbai is transforming. Comparing 2010 to 2012 and 2014, there has been a slow regression of social engagements. Lights, for example, are turned off after ten o'clock, and most of the residents remain within the walls of their household after dusk. In 2010, it was common for women and men to stay up until midnight. While the women would bundle betel leaf, the men kept them company. Additionally, in 2010, female neighbours often volunteered to help in other households where the harvest amount was too large to be bundled in one night by the few persons in the family. In 2014, in contrast, women worked alone behind closed doors. Jacob, too, who played a crucial role in the anti-eco-park mobilisation, repeatedly complains about passivity and indifference in the settlement. At first it seems that these emotional tonalities are indications of the aftershock of the heightened times during the anti-eco-park movement, during which emotions intensified quickly and grew to such an extent that a sinking phase was inevitable. Later I conclude that they instead point to internal social divisions.

Several times I attempt to initiate discussion about the causes behind estrangement. Villagers, however, refuse to talk. They either change the subject or laugh uneasily. Despite these redirections, a few of them make periodic revelations in the form of short phrases like: 'everybody wants to be a *montry* now'; 'the situation is not good here'; and 'people became greedy these days'. These throwaway remarks seemed like whispers, and while they rippled the surface of the village's social life, they never really broke the silence that veiled the conflicting interests among villagers. Such sentences remained on the level of enigmatic gestures. Secrecy is a 'generative mechanism for constituting self, society, and [...] culture' (Jones 2014). Additionally, secrecy is paradoxical, since the secret must be publicly performed through revelations to be recognised as a secret in the first place (ibid., 54–55). 'The revelation of concealment is a way of socially mobilising the secret' (ibid., 55). The leaking of secrets can be termed as 'secretion' under which the performance of secrecy without the 'disclosure of secrets' is understood (Zempléni 1996, cited in Jones 2014, 56). Accordingly, the above-cited phrases can be interpreted

as revelations of concealments. But what were the villagers trying to veil or reveal? This question was cleared up for me in September 2014, when Matthew and I were invited to Victoria for a cup of tea.

Victoria is a 48-year-old woman with four sons and one daughter. We developed a close acquaintanceship through her smallest child, Erica, who accompanied me everywhere in the village in 2010. Since I often worked until late at night and her house was deep in the woods behind the Presbyterian church, I took Erica home after work a few times. During these occasions I also met Victoria, who, each time I came to the house, was bundling betel leaf by herself. She often complained about the magnitude and burden of household tasks. Her four sons, when they had their school break, usually worked in the garden, while Erica, at the time eight years old, was too young to help. Many times, the focal target of her frustration was her husband, Philip, who refused to lend her a hand. She never mentioned it directly, but it was gossiped about in the village that Philip had trouble with alcohol.

Between 2000 and 2009, Philip was the official secretary of Latrymbai and was responsible for the economic affairs of the village. He was also well known outside the settlement and fostered good relationships with influential government people. However, by the time I met him, he had lost his influence in the village, and it was rumoured that he had accumulated a large debt with businesspeople outside of Latrymbai. His sudden death due to a heart attack in 2011 pushed his family to the verge of social and economic destitution. Victoria, next to the difficulties of raising the children by herself, inherited the burden of his large debt, including its social consequences. By taking a loan from outsiders, Philip had broken a social code. By accumulating debt with 'strangers', he practically fractured the rigidly maintained social boundaries between the 'outside' and 'inside' world. Since Victoria was incapable of paying back Philip's debt, creditors demanded accountability from the whole village. Most of the residents unified behind Victoria, but socially she had to pay a high price. Many of the families withdrew their trust in her and she was banished from social life. Even today, communication with her is kept to a minimum and she is seldom invited to village meetings. Her alcohol-dependent mother, with whom Victoria now shares a common living space within a house at the edge of the village, aggravates her tragic plight even further. Alcohol consumption is not prohibited among Khasis, but it is not encouraged either.<sup>7</sup> One who battles with alcohol loses face socially because alcohol excess is regarded as a character weakness. Moreover, the

7 Liquor is not produced inside the village; instead, one can obtain it from the nearby teagardens where brewing is legal. It is usually acquired from fermented rice or sugar cane.

social stigma of alcoholism rarely affects only the person who drinks. It extends to the whole family, as is in Victoria's case.

Most of the details of Victoria's story I stitched together through gossip from outside of Latrymbai. When we arrived at her house that September afternoon, Victoria did not hide her excitement and surprise. She said, 'I was sure you would not come'. I let the remark pass, but I knew she was referring to her currently deteriorated social status. She quickly rolled out a mat on the floor, and while we sat down, she disappeared into the kitchen to prepare tea. While drinking the tea the conversation was sluggish, but after some time Victoria started to reflect with an unusual openness about why she moved to her mother's house:

I left my old house to my son. He married last year. And I moved back to my mother's house because she drinks and for alcohol, she sells everything. I must control her. She also started to take loans from Bengalis. They do not like this in the village. A couple of weeks ago, when my mother sold the two big trees in front of our house to some Bengalis, there was a village meeting and they warned me that if they have to bail me out again, they will auction off all of my land. If this happens, I will have to leave the village. But where can I go? Who will take me in?

For a moment she paused, then asked rhetorically, 'What has my life become? First my husband and now my mother.' Victoria talked with a soft voice. Nevertheless, her words sounded like a cry. After a few seconds she continued the narration, now defending her late husband:

They blamed my husband that he took the money gathered by the village and he invested it elsewhere. That is why he had a heart attack. They forgot that he did a lot for this village. During the time he was the secretary, he initiated bringing the electricity line and he was the one who applied for funds at Caritas to make the stairs and pave the road [the middle road that leads to the top of the village]. But in reality, it was the previous *montry* [referring to Eric] who took from each house every week, 300 Taka. Where the money went nobody knows.

I interrupt her to ask if this is the reason for the social estrangement I sense among villagers. She shakes her head:

No. After the eco-park movement many entered the social forestry programme, and everybody is eager to earn money. They fight over who

gets which garden and for how much money. Everybody wants to make a big profit. There are many *montrys* now. They encroach on each other's gardens or sell the land for a higher price to each other.

Thus, through Victoria I find out that the causes of estrangement between the villagers stems from economic competition that has come to erode the 'traditional' authority and right of the elders to distribute land. Yet the question remains why people in Latrymbai conceal this problem. Victoria answers this puzzle with the following words, 'because they are ashamed'. In the next few days, I cannot forget Victoria's last words, and I try for the last time to draw out a 'confession' from Deibor. At first, he refuses to talk, 'The elders advised me that as a *montry* I should not deal with and mix up the social forestry matter with the activities of our *punji*. I don't know much about social forestry.' But after a couple of minutes, he reconsiders and reveals the following:

Because of the social forestry project, people are divided among themselves. As the *montry* of the *punji* I do not deal with this matter. The people themselves are taking the initiative to get leases of land from the FD for social forestry. This creates division among the people in the *punji*. You see, anyone can get a lease of land from the FD for social forestry if he pays the money to the FD. Sometimes it happens like this: one will go to the place of social forestry and if he likes a place, selects it, and pays for it to the FD. On another day, another man will go to the same place and say to the first person who already started to work in that place, why he is growing betel leaf in that place because he wants to grow betel leaf there too. Then they start to dislike each other. So, this way they are divided as they have the conflict among themselves for selecting the same land for social forestry project. And most of the persons who have taken a lease of land for social forestry project are very young, not the elders. (3 September 2014)

Deibor and Victoria's words suggest intricate levels of interpretations. What is striking about Deibor's revelation is the manner of how he verbally establishes a demarcation between himself and those who are involved in social forestry. He stresses his non-involvement as a *montry*. This verbal strategy is more than marking a boundary between participation and non-participation. It is about constructing the self as an outsider who is no longer under the obligation to remain silent. Furthermore, by pointing out that leasing land from the FD is an activity of younger people, he reveals



that the struggles go beyond simple feuds or misunderstandings, as those who lease land from the FD bypass the rights of the *montry* as well as the elder's council to determine who gets what amount of land in the village. In this way, the FD undermines the power hierarchies and slowly erodes the established social structure in the village.

On the other hand, Victoria's last words about the villagers' concealing the problem due to shame reveal that most of the residents consider rivalry an ethically incorrect practice. People in Latrymbai are ashamed not only because they compete for economic gains but foremost because they have abandoned and broken up established social alliances. Care is central to moral practice (Zigon and Throop 2014). Accordingly, everyday morality is not only about fulfilling obligations and duties but 'arises out of concern for the constituting relationships that bring our and others' being into existence' (ibid., 9). We act morally out of care and concern for our relationships. Care, however, cannot be viewed as a practice 'for the sake of the Other' but rather as a 'work to maintain, repair, or make new relations that ultimately results in the maintenance, repair, or making anew of both oneself and all those others constituted through the relationship cared for' (ibid.). Understood from this angle, the shame over rivalry and its veiling in Latrymbai signals awareness of failing to care. Besides morality, there is another dimension of concealment. The hiding of cooperation with the FD is an omission since the collaboration runs contra to the idealised spirit of the anti-eco-park movement. Victimhood is after all a powerful repertoire of resistance (Baviskar 2001). Yet ironically, through the practice of concealment, villagers construct a different kind of 'moral community' based now on a shared secret. Victoria, being excluded, is free to articulate this. She is no longer obliged to be silent.

*De-kot*, anxiety, and estrangement – it is tempting to end here and conclude with the interpretation of surrender and social disintegration. Indeed, the prevailing practice of waiting as well as moving to another place, which I will discuss below, suggests at first glance widespread passivity in Latrymbai.

### **Between Waiting and 'Moving On'**

Waiting can be interpreted as a condition in which the effects of power transpire (Auyero 2011; Bourdieu 2000) or a non-passive state in which those affected prepare for action (Hage 2009; Janeja and Bandak 2018; Jeffrey 2010). As the example of Latrymbai will show, both interpretations are correct.

Let me first start with James' words, which reflect the rather agonising feeling of waiting:

Our people are bored/fed up (*de-kot*) and some of our people even said, let the government chase us out (*beh*) [...]. But still, most of us agree to wait for the decision of the government. You see, we have never heard from our *montrys* that the government wants to chase us out and they [government] also never tell us to leave (*phet*) our land. On the other hand, they [government] do not give us the documents for our land. So, they will keep us hanging until our life ends here. (2 September 2014)

In the *Pascalian Meditations*, Pierre Bourdieu (2000, 228) writes that in waiting, the 'link between time and power' is manifested. Thus, waiting is about the exercise of control over the time of the less powerful members of the society. 'It follows that the art of "taking one's time" [...] of making people wait, of delaying without destroying hope, of adjourning without totally disappointing, which would have the effect of killing the waiting itself, is an integral part of the exercise of power' (ibid.). From this point of view, waiting appears indeed as the experience of marginalisation. The possibilities in waiting lie at arm's length, but at the same time they seem unreachable. Acquiring the aspired land documents is neither unimaginable nor possible. From this paradox derives the desire to capitulate and end the torment as James indicates at the beginning of the quote. Surrender turns out to be more favourable than an endless hanging. There were, however, occasions when people in Latrymbai articulated a different type of waiting charged less with a feeling of helplessness and more with a strategic consideration. This is comprehensible through the words of Deibor:

According to me, if we do not have the evidence that the government is doing something against us, we cannot go against the government. Say, if you do not hit me, how shall I complain that you have hurt me? That is why most of our elders think that we should wait (*mah por*) until we see the action of the government against us. Since we do not have the reason, we cannot go against the government and protest. [...] That is why we are still waiting for the government's action. And according to that we will react. (3 September 2014)

Deibor reflects on the inappropriateness of acting before not knowing or having any tangible evidence. From his remark waiting appears to be not so much an issue of powerlessness as a strategy of patience. The capacity to act

implies a judgement in which the circumstances are carefully considered (Joas 1992, cited in Fuchs 1999). In Latrymbai, this second type of waiting is a reaction to the slow movement of the government as well as a pondering pause before the not-yet-known. There is therefore a difference between waiting as an experience of dependency and the tactic of wait-and-see.

Moreover, even disappointments and the desire of capitulation can be interpreted differently as simply expressions of resignations. Allow me to demonstrate this with Deibor's following words, who below verbalises a sense of disappointment related to the futile negotiations for an alternative road with the local government:

And after they had come to survey, we went again to see the MP, and he said that the bridge would really be made this time. But now [July 2012] we do not think much about the bridge, whether they make it or not. After the last meeting with the MP, I did not go to the MP regarding the bridge and the road because I already feel bored/fed up (*de-kot*) with that. (17 July 2012)

Deibor brings to attention not only his disillusionment but also a collapse of hope: 'we do not think much about the bridge, whether they make it or not'. His words can be read in a sense that hope and the ability to act are not straightforwardly linked to each other. Rather, one can demonstrate strength by letting expectations collapse. Jonathan Lear (2006) labels the relinquishment of expectations as 'radical hope' under which he interprets not submission but rather a moment of 'practical reasoning': that is, the acknowledgement of the arbitrariness of life. The termination of hope and the appearance of *de-kot* at the end of Deibor's reflection indeed mark an ironic turn: the recognition of unintelligibility. Such awareness requires the courage of 'facing up to reality' (Lear 2006, 118). Setting aside hope refers also to a distancing of oneself from the situation. It therefore restores, for a moment, a sense of agency.

The abandonment of old expectations reflects back also in their actions of slowly moving out of the village. More concretely, this means that a few kilometres away from Latrymbai, deep in the jungle and out of the sight of the Bangladeshi state, villagers are constructing an alternative place of living. During the summers of 2012 and 2014 I had the chance to visit this new place, where a small village was being slowly erected. Each year that I returned to the place three or four new houses had enriched the landscape. This new location offers an even more scenic view than the old village. Their new living place is on the top of the hills surrounded by opulent

green. Far from the madding crowd, it provides a far-reaching sight of the lower situated tea gardens in the plains. For now, only younger families have moved to this new site, while the older generation intend to remain in Latrymbai for as long as possible. In case the government does include the old village in the ETP, the elders plan to then follow the juniors. These actions speak of an awareness that a way of life is slowly nearing its end. Instead of protesting, the majority from Latrymbai accept this change and are preparing themselves for the inevitable by constructing an alternative living place.

Yet not everyone in Latrymbai agrees with the tactic of waiting and the abandonment of the old living place. Articulations such as ‘the elders are sleeping now’, ‘they don’t have energy’, or ‘people in the village are not responding’ are verbalised dissatisfactions of the younger men over the elders. David, while walking in the forest, expressed his impatience and frustration over the passivity of the elders with the following words, ‘They should not just wait. They should also understand that they have the ability and the responsibility to act.’ Younger men in Latrymbai desire more combative steps and often refer to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, whose rebellious acts against the army and the government are well-known to everyone in Bangladesh. The situation is, however, so ambiguous that it is difficult to arrive at a clear judgment of which type of action would better serve the inhabitants. Taking the situation under consideration, waiting, and moving on might be the best possible solutions.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored governmental practices of slow encroachment, bureaucratic prolongation, and disruption of internal cohesion as well as the emotional reactions of the people of Latrymbai to these actions. I suggested that anxiety, *de-kot*, and estrangement are symptoms of uncertainty and destabilisation induced by ambiguous government practices. On one hand, all three practices aim to wear the residents’ opposition down in an obscure way; on the other hand, the slow actions reveal that the government’s aim is to make residents stay instead of prompting them to leave. Thus, the primary intention is not to dispossess them but rather to incorporate them into the ETP. At first glance, considering *de-kot*, anxiety, estrangement, waiting, and moving on, it seems that the government has been successful in both of its aims of instigating uncertainty as well as instability, as both now profoundly penetrate and impact the everyday in Latrymbai.

The recurring wrangling over the right to use the ecotourism park road, the repetitive promises to build an alternative road that turn out to be empty and simulated, and the government's delay in providing permanent land rights induce *de-kot* among the residents of Latrymbai. A close inspection of this emotion reveals that there is much more at stake than simple exhaustion or overstimulation, for *de-kot* also signals humiliation. As such, not only are repetitive practices tedious and hateful but they are also interpreted as acts of humiliation because they destabilise the self and neutralise action. Thus, '[h]umiliation individuates; it isolates someone from all the others, not as a subject with agency and voice but as an object of scrutiny, scorn, and possible violence' (Guenther 2012, 61).

The small territorial intrusions like decorations or infrastructural modifications seem inoffensive and innocuous. Due to their ambiguity, it is difficult to determine whether they represent a real threat. Consequently, villagers are careful, yet they continue to suspect. Their perception of territorial intrusions is not based on certitude but rather on conjecture. Anxiety indexes this absence of sureness. Moreover, the oscillations between one's conviction and one's doubt – between seeing and delusion – produce an effect as if the boundary between reality and imagination has dissolved. The erosion of this boundary augments the anxiety even more. The performance of persuasion and the discourse of conjecture are counter acts that aim to minimise worry and achieve resolution. Ironically, these practices have a feedback effect of reinforcing and transmitting anxiety on a larger scale. Estrangement due to economic rivalry and erosion of authority are signs of disintegration and reveal how deeply destabilisation has penetrated Latrymbai, now threatening sociality. Indeed, instead of protesting, the residents' strategy today is to wait and move on; both of which can be easily rendered as signs of passivity.

Yet both activities, waiting and the strategy of 'moving on', demonstrate that the people of Latrymbai did not give up and they will not comply with incorporation into the ETP. Both efforts additionally demonstrate that agency is not synonymous with resistance and that human action cannot be reduced to the binary logic of dominance and subordination. Action is not only situation bound but also does not necessarily rest on a mobilisation of hope. Nevertheless, leaving the old living place behind is heart-breaking because the people of Latrymbai are not simply abandoning a piece of land or a house, but rather are vacating their home, which they established through hard work over the course of extended cohabitation, and which is marked by the memory of their ancestors. But precisely for this reason, it is a courageous act. Thus, '[a]t a time of cultural devastation, the reality a

courageous person has to face up to is that one has to face up to reality in new ways' (Lear 2006, 118–119). Formulated differently, a desire to live and survive entails at times letting old hopes collapse.

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## 5 Triggers of Wrath and Revenge in Madhupur Forest

### Abstract

Chapter 5 shows how the Forest Department of Bangladesh attempts to include forest dwellers in joint forest management through community forestry in Madhupur Forest. Alongside this, the Department files a very high number of forest cases against forest dwellers, accusing them of forest offenses such as tree felling. The chapter analyses these forest cases against the backdrop of the community forestry programmes. While community forestry seems to accept the presence of forest dwellers, the excessive enforcement of the Forest Act reveals that ‘the state’ has never really abandoned the idea of a forest without people. While inhabitants in Madhupur mock the different developmental programmes, the injustice of the forest cases induces *aakrosh* – a combination of wrath and revenge – among them.

**Keywords:** *aakrosh* (wrath; revenge), community forestry, Madhupur, forest cases

Different governments came in at different times with different programmes to implement in this Madhupur area. When one government fails with one project, the other government comes in with another project that has the same purpose. But they present the project in a different way to the local people. The project is the same, just the name is different. They want to protect the forest. (13 August 2013)

85 per cent of the people who live in and near the forest here are harassed by the Forest Department, who file false cases against them. Once a case is filed against a person, he will not get rid of the next case because the Forest Department will gradually file cases against him. Many of us have six to 100 cases. (13 August 2013)



The first account above comes from Pemal and the second from Anjeet, both of whom are farmers in their late 40s living in the interior of Madhupur Forest, located in the north centre of Bangladesh. Apart from the mangrove forests of Sundarban and the hill forests of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Madhupur is the largest jungle in Bangladesh and represents the last remaining Sal woodlands in the country. It was declared a reserved state forest in 1955 and soon afterwards, in 1962, the then Pakistani government created a National Park (hereafter MNP) within the tree-covered area. These dates are important from two perspectives: they mark the beginning of the conflicts between 'the state' and the inhabitants over who owns the forest, and they are also the starting point of the emergence of two different forms of state power that forest dwellers in the area encounter during their daily life. The two testimonies from the men above evidence these perspectives.

Pemal in the first quotation refers to the developmental state grounded in the different forest management programmes – including community forestry as the most recent initiative – that the Bangladesh Forest Department (FD) consecutively introduced in the 1950s in Madhupur. Anjeet, on the other hand, draws attention to the penal state. This state form materialises through the forest cases filed by the FD against the inhabitants of Madhupur under the 1927 Forest Act. The decree prohibits and punishes various forest activities such as tree felling, poaching, and conversion of forestland into agricultural fields. None of the forest dwellers are immune from these legal cases. Most of the residents are facing five or six lawsuits, while some are embroiled in extreme numbers of legal disputes whose figures surpass one hundred. Many of those who tackle five to 20 cases have no other choice but to sell, lease, or mortgage one portion of their land to pay for court expenses. Those who are charged with over 30 cases have been forced to withdraw from the course of everyday life and disappear or 'hide' from the 'eyes of the law'. Some, having no other choice, leave their farmlands and homesteads behind and migrate either to the capital city or to Greater Sylhet in search of low-paid wage labour. Certain residents, however, circulate in and out of jail.

How can one make sense of the high number of these forest cases against the backdrop of the community forestry programmes? My claim is that while different developmental programmes seem to accept the presence of forest dwellers and even – at least since the sustainable development turn – aim for their inclusion, the parallel Forest Act and its excessive use reveal that 'the state' has never really abandoned the idea of a forest without people. Therefore, taking a closer look at the Forest Act and the forest cases, what is really criminalised is not so much individual transgressions of the law as the dwellers' presence in the forest; in other words, they are guilty by their

very existence. Inhabitants in Madhupur portray this incongruent surfacing of state practices in different ways. While the developmental state is often critically described as an incompetent and corrupt governmental body lacking basic knowledge of forest management, the penal state, in contrast, induces an intense feeling among the residents that, in the vernacular form, is referred to as *aakrosh* (a combination of wrath and desire for revenge). Thus, the penal state appears not only as an uncanny Leviathan from which one cannot escape but also a disrupting force that reshuffles the everyday by breaking up community ties, disarranging mundane activities and pressuring inhabitants into hiding or leaving their home behind altogether. The chapter will dwell in more detail in the above outlined circumstances of Madhupur Forest, but first I will discuss the forest as a living place.

### The Forest and Forest Dwellers

The once large tract of forest that stretched from Dinajpur to Dhaka (Sachse 1917, 2) and was known as the Madhupur Jungle is today limited to two smaller areas: Arankhola and Sholakuri, just south of the Madhupur *upazila* in the Tangail District. The forested area is about 1,200 square kilometres and is classified as a reserved forest, managed by the FD (Islam et al. 2014, 3). Within the reserved forest, the MNP stretches for 84 square kilometres (International Resources Group 2012, 41). Madhupur Forest is part of the Pleistocene Terrace area of Bangladesh and topographically is positioned 60 to 100 feet above the surrounding plains. The densely forested areas reside on these elevated lands called *chala*. Small and narrow valleys, locally known as *baid*, often interrupt these *chala* fields, providing space for wet rice cultivation (Khaleque 1992, 22). The higher grounds give space for the unique and rich flora and fauna of Madhupur, among which the main tree is Sal. Sal is a robust, tall tree that can reach 32 to 50 meters elevation and has a high commercial value since it is utilised for furniture as well as house construction in Bangladesh (*ibid.*, 23).

According to the 2011 government district census, within Arankhola and Sholakuri are 52 villages, 25 of which are located directly in the densest part of the forest, where the MNP is also situated. All these 25 villages are mixed settlements comprising Bengali, Garo, and Koch families. Nevertheless, in 22 of those villages, Garo and Koch still make up the majority (roughly 80 per cent, of which approximately 70 per cent are Garos). I carried out my research in these localities, concentrating predominantly on Garos due to their position as the dominant majority as well as being those most affected

by forest cases. In the rest of the settlements along the edge of the MNP, Bengalis are the most prominent population.

Despite Bengali predominance, however, differences in the linguistic, cultural, and religious practices between Bengalis, Garo, and Koch – though gradually decreasing – remain. In contrast to Bengali, which is an Indo-European language, Garo and Koch belong to the Tibeto-Burman languages and are classified under the Boro-Garo and Bodo subgroups (Burling 1997, 14). Additionally, Garo of Madhupur speak a special dialect called *A'beng*, connecting them linguistically to the inhabitants of Garo Hills in the Indian state of Meghalaya where the majority of *A'beng* speaking people live (Bal 2007, 15). Nonetheless, today Bengali is the most widely used language and all of the inhabitants of Madhupur Forest, regardless of ethnicity, speak this language fluently.

Next to these linguistic distinctions, the most prominent cultural difference between Bengalis, Koch, and Garos stems from social structure. While Bengalis and most Koch families are patrilineal, Garos represent the second largest group in Bangladesh, aside from the Khasis, who have a matrilineal social formation.<sup>1</sup> Matrilineality means that children belong to the maternal kin and that a female heiress – the *nokna* – inherits the family property. Additionally, Garos, similar to the Khasis, are matrilocal, which means that after marriage the husband moves to the house of his wife's kin and not the reverse. However, these matrilineal rules among Garos in Madhupur have already begun to alter – not only due to the strong influence of Bengali culture, but also due to the greater impact of Christianity. Christian priests regard the matrilineal inheritance rule as unjust towards male members of the family and openly encourage Garos to change this practice. As a result, Garos increasingly divide their property equally between sons and daughters and an increasing number of married couples establish their own household separate from the maternal home. It is also not unusual these days for the wife to join the household of her husband. Despite these changes, the most important rule of matrilineality, namely that children belong to the maternal kin, continues to persist. The paternal kin rarely extend control over the children of the male relatives.

Religion is yet another aspect of social difference. Most Bengalis are Muslim, while Koch practice Hinduism. Conversely, a great number of Garos in Madhupur are Catholic, though a few still practice the pre-Christian religion called *Songsharek*. Even though the religious differences between

1 Some Koch practice matrilineality (Burling 1997, 14), yet most of the Koch families that I encountered in Madhupur were patrilineal.

Muslims, Christians, and Hindus do not cripple everyday interactions, the salience of these distinctions is predominant through the various verbal references to one's religious belonging during ordinary conversations.

Since Madhupur is an ethnically mixed area, the local political structure is also diverse. Political positions are assigned according to ethnic belonging, meaning that Garos, Bengalis, and Koch each have their own leaders. Accordingly, several persons may hold the same title within one locality. The Koch leader, locally called the *gaonburo*, is usually the eldest member of the community and he is assisted by a group of elders. In contrast, a mosque committee elects a formal leader of the Bengali Muslims, called the *matabor*, but this post is rather ceremonial. For social issues, Bengalis informally choose another *matabor*, typically a male who is the most respected and influential person in the village. Among Garos, the status of a village leader (*nokma*) is inherited. This means that the son-in-law, the *nokrom* (the husband of the *nokna*), acquires this position automatically. The fact of legal plurality also contributes to this political complexity due to the differences between Christian, Hindu, and Muslim civil codes. When a local dispute occurs, which are usually marriage or land-related, the different leaders of a village sit together and try to solve the problem locally by weighing the different legal systems against each other and reaching a common understanding. Accordingly, village level disputes are rarely brought to the official court or to the lowest level of the government, the Union Parishad.

In Madhupur, architecture is more an indicator of one's economic standing than ethnic belonging, although slight differences between Garo, Koch, and Bengali homesteads are, on closer inspection, detectable. In rural Bangladesh, one distinguishes between three different housing styles: *pucca* (brick, cement, or wood house with iron roof), *semi-pucca* (brick or cement walls with iron roof and mud ground), and *kutchra* (bamboo or mud house with thatch or iron roof). Those who can build *pucca* houses using permanent building materials occupy the highest economical position. *Pucca* houses in Madhupur, however, are rare. Only a small number of Bengali families and a few Garo families have *pucca* houses, and more than 90 per cent of the houses in Madhupur Forest are *semi-pucca* or *kutchra* (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2013). Most Koch houses belong to the latter category. Garo and Bengali houses, in contrast, are made from mud with corrugated galvanised iron roofs. While among Bengali families the single-family house predominates, most Garo dwelling places are built for extended families. The homesteads of one Garo household, comprising at minimum two but most commonly three generations and hence usually two or three nuclear families, are built in a circle facing each other. In the middle of the houses

there is a larger courtyard that remains hidden from outside gaze. The Garo courtyard is an important place for clan (*mahari*) meetings and family gatherings, but also for mundane get-togethers during leisure time when neighbours and relatives visit each other in the afternoons. The highlight during these gatherings is the consumption of rice beer, locally called *chu*.

The 25 villages located within the MNP are scattered; in some instances, they are a few kilometres apart, but occasionally the distance between them is so small that not even the beginning nor the end of a settlement is determinable. Inside the forest, none of these villages stand out as centres – instead the focal point in Madhupur is a place called Pochishmail, located at the edge of the MNP. Pochishmail is not a registered place, and it cannot be found in any official statistics. During colonial times, Pochishmail was an important postal point where horses were changed for the postal car. It is located 25 miles from Mymensingh, one of the largest towns in the north of Bangladesh. It is for this distance that it was named *pochish*, or twenty-five. Today, Pochishmail has not lost its importance, as it represents the only highway bus station connecting Madhupur Forest to Mymensingh in the northeast and to Tangail town in the south. Dhaka is approachable by both roads. Near the bus station and along the highway, various shops, tea stalls, wood sawmills, a few NGO offices, and small restaurants form a line and the road is busy day and night. Additionally, Pochishmail is also one of the most important marketplaces of the area, where seasonal fruits and vegetables are brought in on carriages for sale. The sold goods are then loaded onto trucks and delivered to different parts of the country. The existence of the market is only noticeable at the time of the seasonal fairs. During these occasions, a large piece of bare land adjacent to the highway is filled with people and their products.

Although there are several different employment possibilities in Madhupur Forest, farming still represents the main income-generating activity. Rice is considered locally to be the primary and most important crop, but local farmers grow paddy rice mainly for their own consumption and rarely for sale. In contrast to rice cultivation, the most common cash crops, such as pineapple, lemon, papaya, banana, and ginger, are produced exclusively for sale in Madhupur. The growing of such cash crops is an agroforestry activity. This means that fruits and vegetables are produced mainly on the higher located *chala* lands without cutting down the forest trees. Among these crops, the most beneficial plant is the banana, because it has a high price at the market and after plantation bears fruit again within nine months. Banana monoculture is not permitted in Madhupur because it quickly exhausts the ground. Thus, instead of single crop cultivation,

banana trees are surrounded by other various trees, most often timber as well as the valuable jackfruit. The oldest and most widespread cash crop in Madhupur is, however, pineapple (*anaros*). Its market price is lower than that of the banana and after plantation it requires eighteen months to bear fruit once again. Additionally, it requires weeding three times per year. Nevertheless, if *anaros* is properly taken care of, it can live and produce fruit for more than eight years. Pineapple, similar to banana, is not produced in monoculture in Madhupur; instead, it is usually planted in the middle of the forest surrounded by trees.

Many small farm holders in Madhupur who possess such fruit gardens do not cultivate the land themselves but instead lease it to cultivators. This is because planting and taking care of the fruit gardens is often too expensive as well as a risky business due to price fluctuations on the market. On larger estates (between 20 and 100 acres), wage labourers are hired to perform the most difficult work in the gardens, such as preparing the ground, planting, and weeding. Besides leasing, sharecropping is also a widespread practice in the region, and many Garos allow Bengali tenants to cultivate their land for half of the products. Those who own no gardens work as wage labourers for others. Since most of the Garos in Madhupur possess some amount of farmland, they do not have to rely on wage labour. Koch families, in contrast, do not hold enough land for farming; they usually work for either Garos or Bengali families. This work distribution also determines the local hierarchy, with Bengalis and Garos located at the top and middle and the Koch at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. In Madhupur, even if a farmer cultivates his garden himself without leasing or sharecropping, he rarely carries the products to the market on his own. Instead, a middleman called the *mahajan* buys the fruits at a lower price before they are ripe. During harvest-time, the *mahajan* returns with his own workers to collect the crops and carry them to the local market, sometimes using either bullock or horse carriages but most often using rickshaws.

The amount of land ownership and hence income differs from village to village in Madhupur. While in one village a farmer with eight acres of land might be considered a middle-income agriculturalist and those who possess more than fifteen acres are considered rich, in another locality farmers who own eight acres of land are regarded as wealthy. Nevertheless, the majority of Garo and Bengali families in Madhupur own two to five acres of land (according to the author's own survey). Such an amount of land, although relatively small, assures a modest income for a family. Families owning one or just half an acre are also very common in the area. This land quantity allows the erection of a homestead, but no farming except some

small gardening in the courtyards. More than 90 per cent of farmland in Madhupur is classified as government-owned *khas* land or forestland (within the MNP), the latter category officially being under the management of the FD (according to the author's own survey). This means that most of the farmers do not have state-accepted legal proof or documentation stating their ownership (for a historical explanation, see the next section). Despite the absence of such documentation, all the farmers regard the land as their own, and they exchange it, sell it, lease it, or pass it on through inheritance to the next generation.

### A Short History of Madhupur Forest

The history of Madhupur Forest is tightly interwoven with issues of land occupancy, population movements, and various forestry projects, each of which was introduced by the FD at different times since the 1950s and then subsequently failed. What unfolds in the context of these various forestry programmes is the struggle between local dwellers and the FD over the right to forestland and forest products, a struggle that extends into the present. In the following restoration of the forest's history, I utilise human rights organisations and donor agency reports (such as USAID) as well as published and unpublished academic works.

#### Colonial Times until Independence

During the Mughal period (1576–1757), Madhupur was under the Pukhuria *pargana* (revenue division); during the British era (1757–1947) was included in the Mymensingh District and belonged to the estate of the *zamindar* of Natore. Up until the separation of India and Pakistan, mostly Garo and Koch farmers populated the area and were allowed by the *zamindar* to live and cultivate in the Madhupur Forest. For the use of the arable and homestead land, they paid regular cash rent to the *zamindar*. Until 1950, *jhum* (slash and burn) cultivation was the most common agricultural practice in the area, mostly carried out by Garos. In contrast to the Garo hills, where land was owned commonly under the *aking* system, in Madhupur the individual *jhum* fields belonged to individual Garo households, most likely because the *zamindar* encouraged separate ownership rights to ensure higher revenues (Khaleque 1992, 128). In this way, each family prepared and cleared one patch of forest for cultivation individually. The families obtained permission for clearing from the *sarder* (village-level rent collector, Khaleque 1992, 112).

The *sarder* allowed *jhum* cultivation on territories covered by bush or grass where no valuable trees existed. Farmers cleared such fields during the cold season, and before the first rains of March they set the dried bush on fire to extinguish unwanted roots and seeds. This first rain had an important function; it washed the ash into the soil and fertilised it (Burling 1997, 35–36). The *sarder* authorised *jhuming* in one location for a maximum of three years, after which farmers had to abandon the land for seven or eight years and shift to a different place. Additionally, *jhumers* were also obliged to plant tree seeds on the previously cultivated fields to promote forest growth. In this way, *zamindars* assured a continuous renewal and expansion of the forest and simultaneously a steady flow of revenue. Garo and Koch families were granted, in return, temporary rights of usufruct called *patta*, according to which farmers could cultivate the land for a minimum of ten years and then pass this right on to the next generation without selling it (Khaleque 1992, 113–120). Only the *zamindar* had the right to sell land, but in such cases, he had to pay compensation to the plot-holder (*ibid.*). Later, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, *pattan*, a more permanent form of land tenure, was introduced, through which farmers acquired permanent occupancy rights but still had to pay regular royalties to the *zamindar* (*ibid.*, 114). *Pattan* additionally meant that plot-holders could also sell the land they cultivated. However, for *jhum*, which was carried out exclusively on *chala* lands, the *zamindar* gave only *patta* rights. *Pattan* was granted for *baid* fields, where local farmers began to gradually introduce rice cultivation (Poffenberger 2000). Garo and Koch farmers adopted the technique of wet rice rearing from Bengali agriculturalists, who migrated from other parts of East Bengal and settled around the edge of the forest during the beginning of the nineteenth century (Khaleque 1992, 107). Although the *zamindar* was obliged to give documents to farmers regarding both *patta* and *pattan* land tenure, this was often neglected (*ibid.*, 120).

In Madhupur, not just the land but also all the trees and other forest goods belonged to the *zamindar*. Two major tree classifications prevailed: natural or planted forest trees and planted homestead trees. These were further divided into timber (*dami gach*) and non-timber (*baje gach*). *Zamindars* allowed Garo and Koch dwellers to utilise non-timber trees as fuel wood or for other purposes. Although local inhabitants held no rights over timber, nevertheless, with the permission of the *sarder*, they could fell such valuable trees once a year if they paid royalties (Khaleque 1992, 107).

With the independence of India in 1947 and the separation of Pakistan and East Bengal (today Bangladesh) from the rest of India, the social and political circumstances also changed in Madhupur. During the separation,



Bengali migration to the forest area further intensified (Burling 1997, 68). With this expansion, farming practices changed replacing the previously common shifting cultivation with permanent agriculture. This transformation was further facilitated by the fact that in 1950 the Pakistani government banned *jhum* farming in Madhupur (Khaleque 1992). Garos and Koch were therefore forced to switch over to wet rice cultivation and agroforestry. During this time, pineapple cultivation began in the area and an increasing number of farmers converted their previous *jhum* plots into fruit gardens (Khaleque and Gold 1993). In 1951, through the East Bengal State Tenancy Act, the government abolished the landlord system, and the former tenants, who cultivated land under the *zamindar*, could claim permanent ownership rights directly from the state – granted they could prove their tenancy status with *pattan* deeds. Many Garos and Koch lacked documentation, primarily because if they had legal contracts with the *zamindar* these were *patta* papers (Satter 2006). Hence, the *pattan* criteria explicate why currently over 90 per cent of Garos and Koch in Madhupur (own survey) have no documented legal ownership over their land. Following these events, the government declared Madhupur in 1955 a reserved forest and transferred the management rights of the tree-covered area to the Forest Department. With the takeover of the FD, the developmental era – through the introduction of different forestry programmes – began in Madhupur.

### Chronological Timeline of Forestry Programmes

#### *1950–1960*

Shortly after the state reservation of the forest, the FD introduced the ‘taungya system’ in Madhupur. Under taungya plantation, the FD aimed to combine agriculture with tree plantation to turn ‘the irregular forest into a series of age gradations of Sal and other valuable species’ (Khaleque 1992, 138). Under this system, the forest was divided into nineteen blocks of felling. FD officers allocated each block to individual farmers, who were responsible for clearing the patches and planting Sal saplings with the goal of converting the forest into uniform Sal woodland. As compensation for their labour, farmers were allowed to cultivate certain crops between the rows of trees for up to three years. Additionally, under the taungya system the FD planned to convert settlements within the forest, thereby targeting mainly Garo and Koch hamlets, which were to become ‘forest villages’. Forest villagers were envisaged as the guardians of the trees and responsible not only for the maintenance of the forest but also for reforestation. Yet this

was not to be done independent of state supervision; it was to be carried out under the governance of the FD, and no compensation was to be paid for their work. Farmers also did not benefit from the tree trade that began in Madhupur on a large scale, when the FD felled most of the non-Sal trees. For these reasons, many of the local farmers refused to continue to participate in the taungya project, which during the 1960s slowly ceased even though it was due to continue until 1970 (Poffenberger 2000).

#### *1961–1970*

Contributing to the failure of the taungya system and to the farmers' reluctance to participate in the programme was most likely another state agenda. In 1962, through a gazette notification, the Pakistani government declared the interior of the forest a national park and issued eviction notices to the 542 families who resided in this region. The development of the MNP, however, was suspended due to the 1964–1965 Indo-Pakistan war and the following liberation movement in 1971, through which Bangladesh gained its independence (Poffenberger 2000).

#### *1971–1980*

Immediately after liberation, the government of the newly formed Bangladesh raised the issue of the park anew. In 1975, under the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, villagers within the park area received resettlement notices once again (Satter 2006). According to the plan, all residents had to move to a different location outside of the park allocated by the government. However, this new location was not empty but in fact already occupied by Bengali Muslim migrants who had fled from India and taken refuge in Bangladesh during the Indo-Pak War (*ibid.*). Owing to this fact but also due to the internal political turmoil in the country, between 1975 and 1982 the initiation of the National Park was obstructed once more. The FD also put other development enterprises on hold.

#### *1981–1990*

When General Ershad, the last military head of Bangladesh, took over the office in 1982, the political and social situation of the country seemed to calm for some time. Under the Ershad regime, the development of the MNP proceeded, and during this time the park reached the size it is today. Additionally, through the simultaneous enactment of the Attia Forest Protection Ordinance 1982, the state strengthened its power in the region by naming the FD the omnipotent manager of the forest while suspending land tax collection from forest dwellers inside the MNP. The suspension

of taxation meant the supplementation of the state authority but also the removal of dwellers rights to the forest. Thus, with this decision the state rendered all the inhabitants in Madhupur Forest illegal occupants and nullified not only their previous claims to forest land but also any future claims, since without tax documents dwellers are incapable of proving their continuous occupancy (Satter 2006, 43–44).

With the strengthening of the FD's power, new development projects were introduced in Madhupur, and the FD started with its plan to turn the region into a commercially profitable area. With the financial support of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the agency introduced in 1986 the 'Rubber Plantation Project' and transferred 8,000 acres to the Forest Industries Development Corporation (FIDC), controlled by military personnel, for planting in rubber trees. During the first phase, from 1986 until 1989, the FIDC populated about 4,000 acres with rubber saplings (Poffenberger 2000, 98). Some of the lands upon which rubber trees were planted belonged to local people, leading to villagers repeatedly uprooting the saplings planted on their land. In response to the uprooting actions, the FIDC struck back by burning several of the local houses down (Gain 1998, 115). The conflict between the FIDC and the people of Madhupur gained nationwide attention through the resulting media coverage, and as a consequence, the ADB withdraw their financial support for the second phase (Gain 1998, 132–133). Without funding, the rubber plantation plan slowly faded away.

#### *1991–2000*

The year 1990 was a turning point, not only in Bangladesh with the restoration of parliamentary democracy, but also globally. Here I am referring less to the geopolitical restructuring worldwide than to the discursive shift in the developmental sector through the sustainable development turn following the prescriptions of the Brundtland Commission. This global discursive change also effected practical adjustments in Madhupur. In 1990, under the 'Participatory Forest Management Programme', the FD introduced two new schemes in Madhupur that became known as 'Woodlot' and 'Agroforestry Projects' (Satter 2006, 48–52). Through the first project, the FD aimed to afforest those lands which were either barren or had low productivity, and through the second it intended to start the afforestation of 'encroached' forestland. The ADB and United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) funded both projects while the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) supervised them. Both projects' aim was the introduction and plantation of fast-growing tree species such as eucalyptus, acacia, and cassia, which were then meant to be utilised for fuel wood (Gain 1998, 138–140).

The major difference between these programmes and previous ones was that the FD sought the inclusion of local people in the projects. This meant several things: the FD supplied the trees to the project participants, who then received permission to plant and maintain the plantations under the supervision of the FD. The partakers also received wage payments from the state and additionally they were promised a share from the timber profit (40 per cent in the case of Woodlot and 60 per cent in the case of Agroforestry) that the FD gained from the harvested and auctioned wood (Poffenberger 2000, 98). Moreover, the FD allowed participants to grow their own crops within the rows of the trees during the first three years and to collect forestry products such as leaves, twigs, branches, and fruit. Despite these benefits, local dwellers were reluctant to participate in the project because the FD insisted the trees be planted on already cultivated lands that belonged to the residents. More problematic was that after the plantation, the FD claimed these plots to be state land. Also, the participants could not determine the crops, which instead were selected by the FD. Further misunderstandings occurred surrounding the benefit sharing. After cutting the trees, farmers rarely obtained the share of the profits that was promised to them at the beginning (*ibid.*).

Although the UNDP deemed the projects unsuccessful, ADB extended financial support for a second phase from 1998 until 2006 conducted under the name of 'Forestry Sector Project' as part of the countrywide programme of 'Community Forestry' (Poffenberger 2000). However, since Garos and Koch refused to take part in the schemes, the FD invited farmers – mainly landless Bengalis – from outside Madhupur to participate in the programme, and the FD distributed plots for social forestry among these newcomers. Such actions caused further changes in the composition of the region's population (Poffenberger 2000). Parallel to these projects, the implementation of the MNP continued. In 1999, the FD launched the Madhupur National Park Development Project to establish an ecotourism resort on 3,000 acres within the MNP (Satter 2006, 52–60). Multiple donor agencies, such as GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit), ADB, WB, FAO, and UNDP financed this later project.

#### *2001–2016*

Following the donor agencies recommendations, the FD commenced the construction of a brick wall to separate the ecotourism park from the rest of the forest in 2003. The wall would have surrounded and cut off three villages from the rest of the settlements. To stop the construction, in January 2004 inhabitants of the MNP organised a demonstration during which the police

and the FD officers opened fire on the protestors, killing one person and injuring several more. Over the next several days, multiple protests occurred countrywide. Finally, the government was forced to withdraw from its plan because the protests drew international attention to the events and donors ceased their financial support of the project (FIAN report 2004). Despite this retreat, in 2005 the Bangladeshi government made one last attempt to finish the wall's construction, but a court petition submitted by the Bangladesh Environmental and Law Association on behalf of the affected villagers halted this effort (Satter 2006, 55–60).

For a brief period between 2006 and 2008, the army of Bangladesh seized power in the country. The effects of this were also felt in Madhupur because the FD was able to strengthen its power in the region through the help of the military. During this time, several local activists contesting FD activities were arrested and jailed in Madhupur. In 2007, one male Garo activist was detained and tortured to death while in the custody of the army (Human Rights Watch 2009).

In 2008, parliamentary democracy was restored in Bangladesh once more. In the same year the FD, in collaboration with the financial support of the USAID (United State Agency for International Development), began the 'Integrated Protected Area Co-Management' (IPAC) project in Madhupur under the countrywide programme called 'Nishorgo', 'with the aim of improving local people's livelihoods through greater access to and control over forest resources' (Begum 2011, 158). Several points of action are aggregated under this project: (1) alternative income generating activities; (2) installation of fuel wood efficient stoves; (3) homestead plantation activities; (4) habitat restoration and forest rehabilitation programme; and (5) ecotourism for generating alternative income for local people (Dodson 2013, 199). Yet, due to the reluctant participation of locals this project ultimately failed in Madhupur (*ibid.*). Surprisingly, when one reads through the USAID reports, evaluators advise the FD to use 'more stringent law enforcement' and encourage stricter sanctions and punishments of forest crimes such as 'illegal logging' and 'encroachment of forest land by local people' (International Research Group 2012).

Parallel to this project, in 2010 the FD introduced a separate and independent programme under the name 'Revegetation of Madhupur Forest Through Rehabilitation of Forest Dependent Local and Ethnic Communities' with the aim of rehabilitating 'forest offenders' by providing them with two months of training to become 'forest defenders'. For the participation in the project the FD promised villagers the cancellation of the on-going forest cases (personal discussion with Assistant Commissioner of Forest, August 2012).

The competing visions of the forest and the patterns of the forest cases, which I will discuss below, are connected and evolve against the backdrop of these different programmes outlined above.

### **Competing Visions of the Forest**

To find out more about state perspectives and activities in Madhupur, I decided to visit the Assistant Commissioner of Forest (ACF) in his office on 14 August 2012. The ACF is the head in charge of the MNP and is also responsible for the supervision of the different forestry programmes in Madhupur. His office is located five kilometres away from Pochishmail, directly bordering the beginning of the MNP. Under the ACF department, there are four range offices, further divided into ten beats, meaning that aside from the ACF, the local FD staff comprises four rangers, ten beat officers, and 20 forest guards. In the following pages, instead of offering a singular account of the ACF narration I wish to contrast his perspective with the position of the villagers, all of whom are Garos. What is interesting is that although I conducted the discussions with the ACF and the forest dwellers at different times and in different places, if one reads them side by side they appear as synchronic counter-arguments.

### **Forest Protection vs. Systematic Destruction**

In response to my question of what role the FD plays in the area, the ACF elucidates: 'Actually, we are working here to conserve the natural forest. There are 45,000 acres under the FD. There are different categories of forest. This [Madhupur] is a reserved forest where everything is prohibited unless permitted.' As he reveals later, of these 45,000 acres, only eighteen per cent is natural forest and the rest is either maintained by community forestry or used for other commercial purposes, while a large amount is occupied by forest dwellers: 'Two-third of this forestland is already encroached by the local inhabitants. We have only 7,000 to 8,000 acres of natural forest here. So, we declared a little amount of forest area as a national park. The surrounding areas of the national park we call the social forestry forest.' I am curious what the objective of the national park is in light of this, and the ACF explains, 'The purpose of the national park is to conserve the natural resources intact. Everything is prohibited inside the park. We only permit tourists to see the natural beauty of this forest. As a result, now new species and wildlife are coming back to this area.' Despite such

successful conservation efforts, the decline of the forest remains a headache for the FD. The ACF ruminates upon several reasons for this: 'There are many causes of deforestation: the dependency of the local people on forest goods, the scarcity of alternative fuels and housing materials.' Yet, the most significant and disturbing reason appears to be the conversion of forest into agricultural land: 'The encroachment of forest area for agriculture is one of the main causes of deforestation. They are raising pineapples and bananas by converting the forestland into agricultural land.'

Through the account of the villagers, I get a different picture of the forest and the FD's activities. The eldest village members are still able to recall the existence of a thick forest rich with different tree species and wildlife prior to the separation of India and Pakistan. Many assert that it was with the transfer of the management of the forest to the department that the disappearance of the trees began. Nere, a 78-year-old man, recalls these days in the following way: 'I was in primary school. During that time, this forest was a very deep forest. There were different species of local trees and wildlife was moving very freely. During the Pakistan period, the destruction started. The FD gave permission to businessmen to cut down the big trees inside the forest' (12 August 2012). As Nere continues, I find out that the systematic tearing down of the forest reached its peak after Bangladesh became independent and the military government took rule over the country: 'In 1971, the forest still existed in good proportions. But the destructive actions to destroy the forest were massively undertaken during the period of the autocratic rule of Ershad.' This was also the time when the rubber project was initiated: 'The deep forest was totally cleared for preparation to plant rubber trees. These areas were the deep forest of Sal trees. All those Sal trees were cut down. This way, the forest of Madhupur was destroyed ceaselessly.'

According to Nere, the deforestation continued during the 1990s, when the FD began with the Woodlot and Agroforestry Programmes in the area: 'After the rubber plantation, the government introduced a seedling programme at the *thana* level to make people aware of planting trees and conserving the forest properly. This programme failed because the government did not really work on it. This forest was destroyed again at that time.' The subsequent 'Community Forestry' programme did not change the course of forest decline either:

During the second term of the BNP, the government executed another programme called 'social forestry' [vernacular for community forestry]. Through this so-called social forestry programme, the thousand-year-old

Sal forest was totally destroyed. They cleared the forest to execute the social forestry programme where the deep forest of Sal existed. This was the project: to plant trees in different plots distributed by the FD to the people. Instead of planting trees in empty places, the existing forest was destroyed, cleared, and prepared for the planting of foreign species. (12 August 2012)

Through the words of both the ACF and Nere I gain insights into different views of the forest's management and reasons for the forest's decline. The ACF depicts forest dwellers as the main culprit of deforestation, while Nere counters this view by holding the FD and by extension the state responsible for the destruction of the forest. Such contradictory perspectives are termed by Ramachandra Guha (2001) 'politics of blame', meaning that both sides – the state and the forest people – are absorbed in holding each other responsible for forest degradation. Moreover, it is interesting in the ACF account that he reiterates a classical Malthusian argument that is a widely accepted idea in the forestry literature. According to this theory, population growth and the parallel decline of stocks are the causes of deforestation, justifying the need for state intervention that gains legitimacy through exclusive scientific expertise of managing the forest.

### **Scientific Management vs. Profit Making**

The ACF explains scientific management in the following way: 'We have a mechanism in managing the forest. We call it scientific management. After five years, we trim the plantations to clear the space to provide more space for the trees for their better growth. We call it mechanical trimming.' After a short break he continues, clarifying what exactly this trimming means: 'We cut down half of the trees in a hectare of the land so that there is space between the trees, and they get sufficient light for their better growth. After cutting down, we collect all the trees to the nearest office, and we sell them out as firewood to locals.' The ACF does not deny that such management serves foremost commercial purposes, but this is exactly what villagers view critically – because from their perspective, it contradicts environmental protection aims.

In relation to these FD practices Jothi, a 43-year-old Garo woman, voices the following critique: 'They claim that these trees are planted to preserve the forest and the environment. But these trees are cut down after ten years. So, what is the purpose of shouting about preserving the environment? This is done just for commercial purposes and not for preserving the forest' (13 July 2012). Also, the ACF's claim that the felled trees are sold to local people



to meet their needs for firewood is rejected. As Nere reveals, the timber is privately sold to timber traders in the area: 'After eight or ten years, they cut down all the trees planted in different plots. Most of the time these trees are felled and sold secretly to businessmen' (12 August 2012). The corruption of the FD, to which Nere draws attention with his last words, is a widely known and documented fact in the whole South-Asian subcontinent and has been since the colonial time. For this reason, the organisation is often described as the 'most vilified government institution' (Singh 2015, 67). Yet, what interests me here is not corruption but rather the fusion of commercial goals with scientific management and environmental protection.

The idea of scientific forestry originated in Germany and France in the beginning of the eighteenth century and was later disseminated in post/colonial contexts (Peluso 1992, 7). The introduction of such practices was aimed at the rationalisation of forest management and the justification of state control over valuable resources. Rationalisation should not be understood as an aim towards consistency (Peluso 1992). Rather, contradictions lie at the heart of scientific forestry, since in practice different ideas and objectives are blended. The example of Madhupur is particularly illustrative. Scientific management means here replacing indigenous species with monocultures and the planting of fast-growing trees, which can be then cut and commercialised in an accelerated way. Thus, as the ACF at the end of our discussion reveals, over 100 brick-burning factories and about the same number of wood saw mills and furniture production firms surround Madhupur Forest. The ACF estimates the timber needs of the brick factories to be 640,000 trees per year, which equals the clearing of 1,000 acres of forest area annually. Consequently, the timber trade must be a lucrative business in which a variety of actors are involved: businessmen specialising in wood commerce, FD officers, police, local government actors, and forest dwellers. Such heightened demand for wood raises doubts over the ACF's previously asserted argument that conversion of forestland into agricultural fields is the main cause of deforestation.

Interestingly, the goal of profit making does not unequivocally denote the renunciation of environmental protection. Rather, the two ambitions are maintained side by side, even if they are in conflict with each other. This is exactly what Jothi and Nere criticise as signs of inconsistency and hypocrisy. Bhrigupati Singh (2015), in the context of Rajasthan, observes similar processes but rejects the rationalisations of forest management because, according to him, it does not accurately capture the simultaneous appearance of 'institutional mode of power and incapacity' (69). Rather, he suggests terming such practices a 'productive economy in which, as a mode

of governmentality, forests are seen as a source of revenue' (ibid.). Such procedures make much more sense in the present if we see them not as a break from colonial forest management, but rather a continuation, since one should not forget that the Forest Department during the British rule 'was basically a commercial enterprise' (ibid.). This mercantile profile of the FD did not lose its prominence with the introduction of environmental protection and community forestry. On the contrary, joint forest management represents an opportunity to increase revenue from natural resources without surrendering control over the territory and while simultaneously striving to incorporate local inhabitants under state authority by introducing community forestry – in its vernacular form, social forestry – in Madhupur. Community forestry as a contemporary practice of forest management embraces the idea of ecological sustainability and aims for biodiversity protection by propagating at the same time development with the formal inclusion of local people in forest control (Charnley and Poe 2007). These same core ideas are manifested also in the context of Madhupur.

### **Inclusive Development vs. Refusal of Participation**

The ACF details the objective of community forestry in the following way: 'When there is a huge pressure on the forest here created by the local people, we consider and convert the surrounding areas into social forestry through a programme called "Community Forestry Project".' Upon my question as to what this exactly means, he explains: 'This is a kind of afforestation programme in which people's participation is a must. If we take a participant under this programme, we give him one hectare of land with a written agreement. Under this agreement there are some provisions, some rules and exercises.' He remains vague as to what exactly these provisions are and instead highlights the advantages of the project: 'We also provide some benefits. One is that the participant can cultivate agricultural crops on that land, which is handed over to him with an agreement for ten years. Another benefit is a fifty-fifty profit share from the cut trees.' Yet, as he reveals later, the programme has been unsuccessful due to the forest dwellers' reluctance to participate in the project disclosing at the same time the limits of the FD's authority in Madhupur: 'The problem is that when the government takes on any project in the area to plant trees, local people do not allow us to do this because they consider the land as their own. They are afraid that the land would be handed over to the FD.'

During a discussion with Nere and Anjeet, the two men confirm the words of the ACF, explicating villagers' grounds for reluctance more clearly:

'This year in June the FD was offering us to plant saplings on our own land. We said to them that we would not plant saplings on our land.' Nere paraphrases the interaction with forest dwellers and the FD point by point: 'We told them to plant saplings on empty lands where there are no trees. They don't need to give us saplings of different trees to plant on our land because we always plant different local trees. Our land is not empty.' Anjeet supplements Nere's narration: 'They said that if we plant those saplings we would benefit. But we did not accept it and said to them that if we would plant the trees given by them later, they would claim that the trees and the land are the property of the FD' (10 September 2013). Such refusals and suspicions are not unfounded, given that in the past there were occurrences of the FD claiming the land upon which trees were planted. Nere and Anjeet's doubts are based upon previous experiences and encounters with the FD. Yet, villagers' rejections make more sense when one takes a closer look at the competing claims over who owns the forest.

Regarding ownership rights the ACF elucidates: 'Before 1950, this forest was under the Natore emperor. After 1950 the government took over the forestland in a legal way and handed it over to the FD for scientific management of forest resources. The government considers this whole forest as reserved forest.' He acknowledges the presence of the dwellers prior the reservation but at the same time refutes their rights to the land: 'Many people were living inside and outside the forest at that time and they demanded the land as their own land. But they have no legal rights. The government does not give these kinds of certificates because this whole forestland was handed over to the FD and it is considered as forestland. They have no certified legal occupancy.' What legal occupancy means and why the government does not consider previous occupancy rights to be valid remain unclear. In the face of such claims, villagers stand perplexed. Thus, the rejection of their right to the land is a new phenomenon that materialised after the end of the colonial rule. Pemal expresses his bafflement over this,

The government claims that this forest is a reserved forest since the British period. But the British government also recognised our existence here through the land records and the government of Pakistan allowed many people here to make records of land. So, why did the past governments give us a chance to be the owners of these lands if this is not our land? We also have the receipts of revenues that we paid to the government in those days. Even there are the revenue receipts paid till 1984. Then during the period of Ershad, the government stopped accepting land revenues from us. Governments themselves contradict each other. One

government allowed us to make the records of our land and the other refused to receive revenues from us. They declared the documents of our land invalid. (13 July 2012)

From these competing claims and contradictions, one gains a different insight into why villagers refuse to participate in community forestry. In contrast to popular belief, participatory forest programmes do not mean that local users control forestland and that forest products improve since the ownership of the forest remains in state hands. The management rules, as the ACF underlines, are determined not by the participants but by state actors and are centralised. Villagers merely gain usufruct rights and a share of the profits. Community forest programmes are not a move away from centralised state power towards devolution but rather an extension of state authority (Sundar 2001). Thus, 'community involvement in conservation and management often represents merely a shift to more micro-disciplinary forms of power' (*ibid.*, 352). However, the conflicts that arise within the frame of such projects should be seen as not only territorial but also legal. Forest conservancy cannot be understood exclusively through the lens of territorialisation since the production of rules and rights often supersedes territorialisation procedures (Sivaramakrishnan 1997), and where land rights are denied or unclear, local farmers refuse or deliberately obstruct forestry programmes (Peluso 1992). Indeed, the forest dwellers' dissent in Madhupur seems to arise above all due the contestation of the historical rights over land ownership. Moreover, when state authorities face the danger of losing control over the forest, they may turn to coercive techniques to re-establish and continue law and order (Peluso 1992, 10). Pemal from Madhupur confirms this observation: 'When we started to oppose or protest against the projects, the FD as well as the government filed false cases against us. Filing cases against us is a plus point for the government' (13 August 2012).

Pemal draws attention to a particular juncture where the developmental and the penal state converge, indicating that forest management and the law are inseparable from each other. The rise of the notion of forest criminality is, therefore, an effect of this entanglement. However, the existence of law does not necessarily mean that the people upon which the law is enforced accept it. Nancy Peluso (1992) identifies forest crimes such as poaching or tree felling as deliberate actions of forest dwellers to defy the state and thus form part of the 'repertoires of resistance'. While I find this argumentation convincing, it stops short of taking a more differentiated look at the everyday effects of amplified legal power. The aim of the next section is – through the inspection of forest cases that surface in Madhupur – exactly this. The

abundance of such cases indicates that legal contestations go beyond simple disputes over territorial claims and the right to utilise forest resources. In the interpretation of these forest cases I will dissect not only the different notions of *aakrosh* but I will also utilise Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial*. What interests me about K's story is that arrest (*Verhaftung*) denotes more than losing freedom; rather, as Patrick Bridgwater (1994) claims, it stands for becoming entangled in the very fabric of power. This is one point where I see a parallel between the situation in Madhupur and *The Trial*. But there are three further similarities that I will highlight gradually while unpacking the story of the lawsuits.

## Kafka in the Woods

### Divine Law

The most important legal instrument determining the preservation and protection of forests, enforcing forest law, and sanctioning forest offences is the 1927 Forest Act of Bangladesh. Since 1971, the act has been amended three times (in 1973, 1990, and 2000). These revisions added slight modifications to the Act but did not alter its content in any substantial way. What is of interest in this Act here is found under section 26, where the government distinguishes and specifies two different forest delinquencies that are then also sanctioned differently. In the first point under section 26, activities such as trespassing, grazing, and charcoal burning are enumerated. The state punishes such transgressions with six months of imprisonment and a fine of 2,000 Taka. Under the second point, tree felling, conversion of forest land into farmland, and clearing of the forest for the preparation of *jhum* cultivation count as more serious misconducts and are penalised by five years in prison and an additional fee of 50,000 Taka. The law moreover entitles forest officers – a position not lower than a ranger – to sanction, to arrest without a warrant, or to charge by issuing a lawsuit against a person who is caught transgressing the law or if the officer beyond reasonable doubt has reason to believe that a person is involved in the above-mentioned activities (section 64).

Since forest offences are criminal activities, the magistrates deal with such lawsuits. According to the ACF, between 2000 and 2012 the FD filed 5,000 to 6,000 such cases against local people in Madhupur and many more have been pending in the court since the 1990s. The villagers confirm this number. Due to the abundance of the forest cases the government

appointed a special Forest Magistrate in the 1990s. This Magistrate deals exclusively with forest disputes in Tangail city, located about 20 kilometres from Madhupur. The court in Tangail city is an impressive seven-story colonial building. Its corridors and rooms are always filled with people, and due to this congestion, there are also several improvised desks for lawyers set up outside the court building. In this way, the judicial place resembles a bazaar instead of a place of law and order. While talking with a lawyer who specialises exclusively in such forest cases, I discover that most of the time a hearing takes just a couple of minutes. In many cases no decision is made or is postponed because either the accused or the forest officer, who is simultaneously the plaintiff and the witness, is not present. Many of the defendants do not appear in court because they have no knowledge of the lawsuit, or they avoid the court because of other cases pending against them. The forest officers, on the other hand, often have already been transferred to another area when the court finally takes up the case.

These cases have transformed everyday life in Madhupur profoundly. One of the most troubling effects of the lawsuits is economic impairment from multiple forest cases running over an extended period, as Sohita and Laksh, both men over 50 years old, explain:

Sohita: Since 1990 I have cases. In 1991, 92, 93, and even when I was in jail cases were filed against me. I was arrested in 1993 and released in 1998. Till now I have 52 cases. These cases have not been dismissed and they are still running. I must appear in front of the court several times a month. I had to lease my land to others just to run the cases. (15 August 2012)

Laksh: Since 1990 I have been running the forest cases. First, I was continuously running my cases in 1991, 92, 93, and 94. I had 46 cases and among them 35 cases have already been dismissed but eleven are still remaining. Now I have nothing for my family because I was spending a lot of money running the cases. My children stopped going to school. I have been running these cases for 22 years but the cases are not finished yet. On the other hand, a murder case is dismissed within one or two years. Though the hearings of these forest cases are held several times and the witnesses are present during the hearings, the dismissal of these cases has not yet been done. (11 August 2012)

The second negative effect is forcing forest dwellers to hide to avoid continuous jail time. Anjeet highlights this aspect with the following words: 'Suppose we make bail on five cases, but there is a warrant for other cases. At the time we come out from the jail, we are sent back to the jail. Many of us do not stay

at home especially during the night. We hide because the police will arrest us.' The necessity of concealment has become an everyday part of life in Madhupur. The house construction styles mirror this. Every room has, next to the main entrance, one or two additional doors affording an escape route for those who are accused in case of the police arriving during the night.

The third damaging impact affects women who have a son or husband on the run. Many women in Madhupur are left alone with the burden of running the households by themselves, securing income for the family as wage labourers and worrying for their men. Consider the following words from a 60-year-old woman, Pushpo, who has two sons charged with lawsuits: 'When my sons hide outside in the jungle, I cannot eat or sleep. I do not feel like eating food because there is this anxiety in my mind for them. Sometimes I think that the night will never end.' She continues, highlighting the load of work abandoned women have to perform: 'We get up at about 4 am for cooking. After preparing everything for the children we go out for work at 8 am and return at 5 pm. And after finishing all work at home we go to sleep at 12 am. This is our daily routine' (17 September 2014).

Yet, what is surprising is that despite these multiple negative effects, none of the inhabitants demand the abolishment of the forest law. This indicates that while the authority of the developmental state is refused, the penal state's legitimacy remains unquestioned. Even those who are criminalised and thus suffer from numerous forest cases view the law as a necessity which cannot be removed or changed. This reverberates also among many activists, who instead of insisting on the removal or the change of the Forest Act rather stress the need to set up mobile courts to speed up the lawsuits. A lawyer at the court whom I asked to explain the logic behind these cases and their procedures says the following: 'Madam, this is a simple answer. This is the law of the country' (29 August 2016). After these words he looked at me triumphantly, as if he had explained everything. In a way, he did indeed say a lot, given that he drew attention to an interesting aspect: *the deification of law*. The acceptance of the law as 'divine law – unchangeable through the will of men' is a specific Kafkaesque notion that allows a glimpse into how humans become entangled in their own constructions that in the end overwhelm them (Arendt 2005, 72). This is what absurdity denotes in the Kafkaesque sense, not just the frustrating experience of navigating the labyrinths of bureaucracy, as is often highlighted in the popular understanding. Thus, the absurd in Kafka's writing illuminates a type of power that holds the individual captive by emerging not only from outside but also from within. To borrow the words of Begoña Aretxaga, the intense effect of this power is to 'hold not only on one's life but also on one's

soul' (2003, 404). Humans are arrested by their own ideas. Yet, there were still some unanswered questions. What is the motivation behind filing so many cases? How do people from Madhupur view this practice, especially against the backdrop of community forestry?

### Existence as a Sin

Jothi delivers answers to these above posed questions with the following words: 'They claim that they want to improve our life here. But then they are filing these forest cases one after another. What kind of improvement is this? This is just to harass us and evict us from our land' (28 August 2016). Profullo, a man in his late 40s, who is also present at the discussion complements Jothi's explanation: 'They have filed many false cases against us without any kind of consideration. So, this continuous activity against us proves that the government does not want us to live here'. Indeed, the forest cases and their excessive number seem to run counter to the efforts of including and enhancing the quality of life for inhabitants in Madhupur through the community forestry programmes. This is the point where one can gain a glance into the penal state as an uncanny Leviathan lurking behind the façade of a benevolent development state.

Moreover, as Jothi and Profullo highlight, punishment is less about penalising the individual transgression of the law than about purging the forest of the dwellers. Thus, what is criminalised in Madhupur is the presence of the dwellers in the forest. This I see as another Kafkaesque aspect. Existence as a sin is a recurring theme of the novel *The Trial* and it appears most clearly in one of the most famous passages of the book, the conversation between K and the priest: "You are considered guilty. Your case will probably not even go beyond a minor court. Provisionally at least, your guilt is seen as proven." "But I'm not guilty," said K., "there's been a mistake. How is it even possible for someone to be guilty? We're all human beings here, one like the other." "That is true," said the priest, "but that is how the guilty speak" (Kafka 1925, 251–252). What I seek to underscore by drawing upon this extract from the novel is that regardless of whether someone violated the law in Madhupur, from the perspective of the state they are all guilty by simply existing. Local people's protestations against such accusations by drawing attention to the fact of false accusations does not prove their innocence but rather underscores their guilt as humans (Bridgwater 1994, 112). Jothi illuminates this aspect when she says, 'They are planning to raise animals like tigers, bears and other animals in this area. From these activities we understand that the government is keen to evict us from here.' As humans,



people from Madhupur have no legitimacy claiming the forest as a living place. Considering these assertions and the manner of the persecutions, the inhabitants' *aakrosh* (wrath and revenge) seems rather unsurprising.

### Aakrosh

Allow me to illustrate *aakrosh* by introducing the story of Anton, a 42-year-old married man with three children, known in Madhupur as a person tackling 79 forest cases. I had heard about Anton from other inhabitants of Madhupur, but in 2012 and 2013 I was unsuccessful in contacting him. This is because he was hiding in the forest while continuously changing his location to avoid police arrest and, therefore, no one knew exactly where he was. Although few have so many lawsuits as Anton, nevertheless his case is not unique as over 500 predominantly but not exclusively Garo male inhabitants of Madhupur are in hiding and thus share a similar fate. In September 2014, I finally was able to locate and talk to him. Due to the aggravation of his tuberculosis, he was forced to leave hiding and surrender. Capitulation means here that he entered a programme initiated by the FD, which aims to rehabilitate so-called 'forest offenders' and train them to become 'forest defenders' by supplying them with two months tuition for training and some basic financial support. Participation in this programme provided Anton with a moment of relief, because during the programme he ostensibly became part of the FD and did not have to fear being arrested by the police. Many men who have a high number of forest cases and are tired of hiding followed Anton's example, hoping that their lawsuits eventually would be dropped, as was promised by the FD. Others, however, continue to defy the FD and persist in their efforts to remain in concealment.

Anton is a quiet and skinny man with a thin moustache. Our conversation takes place in his home where I asked him to tell me about his time of exile. Anton begins his narration with the following words: 'When I got a warrant for the forest cases, the police could arrest me any time anywhere if they found me. When I heard from others that the police were coming to look for me, I had to hide. It was difficult for me to move inside the village.' He further elaborates upon what such concealment means: 'I even could not go to funerals. When I was sick, I could not go to the hospital for treatment. Most of the time I could not sleep in my house during the night. I spent the nights in the jungle or sometimes in my relative's house.' Upon my question if others joined him during such hiding, he replied, 'I was always alone. Because it was safer that nobody knew where I was hiding. I also did not tell my wife where I was hiding because if she knew the police might have found

out where I was.’ Anton remembers his time of self-induced banishment as especially challenging: ‘I had to tolerate the bites of the mosquitoes. Most of the time I had to stay in the dark and I could not use the torchlight because other people near the jungle might have seen me hiding there. They might tell others. Who knows, they might inform the police or the FD.’ Only during the rainy season did Anton pursue alternative accommodation: ‘When it was raining, I took shelter in someone’s house. They were my relatives and friends.’ As Anton reveals, taking refuge in someone’s home, however, is also not a harmless endeavour: ‘I had to be very sure where I take shelter because you do not know who has what in his or her mind.’ Due to this, Anton often decided to remain in the forest even while it was raining: ‘When I did not take shelter in others’ houses, I used a plastic bag to make a shed over my head so that I do not get wet. And I had to stand for a long time till the rain stopped. Sometimes it was raining for four to six hours during the night.’

During our conversation, Anton finds two points related to forest cases in Madhupur shocking. One is connected to the manner of the legal proceedings: ‘When the FD files any case against us, they themselves become the witness of the incident. A police officer needs a witness. But the forest officers do not need such a witness outside their department. A person from their department can become a witness of a forest case.’ The second scandalous aspect that he highlights is connected to the high number of lawsuits based on false accusations: ‘There are many forest cases in Tangail District. Very few of them are real cases. I would say that 95 per cent of them that were filed against *adivasis*, and poor people are false cases. If you want to file cases against a person to create a problem for her, one or two cases are enough. But here a person has 40 to 50 cases.’ He expresses indignation regarding these towering numbers of disputes: ‘There is no record in the history of the world that a person has 40 to 70 cases. There is no example in the world like this.’ He also reveals his interpretation of this practice: ‘The main target of this is to harass us and evict us from our land. When people cannot run their cases, they run away or leave this area, losing everything that they have here.’ At the end of our conversation, I ask him how long he had hidden; Anton responds, ‘Since 1991. It is about 22 to 24 years.’ Upon my question as to how he assesses this time, he pauses for a few minutes before answering: ‘There is a lot of *aakrosh* inside my mind when I think about it.’ This was not the first time that I came across the concept of *aakrosh*. The sentiment cropped up in different discussions with different people; however, it was during my encounter with Anton that this emotion was so directly communicated.

*Aakrosh* is not a Bengali but a Hindi word. It gained footing in Bangladesh through the reception of a famous art-house movie carrying the same title

directed by Govind Nihalini and starring the popular actor Om Puri. The film narrates the story of a peasant, Bhiku, who is framed by the murderers of his wife for the crime. During his entire persecution Bhiku remains silent and does not oppose the unjust accusations because he does not believe in the justice system. The movie's main goal is to disclose the raw violence and corruption of those in power in rural India and the indignation of those who are oppressed. *Aakrosh* in Madhupur has similar connotations to the Hindi usage. It is viewed as a strong and active emotion combining feelings of intense wrath and suppressed aggression.

Indeed, if one takes a closer look at the narration of Anton, *aakrosh* comes through as a moral feeling – as an actualisation of felt injustice over false accusations and over lost years of life that can never be recovered. Additionally, Anton's *aakrosh* is related to the excessive use and abuse of the Forest Act and to the absurd manner of legal persecution through which the accuser and the witness merge. Strong emotions that invoke some form of rage or wrath are often expressions of moral concern and can be seen as reactions to circumstances of historical alienation. However, they are also connected to a sense of injured self-integrity (Fassin 2013). Nayan, a 60-year-old male teacher who is a much-respected man in Madhupur, draws attention exactly to this fractured sense of personal dignity, 'I am a teacher. But through these forest cases they made me a common criminal.'

Yet, there is more to *aakrosh* than simply an experience of injustice. To disentangle its different meanings, one must ask above all, where is *aakrosh* directed? Only such a question reveals two additional layers that *aakrosh* carries. *Aakrosh*, accordingly, also connotes a boiling desire for destruction and revenge steered not only in the direction of the forest and by extension the FD but also towards fellow inhabitants sharing the same living space. In its dual manifestation, *aakrosh* discharges in self-destruction, revealing a poisonous aspect of social life in Madhupur. As I came to know, not all these forest cases are false. Many of the accused were indeed innocent at the beginning, but after being released from jail and spending a large amount of money on the lawsuits, their rage turns into an active revenge. Anjeet formulates this in the following way: 'When the level of the cases is high some think that since they were not really the criminal of the forest cases, but they were charged innocently and have to run the cases year after year, then they sometimes get the courage of *aakrosh* and go to the forest and they destroy the forest' (11 August 2012). These acts of revenge can be interpreted as acts of seeking out a form of justice or reclaiming redress and thus gaining momentary satisfaction as well as recovery of a sense of dignity.

However, these acts of retribution are also relevant from the vantage point of how victims transform into perpetrators and how ‘punishment seeks offence’ (Kundera 1988), marking a third Kafkaesque turn. In one essay, Milan Kundera argues that a particularity of the Kafkaesque is a reversed logic where the criminal act occurs after the sentence (1988, 91). To illustrate this point, he narrates the story of a Czech engineer during the time of the communist regime. The engineer is invited to present at an international conference in England. Upon his return home, he finds out that everybody thinks that he stayed back in the West. His case is highly publicised in the newspapers. The engineer sets up to prove his innocence by going from office to office in the Home Ministry. In the state department, authorities acknowledge that a mistake has been made and assure the engineer that no action will be taken against him. The engineer, however, notices afterwards an increased surveillance by state officials. His telephone is tapped, and he feels constantly observed. His insecurity grows, and he finally has no other choice but to flee Czechoslovakia: ‘And so he actually becomes an émigré’ (ibid., 89), subsequently fulfilling the accusation. The same parallel can be drawn regarding what is happening in Madhupur. Thus, many of the delinquencies are committed after the punishments or accusations. Revenge stands, therefore, also as a notion for the absurd in a sense of reversed logic when the delinquent act is executed only after the punishment.

Yet, revenge points also to the self-destructive. On one hand, when the people of Madhupur are actively involved in cutting out the trees, they dismantle the foundation upon which their existence is secured, namely the forest. On the other hand, the acts of retribution are directed not only towards the representative of the state but also towards fellow dwellers. If one pays careful attention to the words of Anton, there is a second layer of meaning woven into his words, which goes beyond the oppositional relation between the FD and the inhabitants of Madhupur. Anton more than once indicated being careful about whom he trusts and about being unsure about the intentions of persons who provided shelter for him during the time he was hiding. *Aakrosh* through this perspective refers to a potential betrayal, revealing internal conflicts, distrust, and grievances that might arise not only from distant kin but also from close relatives or neighbours, thus disclosing a far more dangerous realm of the social life in Madhupur. This will be much clearer through Nayan’s and Anjeet’s words:

Nayan: Many people are still hiding. The forest department always asks where these people are. They tell people to inform them when they come home so that the police can arrest them. Sometimes local people give

the information. When I feel *aakrosh* against you I will not express it by hitting you. I will keep in my mind that you have done something against me and then I will do something against you. (28 September 2016)

Anjeet: Say a forest officer caught a person in the forest. Then the forest officer starts to torture him and asks him who is with him. And say the person has a problem with me. Then suddenly he tells the forest officer that I was with him in the forest. From that the Forest Department files cases against me. (29 September 2016)

*Aakrosh*, from this point of view, allows insight into the dark side of the everyday (Das 1998; 2014). Thus, the mundane stands not only for a site of comfort and routine or even ordinary resistance but also for a site of 'annihilating doubts' (Das 2014, 281). This means that very often the 'threat to the ordinary does not' (ibid.) come from outside but instead carries the seeds of danger and disorder within its structure, and these are often dangers that lurk in the dark corners of intimacy and familiarity (Geschiere 2013).

*Aakrosh* as an act of revenge and self-destruction allows insight into how an accused becomes an offender and how this sentiment refers to a potential betrayal of those who are close to forest dwellers. Through the dissection of *aakrosh*, such dichotomies as victim and delinquent, oppressor and dominated, ordinary and extraordinary, familial and dangerous, wrong and right seem suddenly to collapse, allowing a much more fine-grained analysis of what is really at stake, rather than seeing *aakrosh* merely as an expression of 'everyday forms of resistance' or indignation. *Aakrosh* additionally allows a glimpse into how deeply the destructive power of the penal state penetrates the everyday in Madhupur. In face of intimate suspicions and betrayals, it is hard to imagine that hope for common solidarity might be possible, yet there were fleeting moments that gave hope that forging ties is still conceivable in Madhupur. This came in the form of humour.

## The Social Force of Scorn

Humour surfaced in Madhupur in two different forms. In its first appearance, it was directed towards the state ridiculing the FD and its initiatives of forest management. In its other form it appeared as self-irony, cracking jokes about one's own bitter situation. I will first demonstrate the latter.

Jest is part of the everyday repertoire among Garos in Madhupur during the afternoons, when the larger *mahari* (clan) and neighbours gather in the courtyard of one house to consume rice beer. While these afternoon

assemblies are gender diverse, the meetings at tea stalls represent public places, where only men belonging to different ethnic constellations participate. Regardless of this, both social gathering spots provide opportunities for gossip and social entertainment in the form of joking and teasing each other, wittily crossing thereby not only gender but also ethno-religious boundaries. During the *mahari* get together, people often ask around for an update about how many cases others have while trying to trump each other and compete for who has the most. Some men playfully court women and ask them directly if they have an intention to marry them. The reply on such requests is usually a prompt question: 'It depends. How many cases do you have?' If the answer reveals a high number, then the asked female refuses the marriage proposal: 'I won't marry a fugitive! I need somebody who can support me!' Such exchanges are often followed by loud and 'hard laughter' (Goldstein 2003).

Many jokes are also directed towards those who joined the rehabilitation programme of the FD and were trained as 'forest defenders'. On one such occasion, Pemal teased Sohit: 'So since you participate as community forest worker, they call you forest defender. But when you do not work for them they will again call you forest offender' (15 August 2012). Pemal indicates here merely a shift in semantics but doubts any real change in the situation. On another occasion, amusement grew out of a situation in which men refused the FD's offer to plant trees on forest dwellers' land by arguing that Garo men cannot make decisions about such issues, being subordinated to women: 'We told them that according to our tradition women are the owners of our land. If we agree and allow the FD to plant trees on our land, we will get trouble at home from women. We are not against their plan, but for permission they have to ask our women' (12 August 2012).

Much more differentiated and frequent was sarcasm aimed at various FD activities. Utpol, a young man in his late 20s, comments on the development programmes with the following words: 'The FD is doing this not for the protection of the environment but for bringing money in from outside the country. These so-called development projects are just the source of asking for aid from the foreign countries. These are nothing but bogus. It is a game of pouring money into the pockets of the officers' (26 June 2012). Also, the naivety of foreign funding agencies and the way the programmes are advertised are frequent targets of witty criticism. Take for example the assessment of Pemal: 'When they make any project, they give very nice names to the project and the donors are also very happy to donate for the project. They present this like finding a big piece of gold for the poor people.' In contrast to Pemal, Anjeet draws attention to the senselessness

of the ecotourism park: 'And the eco-park is also another idea which is a joke. The FD said that they would put fences around the eco-park so that the animals are protected, but then the wild animals will not be able to move freely inside the forest. This is an absolutely ridiculous idea of the government' (10 September 2013). On another occasion Anjeet finds fault with the recent rehabilitation aim of the FD: 'So now they want to rehabilitate us on our own land. Doing this, later they will be able to claim that our land is their land upon which they rehabilitated us. This is a scene like in a Bangla movie: a trap to catch a monkey by showing him a banana' (11 August 2012).

Also, the FD's practices of punishing and capturing transgressors of forest law are not spared from such social comments. Pemal calls attention to this: 'The forest officers are eager and always out catching thieves, but the trees keep disappearing during the night. In reality, they are the main criminals and thieves. They are looting in front of the eyes of the people' (13 July 2012). The loss of the forest is a recurring topic of social criticism. Forest dwellers often designate the forest as a 'virtual jungle' existent only on paper and in power point presentations that are then shown to foreign donors, who from time to time visit the area. The rehabilitation project of the FD that came to an end in 2016 is another issue of contempt. Thus, after the termination of the programme, the cases of those who participated were not dismissed. Now, as Nayan reveals, the warrants for arrest against former 'forest defenders' are renewed: 'Last night one of the community forest workers (CFW) was arrested from my village. The promise of our government was that they will dismiss all the forest cases and there will be no more forest cases. Therefore, the CFWs did not go to the court for hearing.' At this point he laughs. I ask him what is so funny about this, he replies: 'I am laughing about the programme of the government and the promise of the government. I am laughing because they promised in front of the people that they will stop the forest cases if we participate in the project. But now that the project ended the CFWs can be arrested any time' (28 August 2016).

How can one interpret such scorn or sarcasm? Rather than viewing humour as a disguise for aggressiveness (Freud), a coping mechanism (Oring 1984), an act of rebellion of those who are oppressed (Scott 1985), or an extension of the tragic (Bernal 2013), I wish to emphasise its capacity to bring people together. Thus, humour's most important aspect is that it is directed towards an audience, but not just any kind. Humour addresses those who can understand the joke by sharing the same experiences and knowledge. Whether the social order can be overthrown or not, therefore, might not be the most important capacity of scorn. Humour's power lies in its inherently social character, allowing the reparation of fractured community

ties, neutralising the poisonous aspect of everyday betrayers, and bridging grievances by disclosing shared experiences. Thus, people in Madhupur, when exercising humour, not only ridicule their distress and thus refuse subjugation, but also critique the Janus-faced developmental state. Most importantly, however, they laugh together.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I sought to answer the question of how to explain the high number of forest cases against the background of community forestry in Madhupur. I have argued that in the context of community forestry, the Forest Department, and by extension the state, accepts the presence of the dwellers in the forest, and through different development programmes it even aims to include them in forest management. In contrast, the excessive number of forest cases is not only a misuse of the 1927 Forest Act but also reveals a striving of the state to purge the forest of its people. Through community forestry and legal actions, two different state powers materialise in Madhupur: the developmental and the punitive state. At first glance these two state authorities seem contrary to each other, yet a closer look exhibits that these two different state configurations stand not in opposition but rather complement each other. Thus, the penal state enters into force because the FD is incapable of establishing the legitimacy of the developmental state in the local context. Forest dwellers continuously sabotage and refuse to participate in the different developmental programmes that the Department has been introducing in the area since the 1950s. The reason behind the refusal of these projects is that the forest dwellers' land rights remain contested while they also continue to doubt the value and the benefits of these schemes. The FD, to break the reluctance of the local forest dwellers, reacts by mobilising penal law and imposing excessive punishment. The goal is to force them to participate in the development programmes while at the same time establishing state authority in the area. On the surface level, therefore, the forest cases seem to indicate that they are about power struggles between the FD and forest dwellers, but a closer look at the lawsuits reveals that the disagreements go beyond simple disputes over territorial claims and the right to utilise forest resources.

In order to work out the complicated layers of meaning within the lawsuits, I draw upon three Kafkaesque notions of the absurd that lurk in the forest cases: (1) the acceptance of the law as a necessity, (2) existence as a sin, and (3) a reversed logic where punishment does not follow the delinquent act, but rather punishment precedes the transgression of the law. First, concerning



the forest lawsuits, it is surprising that even those who are criminalised by the Forest Act and suffer financial decline as well as being forced to hide do not demand the repeal of the law, but rather call for the acceleration of legal procedures through mobile courts. This kind of conviction allows us to see that while the legitimacy of the developmental state is rejected, the penal state's jurisdiction remains unquestioned. The authority of the disciplinary state originates from the fact of seeing the law as a necessity unchangeable through the will of humans. Second, I argued that through the forest cases it is not so much the transgression of the law that is criminalised, but rather the presence of the dwellers in the forest. Nature is a realm carved out as living place for plants and animals. Humans have no place in this ecosystem. Instead, they are seen as a disturbance and danger to an increasingly fragile environment. The preservation of nature as a pristine sphere of the world serves as justification and also a motivation to remove the people of Madhupur from the forest. Third, the purging actions of the Forest Department through the forest cases induce among the residents an intense sense of wrath coloured by a desire for revenge, expressed in the vernacular form with the word *aakrosh*. I suggested three different interpretations of *aakrosh*. On one hand, it stands for a response to on-going injustices and the misuse of power, though on the other hand its direction must also be taken into account. Thus, *aakrosh* as a realised act of revenge is directed towards the forest and FD but also towards fellow inhabitants. The residents who avenge themselves for their legal punishment actually transform from victims into perpetrators. This is what Kundera terms the reversed logic of the absurd – when punishment seeks offence. One could argue that the acts of revenge are about redress and thus part of the repertoire of everyday resistance. I do not reject this, but instead contend that considering revenge as rebellion impedes one from seeing the destructive character of these actions. Thus, with retribution villagers dismantle not only the foundation upon which their existence is based, i.e. the forest, but also disrupt community ties by betraying each other. By taking a closer look at the ramifications of *aakrosh*, I aimed to illuminate that the everyday is not merely routine activities or comfort but also carries within its structure danger and the possibility of betrayal. *Aakrosh* directed towards fellow inhabitants spreads suspicion on a large scale and poisons everyday life in Madhupur. I claimed that it is exactly on this point that one can see how deeply the destructive power of the penal state penetrates the everyday in Madhupur.

Taking into account the signs of the disintegration of the everyday raises doubts as to whether it is possible to imagine solidarity in Madhupur. Despite suspicion and betrayal, hope to repair community ties in Madhupur is not

inconceivable. While humour appeared as a social critique, it also presents here a possibility through which differences and everyday hurts could be fruitfully overcome. Thus, humour's social force lies in exchanging similar experiences and bursting out in laughter together. Humans rarely laugh alone but with other people, namely those who understand the joke due to similar experiences. Although such moments were fleeting, one must take into account the capacity of not only suffering but also humour to forge solidarity.

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## 6 Land Loss Lamentations next to the Sylhet Cantonment

### Abstract

The focus of Chapter 6 is the inhabitants of Ratargul, who live next to the Sylhet Cantonment of the Bangladesh Army. Since 1977, villagers have been confronted with the gradual alienation from their land due to the construction of the cantonment adjoining the settlement. This alienation will soon reach full completion through the new extension plans of the military base. Villagers anticipate this expansion with fear and express anger at the gradual impoverishment caused by land appropriation. Yet, in their accounts, *dukkho* (grief) overshadows their anxiety and anger, suggesting that *dukkho* is not simply an expression of grief over material loss but also an expression of pain over the disappearance of previous forms of life.

**Keywords:** fear, anger, *dukkho* (grief), military, gradual land alienation, impoverishment

This chapter focuses on the social impact of land loss experienced by the inhabitants of the small hamlet of Ratargul, situated near the town of Sylhet in the immediate vicinity of the Jalalabad Cantonment of the Bangladesh Army. Most of the villagers are non-Bengali Hindus, popularly known by the name of 'Patro'. Since 1977, dwellers of Ratargul have been confronted with the gradual appropriation of their agricultural land by the Bangladesh Army due to the construction and continuous expansion of the cantonment. As a result of this process, the inhabitants of Ratargul have left their original village site and resettled some distance away from the military establishment. There are rumours of a further extension of the military base in the future, which would result in the expropriation of the remaining smallholdings. People from Ratargul anticipate this future expansion with fear (*bhoi*) and frequently express *raga* (anger) at the gradual impoverishment caused by

this surreptitious land appropriation. Yet, in their accounts, it is another emotion, *dukkho* (a combination of grief, pain, sorrow, and suffering) that overshadows their anxiety and anger.

In exploring the question of why and what villagers grieve for, I will argue that their grief is not simply an expression of lament over material loss – i.e. land – but also an expression of pain over the disappearance of previously cherished forms of life. In the process of dispossession, the material foundations of their lives collapsed, also disrupting their notions of intimacy. With the loss of the land, these remembrances of ways of living have not completely sunk into oblivion but rather continue to reverberate from the past and further endure in the present, prolonging their *dukkho*. Consequently, their grief in relation to land deprivation can be interpreted as a yearning for times gone by or aspirations for a restoration of past familiarity in the present or ‘a longing for continuity in a fragmented world’ and ‘a longing for a home that no longer exists’ (Boym 2001, 1–2). Additionally, when people from Ratargul convey *dukkho*, they express regret over missed opportunities of resistance. Over the course of more than fourteen years of protracted takeover of their land, no socially organised opposition evolved against the army.

The question of why they did not defy the land appropriations can be answered through three different interpretations. First, they failed to recognise the kind of purposes for which the government acquired their land. Second, as low-caste Hindus, they not only face material insecurity but also have no social support that could aid resistance. Thus, politically organised resistance requires basic material security, but a successful mobilisation of vulnerability means to ‘mobilize vulnerability in concert’ (Butler 2015, 140). In other words, without ‘supporting networks of [social] relations’, political opposition is unlikely to arise (*ibid.*, 129). Third, people from Ratargul did not resist because they could not – and still cannot – specify who is responsible for the capture of their land: the government or the army. In their accounts they rarely draw a distinction between the state, the government, and the military; instead, they refer to these institutions interchangeably. Rather than viewing this blurring as misplaced knowledge, I will argue that it exhibits a profound knowledge of the on-going influence of the military in Bangladesh, legitimised by the primacy of national security. Additionally, such blurring indicates an understanding of the concentration of power in the hands of politicians, bureaucrats, and military, all whose personal interests shape political life in contemporary Bangladesh. Such allocation of power almost always implies the diffusion of responsibility. Consequently, not knowing who is accountable and who might be of help impedes the

possibility of any kind of redress. The plight of the people from Ratargul must be understood within the frame of the whole book. That is, in contrast to the cases analysed in previous chapters, in this small hamlet the process of land dispossession is almost entirely completed and has reached its final stage, pushing the villagers who continue to live in the vicinity of the military base into a state of deep destitution.

### **Life in the Proximity of a Cantonment**

Ratargul is a hamlet (*tilla*), and thus part of a larger ethnically and religiously mixed settlement. To reach Ratargul visitors must take a slight detour (a few kilometres) through neighbouring villages and a national park. Before the construction of the cantonment, Ratargul was accessed directly from the main road connecting Sylhet Town to Jantiapur, a city just a few kilometres away from the Meghalaya border. The territorial area of Ratargul is a smaller, oval-shaped zone that stretches for about two acres. The cantonment borders the south edge of the settlement, while the north edge ends with a shrine to the Hindu goddess Kali. The small temple is disconnected from the residential area by a fence delineating the place of worship clearly. On the west side, rice fields border Ratargul, while on the east, a smaller hill sets the hamlet apart from the rest of the larger village. Behind this hill, burial places are situated. Despite the majority of Ratargul residents following Hinduism, they do not burn their dead – instead, they bury them. The reason for this is that burning is an expensive ritual, one the inhabitants cannot afford today.

A total of 216 inhabitants live in Ratargul, comprising 39 nuclear families in 29 households. Of these, four families are Bengali Muslims, and the rest are non-Bengali Hindus, designated by the majority Bengali population with the name Patro. According to the villagers, the name Patro originates from the Bengali word *pathor*, or stone. The title is meant to specify the original profession of Patro, namely wood burning for charcoal. Due to its derogatory connotation indicating low caste status, today this title is rejected, and preference is given to the name of the native language and ethnic affiliation, Laleng. Since there exist no historical documents, it is unclear to which language family Laleng belongs. Some authors presume it to be a Tibeto-Burman dialect and that Lalengs are ethnically related either to Bodos or Sutiya from the Indian state of Assam (Mree 2007, 541). Among themselves, the majority of elder Lalengs still speak their mother tongue; yet they also mix in several Sylheti and colloquial Bengali words



while conversing with each other. Additionally, since school is taught in the Bengali language, Laleng children have no opportunity to study their own native tongue. Thus, Laleng has gradually lost its relevance in everyday life. Today, a great number of the younger generation speak better Sylheti and colloquial Bengali than Laleng.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, Lalengs practiced their own native religion. The customs associated with this faith are today largely forgotten since the majority of Lalengs converted to Hinduism around 1920. This mass change in religion was prompted by the arrival of the preachers of the Ramakrishna Mission, who came to Sylhet to spread the visions and philosophical thoughts of the famous Hindu mystic Ramakrishna and his student Swam Vivekananda. While their religious practices have transformed over time, the Lalengs' system of governing locally, called *larship*, prevails. The *lar* (village headman) not only occupies the highest political position in the village hierarchy, but also resolves conflicts in cases of village disputes. *Larship* is an inherited post, meaning that after the death of the headman his eldest son will be nominated as the next *lar*, regardless of his abilities. Only if the eldest son is physically absent is there the possibility of choosing a *lar* from the younger sons. In the political hierarchy, the *lar* is followed by the *montani*, who assists and coordinates the work of the *lar*. The *lar* also seeks advice and help from the elders of the village, who are usually present at village meetings, locally called *sorjomin*. At *sorjomin*, all the male adults of the village participate. In this way, the *lar* can consider the opinions of the other members of the village and make decisions with their consent.

In cases where a dispute is an external matter – that is, a conflict between persons who live in two separate villages – the so-called *bara gait* or local court of Lalengs takes over the conflict resolution. In cases where the *lar* is unable to reach a decision, he also has the possibility of transferring the dispute to the *bara gait*. *Bara gait* is composed of all the *lars* and *montanis* of different villages and has a higher authority than *sorjomin*. At the head of the *bara gait* normally the eldest *lar*, who has the duty to coordinate the meeting, presides, though does not make the decision alone. *Bara gait* sits once per year, so problems that are not solved by the *lar* are postponed until the local court takes place. In cases of disputes, both parties are heard, and witnesses can be called. Once a decision is made by the *bara gait*, no appeal can be raised.

Concerning the social structure of the village, the most important social formation after the nuclear family is the clan, or *roy*. The eldest man holds the highest position in the clan. *Roy* is a patrilineal and exogamic aggregate, meaning that marriage between members of the same clan is prohibited.

While in the past joint family (*thai bhari*) structure was common, wherein many generations shared one living place, presently the nuclear family is more widespread, mostly because of the shrinkage of agricultural land.

Most of the Laleng houses in Ratargul are made from bamboo and mud with straw tops. The four Bengali Muslim houses that are located at the northern edge of the settlement, in contrast, are brick constructs, easily distinguishable from Laleng homesteads. The Laleng dwelling places are built one after the other following three parallel – not straight, but concave – lines, thus giving the hamlet an oval shape. The houses of larger joint families are constructed in a circle surrounding a little courtyard.

The infrastructural supply of the village is poor. None of the Laleng houses have electricity. Water is fetched from tube wells, yet only five to six households have access to such water sources. The signs of poverty in Ratargul are pervasive, being discernible not only through the high number of mud houses and lack of proper infrastructure, but also through volatile job opportunities providing the residents with a modest monthly income. An additional indicator is the very small landholding common among the villagers, no more than 0.04 acres for most families. Such an amount allows the erection of a homestead but no farming. Consequently, at present, none of the families from Ratargul possess land for farming purposes. They earn their daily income as rickshaw drivers or construction workers, while others are employed as daily labourers on larger farms. The best-paid breadwinners are the construction workers and painters, earning 400 and 300 Taka (5.00 and 3.75 dollars) per day, respectively. Rickshaw drivers occupy the middle range with a salary of 300–350 Taka per day during market days. The farm labourers receive only 200–250 Taka per day, a position held by both men and women. Some of the women who possess a sewing machine manufacture clothes for the villagers. Other women work as helpers in higher-class households in Sylhet City for 60–70 Taka per day. Some women weave baskets from bamboo that they sell either at the market or to local non-governmental organisations. However, most Laleng women from Ratargul only perform household activities. In addition to these earnings, all family members from Ratargul are involved in the collection of bamboo for firing wood, which they bundle and sell in the nearby villages. Raising cattle and goats is another activity that provides additional income. Cattle are reared for their milk and sold in the markets. Although Lalengs do not consume beef, they nevertheless sell the cows before *Eid* (Muslim sacrifice feast) for their meat.

None of these jobs offer a steady and reliable income. Construction is seasonal work and depends on the cycles of the monsoon. Even during the

high season, construction sites only hire men for two days per week. Daily labourers on the farms not only earn less money, but employment on foreign land is considered the most degrading way possible to earn an income because of the subordination to the will of others. Rickshaw driving is not a high-status job either, but at least enjoys certain independence, where the driver has the liberty to determine the price and whom he will accept as a customer. Yet, competition due to the high numbers of drivers is fierce, which makes this occupation precarious as well.

Despite widespread landlessness and the ensuing equalising power of poverty, I could still discern economic differences among the villagers based on the number of cattle a family owns. The three families who own no cows and do not have permanent jobs occupy the lowest level of the economic hierarchy. Their monthly income is about 6,000 Taka. Most of the residents – twelve families – own two to four cows, and their monthly total income ranges between 6,000 and 8,000 Taka. Three families have six to eight cows, and two families own more than ten. The monthly income from the cattle alone for these two families is over 14,000 Taka, more than double that of what families without cows earn. In addition to cattle rearing, these two families also seek out other temporary employment, which means that their monthly income is probably even higher. Yet, these families are also the largest in Ratargul, with 24 members within the household, meaning that their daily minimum amount of money for food per person is around 38 Taka (0.48 dollars). Two families have the highest position in the economic hierarchy. One is involved in business, running a small local shop where various everyday items are sold. The other family enjoys monetary security due to the permanent jobs of two male members who work at the cantonment as a gardener and a sanitary man, earning around 30,000 Taka per month (125 Taka per person for the daily amount for food). Except for these last two families, all the other families in Ratargul earn less than half of 80 Taka (1.00 dollar) per person for food, the United Nation's specified amount for determining the extreme poverty line in Bangladesh (Kamruzzaman 2014, 59–60).

Searching for jobs in the nearest markets drives the daily rhythm for men in the hamlet. Women, meanwhile, are busy with household activities such as cooking, washing, and taking care of the children. Children and older men oversee the daily cattle and goat grazing. They are also the ones who gather the firing wood that is used for cooking or put up for sale. The everyday patterns are additionally determined by prayers held three times per day to the shrines located in every house. Not all the residents, however, follow the thrice-daily prayer rule. Men who rise early in the morning and are absent

the whole day due to their work participate only in evening prayers, and some of them not even then. Being a daily labourer means that one lives from one day to the next. After a day's work and receiving their money, many of the male members of a household usually rush to the market to buy food for that evening's supper. Unsurprisingly, the hardship of earning money occupies an important part of everyday discussions. Next to these preoccupations, gradual land loss and the possible expansion of the cantonment loom large in day-to-day reflections. The next section chronicles this land loss.

### **Narratives of Dispossession**

The land loss of the Lalengs in Greater Sylhet is not new. According to oral history, Lalengs originally inhabited a major part of the forested lands around the town of Sylhet until 1303, when the famous Sufi preacher Shah Jalal defeated Gour Gobindo, the last king of Lalengs. Since this event, Lalengs recount their gradual expulsion from the main lands surrounding Sylhet. British colonisation exacerbated this process when the colonial rulers established tea gardens and reserve forests in the division. The continuous expansion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of the Bengali majority population into remote and sparsely populated areas of the country, such as the Sylhet Division, has hastened the expropriation of Lalengs. During the Pakistani era, the situation of the Lalengs worsened considerably due to recurring outbreaks of religiously motivated violence against Hindus. Such critical events were frequently followed by larger out-migration waves of the Hindu population – including Lalengs – from East Pakistan. Hindu resettlements also occurred due to the introduction of several discriminatory practices and legal instruments, such as the East Bengal (Emergency) Requisition of Property Act of 1948, which entitled the state to appropriate land primarily from Hindu landholders after the Partition of India and Pakistan (Yasmin 2015, 126). This practice of expropriation continued under the legitimacy of the Vested Property Act 1965, through which during the escalation of Indo-Pak conflict, the state identified Hindus in Pakistan (both West and East) as enemies, belonging to antagonistic India. The act made it possible to dispossess the assets and properties of Hindus (S. Feldman and Geisler 2012, 975). Though the armed conflict between Pakistan and India lasted only seventeen days, state officials kept the act in force until 2001 for use as a tool to continue the practice of dispossession (Yasmin 2015). The Vested Property Act stands as the major driving force for the out-migration of Hindus from Bangladesh (Barkat et al. 2008). In this, the Lalengs are no exception. Thus, all these factors have

contributed not only to the gradual shrinkage of their landholdings but also the continuous decline of their population size. Accordingly, their contemporary number stands at approximately 3,400 inhabitants in Bangladesh, scattered among 32 villages surrounding Sylhet Town.

Apart from the above outlined social and political forces, one of the most intense changes to the Laleng's manner of living occurred when British introduced the 1927 Forest Act, prohibiting burning wood for charcoal. The decree forced Lalengs to move out of the forests and change their occupation, abandoning charcoal production for farming. Most residents had likely been working as tenants under the *zamindar* from whom they gained *occupancy raiyat* status, because after the abolishment of the landlord system in 1950 many Lalengs were able to record land in their name. This means that in contrast to Khasis and Garos, the great majority of Lalengs have legally recognised land documents. Ironically, these official documents did not protect them, but rather made them even more vulnerable to state-induced land occupation for the establishment of the military compound. Though resentment over these earlier processes of deprivation still crop up in the villagers' narrations, the more recent concerns in connection with the cantonment and its expansion overwhelm previous feelings of injustices. In what follows I will try to reconstruct these more recent narratives of dispossession.

The accounts I am restoring here are based upon two group discussions that were conducted on 23 January 2012 and 6 May 2012, as well as several informal conversations with the *lar* and older males during six different stays at Ratargul between January 2012 and March 2015. The approximately seven to ten participants in each of the two group discussions were exclusively the eldest male members of Ratargul, ranging in age between 50 and 70 years old. Although all the informants took part in the discussions, three men, the *lar*, Sunil, a 70-year-old man, and Upondro and Umesh, both over 60, led the narrations. Women did not participate in these events, but they remained quiet and distant in the concealment of the houses. Though the subsequent narratives villagers did not tell me in a successive way, I have rearranged them to follow a gradual historical line for better understanding. My aim will be first to rebuild the chronicle of dispossession from the narrations by switching between paraphrases and direct quotations. Only after this will I offer an interpretation of the narratives. I start with Upondro's words as he reflects on the beginning of the appropriations:

First the government acquired our land for the establishment of the cantonment in 1977. Old Ratargul was the name of the old place, and the cantonment area started from the main road. Old Ratargul had two parts

and two names. One was Small Ratargul and the other was Big Ratargul. We lived in Small Ratargul, which is now the area of the cantonment. It is about one kilometre from here.

Upondro, continuing with his narration, reveals that Old Ratargul, adjoining the main road between Sylhet and Jantiapur, on which the present-day military establishment now resides, was a larger ethnically mixed settlement consisting of Laleng, Bengali Hindu, and Bihari families.<sup>1</sup> During this first takeover, the government took possession of 65 acres and exclusively the western hilly part of the properties, 25 acres from Lalengs, 28 acres from Bengali Hindus, and all the properties of Biharis. Lalengs did not oppose the land occupation due to the rumour that the government planned to establish a school. In Small Ratargul, most of the residents assumed that the school would be for public use, and they hoped it would improve the area, so many even welcomed the idea. Sunil, the *lar*, reflects on this in the following way, 'We did not oppose at the beginning. The government said that they are going to acquire a little amount of land for establishing a school in this area. People here thought that the school would be established for the locals.' As was later revealed, the information was only partly accurate, because the acquisition was indeed for the establishment of a school, yet not for public, but for military education. Umesh at this point interrupts Sunil, 'Actually, it was a school, but for military training. The government officials kept this in secret. Therefore, we did not know and understand that [the purpose].'

Two years later, in 1979, the second occupation took place. Sunil takes over the role of the main narrator once more,

There was the second acquirement in 1979. This time the government evicted ten Laleng families. Those ten families went to nearby Laleng villages and to the remaining parts of their land in the village [Small Ratargul]. They took the land of 25 Hindu Bengali families, also. The government acquired all the land of those Hindu families. They had to go to different places.

The tone of the narrative slowly changed while recalling the second takeover. While the villagers portrayed the first land occupation in a neutral way, the

1 '[T]he term Bihari as it is used in Bangladesh does not necessarily refer to people of Bihar, India. Bihari is a pejorative term used to identify the non-Bengali Urdu speakers, who during the Liberation War of 1971 sided with the Pakistani Army and therefore 'are considered as enemies of Bangladesh's liberation' (Saikia 2011, 263, footnote 61).

verbal style while narrating the second capture turned slightly accusatory. For example, they abandoned the previous milder and neutral term of *acquisition*, and they replaced it with the sharper word *eviction*, even though all landholders received compensation (12,000 Taka per acre), just like during the first takeover (8,000 Taka per acre). This shift gains meaning through the progress of the story, as the purpose of the establishment became clear in that year. Villagers could follow closely how the army personnel moved into the area, how soldiers constructed buildings and how the military trainings began. The rumours about a public school were revealed to be false information. Related to these realisations, Umesh states the following,

After the acquisition of our land in 1977, some army people came and built small houses. At that time the construction of the big buildings was going on. We thought that maybe the army is staying here to supervise the construction work. They were not training because we did not see them practicing. In 1979, more army people came. They also finished the construction of the buildings. At that time, they started with the training. In 1979 it became clear to us that the acquisition of our land was for the establishment of a cantonment.

Four years later, in 1983, the third capture occurred, in which the army took over the eastern part of the village. Officials increased the compensation from 12,000 to 24,000 Taka per acre; however, most of the villagers at this time owned no more than 0.4 to 1.0 acre of land. Villagers also accepted this takeover without opposition; as Umesh reveals, 'They said that since the government wanted to acquire this place, we cannot go against the state, and we have to accept it.' During the third occupation, the army obtained 20 acres from 65 families. Most of these families shifted to nearby villages, while the rest moved to the centre of the settlement, which had not yet been taken over by the military.

Life in the remaining middle part of the village proved to be difficult, however, since the cantonment surrounded the settlement. It was not only the restriction of movement but also the danger of being injured during military drills that led the villagers in 1991 to willingly give up – during the fourth appropriation – their residual land and move a few kilometres away from the cantonment. Retrospectively, the residents viewed the encircling as a deliberate tactic of expropriation, leaving little room for opposition. Sunil reflects about the enclosure as follows:

Our village fell in the middle of the cantonment. The area of the cantonment was all around our village in 1983. Now they could take over our

village very easily. We did not go for any demonstration or protest. We also willingly let the government acquire the last part of our land for the cantonment, because we were living there in such a situation that we had to ask permission if we went outside the village. If we wanted to graze our cattle in the field, we had to get permission from the army. Sometimes they practiced firing. At any time, an accident could happen. Therefore, we decided to leave our village willingly. It was life in a cage.

Besides the fact that farmers received low compensation because most of them only owned a very small amount of land by this point, they were unable to purchase the same amount of property either, since the market price of the estates in the area was now higher (200,000 Taka per acre in contrast to the reimbursement of 122,000 Taka per acre). Upondro said, in relation to the compensations, 'We could not buy land in other places with the money the government compensated us for acquiring our land. [...] In other years, the compensated money was also not enough even to build a house.' Hence, through each takeover, the villagers not only lost agricultural land, but were pushed deeper into impoverishment. While in the past most of the families owned eight to nine acres of land, this amount slowly decreased to 0.04 acres by 1991, making them landless. According to Sunil, now these last remaining lands are also in danger,

Last year the army came to check the boundary of the cantonment with high officials of the army. They put a flag at the end of the village. [...] It seems that they want to show the high officials that the boundary of the cantonment is where they put the flag. Seeing this, we understand that they will extend the boundary of the cantonment. Otherwise, why put the flag there and take the high officials to show them the boundary? They started to do this in 2008.

Answering my question as to what they intend to do if their remaining smallholdings are taken over, the elders expressed determination, 'If the government really acquires our land here, we won't take the money they will give as compensation. We will tell the government to buy land for us, the same quality and amount of land that each family has.' There is, however, little hope that they will be able to achieve this demand, taking into consideration the countrywide land scarcity and the previous practices of the army during each prior occupation. Article 42 of the constitution states that the government of Bangladesh – based on the principle of its absolute sovereignty – has the right to acquire any land for public purposes. Against



such decisions, courts accept no appeals. Moreover, the 1982 Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Ordinance regulates the procedure of the purchases and the amount of compensation. Compensation is determined based on the prices of the last twelve months of land transfers noted in the Land Office of each sub-district. However, in Bangladesh, to minimise taxation it is common practice not to declare the real price of the land agreements – only half. In the case of Ratargul, this practice has led to compensation that is only half of the value of the land in the district.

### **'Blurred Boundaries'<sup>2</sup>**

The most striking element in the narratives of dispossession outlined above is that villagers did not distinguish between government, state, and military; they referred to them interchangeably.<sup>3</sup> While one could certainly not differentiate between the three during the military dictatorship that lasted from 1975 to 1990, there yet was no noticeable shift in the narratives when speaking about acquisitions after 1990, when the military and government had indeed become distinct. Consider, for example, the subsequent fragment about the future expansion stemming from Shushin, another elderly man over age 65,

Now the government again wants to acquire our land for expanding the area of the cantonment. The higher-ranking officials of the army came and put a mark to acquire our land [...]. The whole village will fall under the area of the cantonment. We will have to leave our village. They will not allow us to stay. And we will not be able to stand (*tike thaka*) against the army.

From the quotation above, it is difficult to determine who intends to purchase the land, the government or the military. I suggest that this blurring does not reflect confusion, but rather signals villagers' perception of the enduring military influence in Bangladesh legitimised by the priority of national security. Additionally, the blurring reveals that villagers are aware of the accumulation of power in the hands of politicians, bureaucrats, and army personnel.

In addition to Shushin's words which indicate the impossibility of opposing the army, the perceived continuation of military authority shows

2 The term I am borrowing from Akhil Gupta (1995).

3 See for example the already cited fragment, 'They said that since the government wanted to acquire this place, we cannot go against the state and we have to accept it.'

also through the way the land captures took place, as the following quotation from Sunil demonstrates, 'The government did not give any previous notification about the acquisitions. They just sent us a letter that they acquired our land and how much compensation we will receive.' Thus, the appropriations were announced in an imperative way, simply disseminating information about an already-made decision and leaving no room for negotiation. Gopal, a 44-year-old man from Ratargul, draws attention on the impossibility of opposing the army even more directly, 'If the army wants the land here, it is not possible to stop them. As the citizens of Bangladesh, we have to follow the constitution of the country and we have to give the government what she wants to take.' This implies the circumstances of an authoritative power resting on the idea of 'national security', which does not need further legitimisation, and additionally sheds light on the ways through which the state is defined.

The notion of the Bangladeshi state is deeply rooted in military culture, slowly unfolding after the 1947 Partition and further developing under the fifteen years of military dictatorship between 1975 and 1990 (Codron 2007). During this time, army personnel not only governed the country but also had the opportunity to widen their influence by entering private businesses and capturing bureaucratic and political positions, from which they still exercise influence today (Bhattacharjee 2010). Additionally, the inability of the two major political parties, the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), to secure and gain legitimacy publicly reinforced the power of the military. Thus, for public validation of their authority, both parties still heavily depend upon the tacit support of the army after each election. Such dependency means offering army personnel economic and political advantages before each election and turning a blind eye if soldiers transgress the law. In case of a criminal offence (rape, murder, corruption, etc.), the armed forces cannot be held accountable by a civilian criminal court. This is, of course, not unique to Bangladesh but is rather a common policy. Yet, such practices, when they merge with dependencies of the civilian government, reinforce military authority in a pervasive manner – about which the army is mindful (Mohsin and Guhathakurta 2007). Moreover, today Bangladeshi military power is an internationally highly praised and acclaimed force through its participation in and contribution to the peacekeeping missions of the United Nations (UN). The direct link between Bangladeshi military force and the UN as well as the constitutional primacy of national security are aspects that contribute to the fact that the army has remained above accountability in the country (Mohsin and Guhathakurta 2007, 64–65). Yet, national

security and the authority of the armed forces are legitimised not only constitutionally but also in public discourse, in which popular imaginations of the nation and the military merge. The army personnel's position looms large in the national imagination. The annual commemoration of the Liberation War of 1971 on 16 December, during which Bangladesh officially gained independence, is a national holiday. This is also the time when the sacrifices and heroic acts of the armed forces – both the official and partisan groups formed by civilians – are brought into the national consciousness in the most visible forms. Martial symbols in the form of weaponry – rifles, tanks, and airplanes – move explicitly into the forefront of public spaces and the glorification of combat merges with images of national devotion. The continuation of this practice even after the end of the military rule reveals how military conduct as well as martial symbols transform the imagination of the nation and national histories in such a way that permanent war, the image of a perceived external or internal enemy, becomes an integral part of these imaginations. Additionally, such fixation allows the state to put forward particular demands towards its 'citizens' regarding national responsibility and attachment. Not accidentally, the army personnel expected the dwellers of Ratargul not only to recognise the priority of national defence, but also to prove their national loyalty by sacrificing their properties in the name of the nation, as Upondro reveals:

We did not want to give our land. But the officials of the military were scolding us [...]. They told us that we should give our land because the cantonment is an asset of the state. [...]. They also said that we should be proud of the cantonment as it is for the country.

This 'country', however, seems not to be designed for everyone, as the impersonal insertion *the country* instead of *our country* implies. This word choice suggests detachment and alienation. Lalengs know that in the popular imagination of the nation, they have no place, and so they must be sacrificed. Thus, the enemy during 'everyday forms of occupation' (Visweswaran 2013, 5) is not so much an external figure but rather internal, embodied often by minorities who become the targets of national 'enclosures' (Scott 2009). Such practices that aim at the eradication of minorities to validate the existence of the majority population is captured well by the term 'predatory identities' (Appadurai 2006, 51). Anxieties over majoritarian national 'incompleteness' trigger such impulses. Thus, the elimination of minorities is driven by a desire 'to close the gap between the majority and the purity of the national whole' (ibid., 52). 'Incompleteness, in this sense, is not only about effective

control or practical sovereignty but more importantly about purity and its relationship to identity' (ibid., 52–53).

Furthermore, the blurring in the accounts of the people of Ratargul also indicates a keen awareness of how power collects in the hands of state actors. Sunil draws attention to this: 'The swindlers or cheats – like the government, the UP chairman, the army – did not let us know that this would be a cantonment. They all kept it in secret'. Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (2008) designates such power accumulation in the context of Nepal as 'distributional coalition'; that is, an 'interplay between [...] holders of key positions in the government, politics, and economics, who have institutionalized their private relations' (ibid., 72). Such kinds of coalitions encompass not just 'resource capture' but also the mutual protection of interests of key state actors (ibid.). The only difference between Nepal and Bangladesh is that the military is also counted among these powerful players. Additionally, going one step further than distributional coalition, I wish to stress that power accumulation means not just concentration of influence but also the diffusion of responsibility. Gopal's and Upondro's following words shed light on this,

Gopal: Last September [2013], the PM visited this cantonment and declared that another military division would be established here. [...] For that they will need more land. [...] But there is no information regarding this matter. Actually, we talked with every official of the government on the grass roots level, but nobody is giving us information. And it is not possible to get information from the army. (23 September 2014)

Upondro: Nobody dares to talk. Even the big leaders do not dare to talk with the army. So, with whom will we talk about our problem? (6 May 2012)

Both men draw attention to the impossibility of obtaining confirmation of the plans of the government/military. Notably, the question 'So, with whom will we talk about our problem?' is interesting; it can be interpreted as a moment of perplexity in the face of the simultaneous processes of concentration of power and diffusion of responsibility. This puzzlement is not only about the difficulty of naming who is responsible for the situation, but also stems from confusion over to whom one can turn for help. Hence, the diffusion of responsibility complicates the circumstances of gaining justice in the form of legal redress, particularly if one is unsure who is responsible for maintaining law and order. Such kinds of insecurities are deepened even further by the despair over loss and deprivation, to which I will now turn.

## Experiencing Loss and Deprivation

While above I elaborated upon the process of land appropriation in Ratargul and how the boundaries have been blurred between the state and the military, below I intend to zoom in further. My aim is to take a closer look at how the people of Ratargul perceive four interrelated problems that determine their present situation, (1) the spatial proximity of the military; (2) the future expansion of the cantonment; (3) gradual impoverishment; and finally (4) land loss. All four aspects will be analysed by focusing on the emotional content of residents' accounts, highlighting especially three sentiments, fear (*bhoi*), anger (*raga*), and grief/pain/sorrow (*dukkho*). These emotions proved to be not only the most salient but also illuminate the above micro manifestations of violence (i.e. intimidation, deprivation, and dispossession). Yet, just as these violent acts are interlinked, so too are fear, anger, and *dukkho* closely connected, reinforcing each other in a circular way. The circularity became clear to me through the words of Gopal, 'When we fear (*bhoi*) we also feel pain (*dukkho*). Say, if somebody takes away my garden forcefully and if I cannot get it back, I feel bad and sad (*mon kharap*) for that. I also have anger (*raga*) in my mind because this man has taken away my land' (3 July 2014).

### Fear of and Fear for

Even though Lalengs have their own word for fear, *farai*, it is currently substituted by the Bangla word *bhoi*, which originates from the Sanskrit *bhaya* and denotes connotations like its English equivalent. It is used in connection with an actual or perceived danger. However, at least in everyday usage, there is no distinction made between sudden dread and more generalised fear. *Bhoi* is used especially in situations where somebody has a feeling that something bad will happen in the near future. Fear alerts and transports hunches of an eventual calamity, additionally evoking nervousness, and worry. Semantically, in Bengali, as in English, there is no distinction made between *fear of* and *fear for*. Nevertheless, the two feelings in the context of Ratargul are different. *Fear of* connotes a reaction to a concrete danger, i.e. the military, while *fear for* marks a feeling of concern for somebody or something, i.e. future land loss and social disintegration. Allow me first to demonstrate *fear of* through the words of Sunil and Sona – a young woman in her thirties,

Sunil: We are living here under their command (*hukum*). If they say stop and do not go there or do not use this or that road, we must follow what they order.

Sona: You know, we have a lot of fear while living here. When we walk through the road of the soldiers, we must be careful because the army might order us not to use this or that road.

Sunil: We must get a pass for 600 Taka a year if we want to move inside the cantonment. Some of us get the pass and some do not because they do not have money to spend for that. You know, earlier this area was our own land. Now we must pay tax for moving inside of it. (20 March 2015)

As Sunil's and Sona's accounts above demonstrate, the spatial proximity of the military provokes a fixed feeling of danger and signifies a *fear of*. Its source is geographically concrete. The threat is materialised through everyday intimidation tactics of the army, more specifically by restricting free movement through the cantonment. Although the former village site does not belong to the villagers anymore, they return to the fields for grazing animals, collecting bamboo for firing wood and taking a shortcut on the road between the highway and the village if larger goods need to be transported. Yet, they must be careful during such activities if they do not possess authorisation. A further need for cautiousness is related to cattle grazing. Even if villagers have a permit to move in the cantonment area, they must be continuously watchful so as not to let the animals wander away. As Aadit explains, 'Let's say we buy a calf for 500 Taka. If this calf goes inside the cantonment to eat grass, the army catches it. And if we want to get it back, we have to pay 1,000 Taka; that is more than the price that we bought it for' (20 March 2015). Restriction of free movement and cattle confiscation do not exhaust the manifestations of the military's threatening proximity. The intimidating presence of the army also materialises through combative sounds disturbing the peace in Ratargul via continuous firing practices like underground bombing and gunshots. Training hours are also very often carried out during the night, interrupting sleep and shaking the unstable structure of the mud houses. Many of the residents are forced to continuously repair the cracks caused by the explosions.

In contrast to these outlined feelings of danger, the possibility of losing their small residual lands can be described as a *fear for*, differing qualitatively from *fear of*. The origin of *fear for* is vague. There is no definite affirmation of future land transfer. Rather, this information has the quality of a rumour circulating and spreading in the village whenever military personnel come to visit, as highlighted in the following assertion from Sunil,

When someone among us shares information that someone, maybe the officials of the army or simply soldiers, are coming to visit their boundary, it spreads everywhere in the village, and we do not go to work until they

go away. Sometimes we stay at home without going to work on that day. So, the whole day or half of the day becomes useless, as we cannot go to work. This is how we lead our life now here. (6 May 2012)

Even though Sunil does not name fear explicitly, it can nevertheless be detected in the form of activities or non-activities as residents remain at home out of concern instead of going to work. *Fear for* appears as a dismantling emotion that disrupts the rhythm of work and the regularity of everyday life. In addition, two more elements from Sunil's statement above are particularly interesting, the fuzziness of the word *someone* and the *spreading* character of the news. Veena Das (2007) highlights two special aspects about rumour, that it tends to spread and that 'the words that are uttered do not belong to anyone in particular' (105). Sunil's words support her explanation since the source of the disseminated information is buried under the anonymity of the term *someone*. Moreover, the accounts about the military personnel's repetitive visits and their performative and public marking of the territory with a flag are unclear as well. They display a coded message, one which carries an implicit warning and represents a rather subtle technique of territorialisation. The flag and its placing at the end of the settlement is a sign that starkly presages an uncertain future; it is a warning of a coming appropriation. Likewise, the verbal silence of the military – never fully conveying directly to the villagers what their intention is – is emblematic. It suggests indifference and superimposes normalcy under the cloak of repetition. Instead of holding the possibility of becoming the product of counter-society, rumour in the face of vague danger creates a vicious circle, reinforcing feelings of anxiety (A. Feldman 1995). Consider Gopal's following words, 'The possibility of acquiring our land is very high. We are trying to find a channel or a source to know the truth of it officially, but we have not yet got that. [...] It could be that it may not happen. But we are still afraid (*atanka*) that it may repeat again' (23 August 2015). Gopal's words suggest that rumour here is not about preparation for the future, but rather a danger that is perceived as potential and actual at the same time. 'Potentiality [...] does not have the sense of something that is waiting at the door or reality to make an appearance as it were, but rather as that which is already present' (Das 2007, 9).

Closely connected to the worry of losing land emerges another aspect of *fear for* that directs attention to an anxiety over social disconnection and incertitude over the future. Umesh expresses this with the following,

If the government really acquires our land, we don't know where we will go because we do not have a place to go. If we must go, we will be scattered.

What will we do alone? We have already built a good relationship with each other. We have relatives here. We can stand for each other. We share our feelings and problems with each other. But if we spread out in different places, we will not be able to communicate with each other. There will be a gap between us. (6 May 2012)

I interpret the words of Umesh, especially the question ‘What will we do alone?’, as expressions of fear over disintegration, the break-up of kinship relations, and therefore a worry over loss of collective support. Moreover, such fears project the possibility of social and territorial ‘dislocation’. Dislocation often carries a double connotation, a tension between the human desire for attachment and simultaneous worry over displacement (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2012). Hence, boundedness always entails a threat of being dislocated socially as well as territorially. The potentiality of *being alone* expressed in the question above is the flip side of the positive actuality of *being together*. Land dispossession in this sense cannot be interpreted merely as separation from a materiality and therefore simply as an economic loss because attachment to land implies a web of social and material relations and is always more than plain possession. Such anxieties, as I will show below, are sharpened by the brutal reality of scarcity.

### **Raga: Experiencing Deprivation**

Poverty and food scarcity are everyday troubles that villagers rarely voice directly. Instead, I encountered numerous situations where residents made attempts to hide their precarious situation, for example, by rarely inviting me into their houses, as this would reveal their meagre interior furnishings. They also often mentioned fleetingly that dinner hours are usually after eleven o’clock in the evening. After returning from work, one member of the family washes himself to rush to the market to buy food. In the morning, normally the leftovers from the late-night supper are eaten. Lunch is skipped. Many of them, however, eat just once a day. This means that the daily income does not cover the expenditures for one day. Malnutrition among both adults and children has visible physical signs that no amount of disguise can cover. However, despite widespread concealment, there were fleeting occasions when villagers broke the silence surrounding poverty, as did Reboti, a 35-year-old woman with three children, drawing attention to food scarcity, ‘We are daily workers; we need money for food. When we cannot go to work on that day, we cannot buy food and we do not eat on that night’ (20 January 2012). Interpreting Reboti’s last words of not eating dinner, one



can see that they indicate that no food is consumed at all on that day. This means that even the basics of survival are hard to maintain in Ratargul.

It is therefore rather unsurprising that expressions of anger surfaced exactly in relation to gradual impoverishment, revealing and at the same time indirectly addressing the present and enduring scarcity. This became clear to me when touching on the topic of compensation during one of the group discussions with the men. One of the participants, Rongesh, a man in his 50's, suddenly stood up. The brown plastic chair behind him tipped from his rapid movement while he burst out, 'But the way the government acted with us is not right! They could just tell us to go wherever we wanted! To go! Instead of giving us compensation. Because they made us landless' (6 May 2012). This obvious outburst of anger was a rare moment during the research, as the display of anger or *raga* is socially not accepted in Bangladesh. Associated with aggression and selfish destruction, it has a strong negative connotation. Additionally, in the reality of a strict hierarchical social order, *raga* is regarded as a rude and profane emotion, correlated with lower social status. Persons with high status are expected to have a strong sense of self-control. Patience and gentleness are associated with upper-class/caste manners. This applies to Ratargul as well. Villagers regard the expression of anger at times as futile and inappropriate, for as Gopal explains, 'It is useless to be angry (*raag kora*) for people like us, the landless. A person like us cannot be angry. He should remain calm (*shaanto*) like water' (20 March 2015).

Nevertheless, villagers do not always dismiss or regard anger negatively. For example, maternal love can be expressed through anger, because 'you do not shout at people who you do not like' – a frequently evoked utterance in Bangladesh. Therefore, in situations where mothers rebuke their children, anger becomes an expression of love and care, a symbol of eagerness to fight for the beloved. Similarly, anger is tolerated when a person has the right to feel *raga*, as in situations of unjust offense such as the one expressed by Rongesh above. *Raga*, through his verbalisation comes through as a moral feeling and an actualisation of felt injustice. Where deprivation surfaces, anger or rage often appear too (Arendt 1970). Yet, anger cannot be seen as an 'automatic reaction to misery' (ibid., 63). Thus, '[o]nly where there is a reason to suspect that conditions could be changed and are not does rage arise. Only when our sense of justice is offended do we react with rage, and this reaction by no means necessarily reflects personal injury [...]' (ibid.). Gopal's following words confirm this reasoning,

We hoped that with the establishment of the cantonment the government would compensate us well. But they compensated us in accordance with

the directives they made at that time. The government thinks that they have compensated us here as we are supposed to be. They do not think about what will happen to us in the future. It is not their interest whether we will die, or we stay alive. (20 March 2015)

Gopal's last two sentences reveal a particular moment where the 'politics of life' (Fassin 2009) flips over into 'necropolitics', aiming not at the maximisation of life but rejection unto death (Mbembe 2003, 40). Gopal's first remarks, in contrast, draw attention to villagers' reimbursement expectations. It is not land acquisition but rather the compensation that villagers find abusive and unfair, as the insufficient payments during each land capture caused a perpetual economic slide. Instead of bringing relief, it prolonged suffering and disabled not just resistance, but also the spirit for starting over. Indeed, monetary reimbursements rarely bring benefits to displaced populations. Compensation is not only frequently insufficient (Cernea 2003, 39) but also affected persons often make poor investment choices with the money they trade for such 'productive assets' as land (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2007, 419). This means that displaced people end up worse off than their original situation. As further negative aspects, one can also count the corruption of state officials, who repeatedly cut their own subsidies from the compensation, transferring just a partial 'share' to the directly affected persons. This was the case also in Ratargul, as Sunil reveals. 'In 1979, for example, each family was given 12,000 Taka per acre. But actually, each family got 8,000 Taka and the rest went in the pocket of the UP member. He told us that he used the money for different costs' (6 May 2012). The siphoning of the compensation has been repeated during each takeover, so that villagers from Ratargul received only partial reimbursements. Just how enraged residents still are over such fraud is demonstrated by the desire to take revenge, as I could see when Gopal one day seethed, 'As I do not have the power to get it [the land/money] back, I just want in my mind that they [military, government people] should not have success in the future. So, as I do not have the power, I just give it in the hand of God that one day they will collapse' (3 August 2013). This desire, however, does not materialise into a real act of vengeance but remains wishful thinking in the form of a curse and an expression of bitterness over powerlessness.

Yet, not just insufficient and bisected compensation causes dissatisfaction among the residents in Ratargul, but also the volatile situation due to joblessness and temporary work. Villagers, if they had to give up their land, expected at least an improvement in their employment circumstances. Such calculations failed also due to the common practice of nepotism in

Bangladesh. Aadit, a young man in his twenties, expresses his distress in relation to joblessness and favouritism,

And you know, it is fine that the government took our land for the cantonment. But if they would give a permanent job to a person from each family, it would be a consolation. But the army officers bring people from their own area. They do not recruit us. They employ us only as daily workers. But the persons brought by the army officers from their own home districts are recruited permanently in the cantonment and they are civilians like us. They of course circulate these jobs. And the persons who work temporarily in the cantonment supposedly should get priority to get these permanent jobs. After advertising, they take the interviews of all who apply. After that they tell us that we did not do well in the interview and that is why we do not get the jobs. And they also give a reason that according to the medical tests we are not eligible physically. (20 March 2015)

Aadit's last words draw attention to a bitter irony. The villagers' physical inaptitude is due to their malnourishment. Those who caused their deprivation are the ones who disqualify them as ineligible for permanent work. Expressions of covert anger resurface also in relation to the possible overtaking of their residual land. Rongesh voices his determination regarding this,

If the government takes our land, we will tell the government to give us a written notice that they have evicted (*utched kora*) us from this land and we will also tell the government to tell us to go to another country and to leave this country because we do not want to be evicted again and again. We do not want their money as compensation. (3 August 2013)

Gradual encroachment elevates misery so that even final expulsion from the country, as Rongesh's demand indicates, appears preferable. Expulsion would also mean the suspension of prolonged suffering. What is interesting in the quotation above is that expulsion is expected to be directly proclaimed and suggests that the villagers would not leave of their own accord; thus, as I will show in the following section, their attachments, although now painful, still hold them back from a final departure.

Before I close this section, I wish to return to the question of why residents from Ratargul conceal their poverty. Such masking can be interpreted as an expression of shame and an attempt to recover a sense of dignity among those who are classified as living in extreme poverty (Han 2012). The numerous government policies and programmes backed by the international

initiatives of the World Bank or United Nations in postcolonial contexts aiming to eradicate financial destitution have had a backlash effect, exposing precariousness and thus elevating vulnerability even more (ibid.). Such programmes, while couched in a benevolent language, disguise that they are formulated within the frame of neoliberal ideologies that hold the poor responsible for their deprivation. Similar state practices also apply in Bangladesh. One of the most prominent government programmes, the 'Millennium Development Goal', is supported by numerous international donor agencies, and one of its most important plans is to reduce the 'poverty gap ratio' and socio-economic inequality to no more than fourteen per cent by the year 2021 (Giménez, Jolliffe, and Sharif 2014). Such programmes reveal widespread hypocrisy both in the Bangladesh government and international agencies because they leave unaddressed the numerous situations where the state itself is responsible for generating poverty and pushing people to extreme destitution through taking their land away.

However, the concealment of poverty in Ratargul must be understood also in the context of caste discrimination. Extreme impoverishment in Bangladesh correlates with low caste status. The fact that people of Ratargul hide their destitution, as well as the widespread consumption of rice beer, indicates attempts to step out from the degrading position of untouchability and attain a higher rank caste status. 'The Hindu castes are Brahmin, Kshatryia, Vaishya, and Suddra. When a person dies among the Suddras, the family fasts for a month; the Vaishya fifteen days; the Kshatryia thirteen days; the Brahmins ten days. We, the Lalengs, also fast for ten days when anyone dies in the family' (6 July 2013), Sunil explains to me one day. By drawing a similarity between the mourning rituals of Brahmins and Lalengs, Sunil implies nothing less than that Lalengs have the same rank as the highest castes. Describing this explanation one day to Gopal, he burst out with the following refutation, 'This is rubbish! Every Bengali Hindu considers us as untouchables. Even those who belong to the lowest caste. They never sit, and they would never sit down with us to eat or share anything. Even the Muslims of this area practice this. We are segregated from every corner' (4 August 2014). Caste discrimination and social isolation are one of the sources of their *dukkho*. Yet, the loss of their land and the remains of their dreams are what prolong their grief.

### ***Dukkho*: Experiencing Loss**

*Dukkho* came to my attention during my second visit to Ratargul, at a moment sitting outside with Sunil and a few other elderly men in a courtyard

located between two houses. From our sitting place, we were looking directly at the cantonment. It was a hot day in May, and when we finished our discussion, all of us were exhausted from the long conversation, and dusk was nearing. We were sitting silently for a few minutes enjoying the cool breeze wavering through the trees, bringing sweet smells of ripe mangos. Suddenly, Sunil broke the silence while staring directly at the scattered white brick buildings of the cantonment. With a quiet but clear voice, he said,

I remember this time. The trees would bear a lot of fruits and we would enjoy those fruits. I still can clearly see my village. I always think about where we were living and now where are we living. Those days have gone forever. Now we go to others' doors and ask for work to earn money and to buy food and those types of fruits. I still remember that my children would play very freely in that village. It is really hard for me to see a clear picture of the old village from here. (6 May 2012)

After this, nobody said a word. We just sat and looked towards the cantonment, imagining perhaps green grass, cows, children playing in the place of the white buildings (see Illustration 5). It was an overwhelming moment, in that in the utterance a wide range of feelings were condensed, unexpectedly transporting the past into the present in front of all of us. The experience of the *lar* was subjective, but the moment was not just about the expression of a singular 'body-self'. Instead, it created a particular atmosphere in which all of the bodies present become connected through pain over loss ('it is really hard for me to see a clear picture of the old village'); nostalgia over time gone by ('those days have gone forever'); shame over dependency ('now we go to others' doors and ask for work to earn money and to buy food and those types of fruits'); and bitterness over the present. As a term, *dukkho* aggregates all these senses of loss.

*Dukkho* is a complex feeling that encompasses all the emotions outlined above. It is regarded as a powerful and deep feeling, not only in Bangladesh but also in the whole South Asian subcontinent and beyond. It is understood as a lifelong concept from birth till death. In both Buddhism and Hinduism, *dukkho* is often equated with life itself or an ultimate experience of existence. By way of drawing a distinction, sadness (*mon kharab/khoshto*), which is associated with a bad feeling in heart and mind, is different from *dukkho*. *Dukkho* describes a protracted feeling, a heaviness that brings one down. In contrast to the vigilance of *bhoi* and the stridency of *raga*, *dukkho* is calm and, crucially, long-lasting. *Dukkho* does not simply express regret. It carries a solemn quality, used in relation to tremendous loss and intense suffering.



Illustration 5. Photograph taken by the author.

*Dukkho* cropped up in the discussions each time somebody recalled the past in view of the cantonment as did Gopal below,

When I sit here, I remember our homes in the past as I can see it clearly from this place. I remember the agricultural land, the mango trees, the jackfruit trees around our house, the cattle, our nice house, and the ponds. Many of us had such properties. So, when we think about this now, it is like we have been pushed down to the ground for good (*matite lutiye pora*). I had 7.5 acres or more than that. When I think about it, I really feel very bad (*khubi kharap lagi*). And *dukkho* becomes bigger and bigger. (20 March 2015)

As Judith Butler (2016) argues, grief is an expression of loss over having something that had value, that mattered and that is now gone. Yet, it is not only the thing or the person that we mourn during loss; what we grieve for is also a depletion of ourselves because our belongings are never simply just possessions, they constitute us (*ibid.*). An independent 'I', according to Butler, cannot exist. 'It is not as if an "I" exists independently over here and simply loses "you" over there, especially if the attachment to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am. If I lose you, under such conditions, then I

not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself' (Butler 2016, 22). Grief over loss therefore also reveals something about our primary vulnerability as 'socially constituted bodies' (ibid., 20). What we really mourn during loss is the fractures of ties and bonds. This also means that when we forge attachments and ties, we are always at a potential 'risk of losing those attachments' and with them a part of ourselves as well (ibid.). Belonging is therefore a precarious and laborious endeavour. It requires continuous effort to exercise trust and to bracket out the potential perils and injuries that tacitly lurk in the practice of living together (Geschiere 2013, 122). This is why loss is so excruciating and experienced as if 'one finds oneself fallen' (Butler 2016, 21), inviting comparison to Gopal's accentuation of being 'pushed down on the ground'. Thus, by losing land and home, trust in the world – in the taken-for-granted – was crushed in Ratargul and 'the illusion of complete belonging has been shattered' (Boym 2001, 557).

The vicinity of the cantonment stands as a constant reminder of these losses for the people of Ratargul. Its sight triggers everyday pain among residents, even though all of the things that represented a home are long gone. During each remembering, villagers draw not only 'maps of intimacy' (Boym 2001, 553) by recounting the things they had – trees, land, houses, ponds – but they also imaginatively replace the white buildings of the camp with their own former possessions. Such replacements can be seen as attempts to flip over the *unheimliche* (uncanny) represented now by the cantonment with the *heimliche* (homely) epitomised by the portrayal of the old village site (Boym 2001). Their home, as they once knew it, appears now in the present as haunted by the white buildings of the military base and held in contrast to the embellished image of the past landscape. This constant retrospection expresses an additional yearning for the dreams that populated days that no longer exist. This will be more understandable through the reflection below, again from Gopal,

We understand that since our land now has become the cantonment it has become a restricted area. We do not need to go to that area anymore. But the problem is that, you know, we have an attraction; a pulsation (*narir taan*) that we cannot forget. We want to go there as there was the cemetery of our ancestors and we had a place of worship there. Our homes were there. Our childhood was there and the playground we played at was there. These things still connect (*sangjukto kora*) us with that place. We still sometimes go there although we do not need to go there because that place has become the area of the cantonment. (20 March 2015)

This nostalgia or ‘pulsation’ – as Gopal labels it – is characteristic of displaced people uprooted from their home and dispersed in space (Boym 2001). People who are forced to leave their birthplace cultivate a ‘diasporic intimacy’ that denotes less a longing for a place than a longing for a time that epitomised comfort and familiarity (ibid., 549). Such yearnings are often connected to memories of former activities such as childhood enjoyments or, as Gopal additionally highlights, devotion and commemoration of the deceased. Thus, a ‘sense of home is grounded less in a place per se than in the activity that goes on in that place [...]. Carried out in concert with others, generation after generation, [...] these activities unite the living with the living and the living with the dead’ (Jackson 1995, 409–410).

Yet, while the image of the former home appears idealised and blissful in these visions, it nevertheless has a double connotation encapsulating not only comfort and familiarity but also confinement. Villagers, by constantly looking back, risk ‘turning into a pillar of salt’ analogously to Lot’s wife when she glanced back to the crumbling cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Boym 2001, 197). Therefore, the repeated retrospections do not ease villagers’ grief but keep it alive, generating an enduring sense of time as frozen in Ratargul. This means that loss also warps the experience of time in a way that stifles the sense of duration. This suspended state finds a correlation from the residents of Ratargul when they repeatedly revealed that they feel ‘caged’. The cage metaphor expresses here not only captivity or vulnerability but also an incarceration in time. Through prolonged suffering, time lapses and makes it difficult to experience duration while gaining distance from past experiences of assault. The ability to engage in historiography and to look at past events from a distance is disrupted. This does not, however, mean that people from Ratargul are not aware of the dangers that the cultivation of *dukkho* and retrospection carries. Aadit makes this clear: ‘If we keep thinking about this past life, we will be sick, and we will die. Many people died because of thinking too much about their past life they had here’ (20 March 2015). Sunil is also mindful about such perils when he conveys a desire of letting go: ‘Sometimes it comes to mind that if I had money, I would have left this place and I would have bought land in another place. But I do not have money. So now I must bear all these troubles here although I have the desire to leave this place’ (20 March 2015).

Such aspirations can be seen as attempts to break out of the grip of frozen time and to recover the capability of projection and establishment of a different life at a different place. Yet, in the harsh reality of scarcity, such wishes remain distant and quickly evaporate. Additionally, material scarcity cripples not just the dream of another life but also political mobilisation in



Ratargul. Villagers regretfully confirm such observations when they repeatedly draw attention to their social abandonment and missed opportunities of resistance during a group discussion with men and women from Ratargul,

We did not know, and we did not understand what their plan was. They told us that they will take our land and we would get money for that, and that we should not oppose it because it will be a big school or college. Therefore, we did not oppose. We did not have a leader to guide us. That is why the government could behave in such a way with us. And you know if you want to protest the army you have to be organised in such a way that you are strong. (20 March 2015)

Socioeconomic positions affect people's capacity to participate in democratic engagement and to effectively critique prevailing power structures, which would lead to socio-political transformations (Jeffrey et al. 2008). Umesh from Ratargul confirms this, 'It is not that we do not want to oppose. But if we go to demonstrate, who will earn money for that day? We are daily workers' (6 May 2012). The absence of opposition, however, does not indicate resignation, since Umesh, while pointing out immediate necessities, nonetheless expresses a desire to resist that might suggest dormant capacities. Indeed, dormant desires could be one possible way to grasp and analyse alternative ways of action. Yet, in the next section I wish to take another direction. Through the interpretation of a local history, I will address the coping strategies of the villagers. Since these actions do not take laudable forms of transgression but rather are couched in a religious language and faith, their agentic potentialities are not obvious at first sight.

### **The Promise of the Hereafter**

The history about the plight of Lalengs is an interesting point of departure in providing an answer to the question of how people in Ratargul deal with their current circumstances. I heard and recorded different versions of the story. The below version is a shortened and somewhat standardised interpretation told by a *lar* of a neighbouring village.

According to the narrative, all the territory surrounding the town of Sylhet once belonged to the Lalengs under the leadership of the king Gour Gobindo. Shah Jalal, a famous Sufi preacher, entered Sylhet in 1303 with the ambition to not just spread Islam but also to conquer the region. Since Gour Gobindo was unwilling to give up his territory without a fight, the king and

Shah Jalal made an agreement. Shah Jalal had to demonstrate the power of Islam by opening all the doors of the temples in the area with the sound of Azan (an Islamic call to prayer). If Shah Jalal succeeded, Gour Gobindo had to give up his territory and leave Sylhet immediately. Shah Jalal won the 'bet', marking a significant date in the spreading of Islam in the Eastern part of South Asia, and Gour Gobindo was bound to leave Sylhet immediately afterwards. In the rush of his escape, he had to leave his family, belongings, and his people, the Lalengs, behind. Nevertheless, despite his hurry he was able to send a message to the Lalengs, ordering them to follow him. Gour Gobindo marked his route of escape by cutting bamboo trees through the jungle. However, these bamboo trees fell under a spell because within six hours, they grew back to their original height, obscuring the route of the runaway king. Consequently, the Lalengs not only could not follow their king but were also unable to find their way back to their previous home. Having no other choice and noticing the opulence of the jungle around them, they decided to settle down provisionally in the forest and continue the search for the king after gathering enough strength. Days, months, and years passed by and Lalengs gradually forgot their plan to find their king. When Gour Gobindo found out that they were not obeying him, he cursed the Lalengs with lifelong misery.

The narrative gains significance through two external interpretations. One reading is connected to the emphasis and claim of autochthony, and the second is connected to the explanation of poverty. Lalengs view themselves as Hindus. However, since they fall into the category of untouchables, they have limited possibilities to relate to and build solidarity with other Hindus. To overcome these problems, one can observe early attempts to reinterpret the Lalengs not as a religious but an indigenous minority. In this process, one local NGO formed by Lalengs themselves takes an active role, devoting efforts to gather Lalengs under the national umbrella of *adivasis* and hoping for institutional support. In becoming indigenous, the above-described narrative plays a significant role, because it fits well into the requirements of autochthony, bringing to the forefront crucial elements like historical continuity in belonging to a territory, colonisation, and gradual alienation. The majority of Lalengs, however, do not consider themselves indigenous, and except for a few occasions the vocabulary of indigeneity rarely emerged spontaneously in their narratives. Instead, they refer to themselves as Hindus.

The second reading of the story I learned coincidentally. It was impossible for me to spend the night in Ratargul for security reasons. Accordingly, I took shelter in an international NGO office nearby. Due to this arrangement, I

had the chance to talk to some of the NGO workers about their work with the Lalengs and about their frustration regarding the 'legend'. From their perspective, the story causes the Lalengs to believe that their contemporary poverty is the result of an ancient misfortune. Not only is the 'legend' apparently accepted as an explanation of their fate and a legitimisation of their misery, but according to the NGO workers, Lalengs are reluctant to change their situation. The NGO workers emphasised that Lalengs regard their existing circumstances as their deserved fate, and the patient bearing of adversity is considered as a possibility towards purification, believed to bear fruits in their next life in the hereafter.

How can one interpret this myth through the second reading? Does it indicate – in accordance with the view of the NGO employees – resignation? In contrast to the NGO workers' understanding, I suggest that the chronicle is on the one hand about experimentation and on the other hand about endurance. Under experimentation, I mean that it is a way to deal with their situation on their own terms, as the story makes it possible 'to formulate claims towards culture and at the same time to recognize this culture' (Das 2007, 86). Under endurance, I mean the belief that the next life will be better if one bears the suffering of the present with patience.

As Michael Jackson (2008, xxx–xxxii, footnote 3) points out, in circumstances with constrained possibilities, agency is often more 'a matter of endurance than of transcendence, and less a matter of free will and more of working within the limits'. Consequently, struggle in Ratargul is less about an active defiance and more about an everyday effort to bear hardship and secure a survival that is determined by immediate necessities and priorities. Such patient bearing of present difficulties stands in sharp contrast to heroic transgression. Instead, it culminates in an 'endless experimentation in how the given world can be lived decisively, on one's own terms' (Jackson 2008, xxx). Moreover, patient endurance is no less challenging than spectacular moments of defiance. On the contrary, the calm 'ability to withstand hardship' requires more effort than active rebellion (Karlsson 2016, 72). The oral history summarised above is an experiment of adaptation and resilience, not in spite of, but because of hardship. However, concerning the distress of the NGO workers, the difference is not so much about explaining the world in contrasting cultural terms than it is a matter of opposed power positions. Thus, the establishment of a future horizon with the help of active will is a capacity of persons with power, who possess specific forms of 'cultural capital such as education, wealth, health, talent' (Jackson 2008, xxiii). As Veena Das (1995) emphasises, the 'cosmologies of the powerless hold the capriciousness of gods and the sheer contingency of events responsible

for the disorder of their lives [...]; But in the cosmologies of the powerful, conversely, there is no place for chaos' (139–140).

## Conclusion

In this chapter I concentrated on how the military has gradually deprived the people of Ratargul of their land since the 1970s. In Ratargul, the process of land dispossession has reached its final stage. To their loss residents react with *dukkho* – which I described as a combined sentiment of pain, sorrow, and grief – and I have in this chapter sought to understand this feeling. My claim was that when people from Ratargul evoke *dukkho*, they grieve not only for the land upon which their existence is grounded but also the disappearance of their former ways of life. What keeps their *dukkho* alive is the twofold experience of material loss together with their previous imagination of life, which continues to reverberate from the past, existing in the present. This is possible due to the proximity of their dwelling place to the cantonment. Through the continuous sight of the military establishment, they recall aspects of the past that are held not only in contrast to their meagre present but are also embellished as well as idealised.

Additionally, when people from Ratargul refer to *dukkho* they mourn missed opportunities of resistance. From this observation follows my second question, through which I searched for answers as to why people from Ratargul chose not to stop or defy the establishment of the military camp. First, state and military authorities let residents believe that their land was to be acquired to establish a school. Through the project, many of the dwellers hoped for an improvement in the area and for new possibilities of employment. Additionally, the prospect of receiving compensation for their land stifled resistance. When they realised that the school would be not a public education centre but rather one strictly for military personnel, it was already too late. The camp eventually encircled the village, entirely impeding everyday activities. Thus, the people of Ratargul had no other choice but to willingly give up their remaining small landholdings and move from their previous village to an area some distance from the camp. Second, since people from Ratargul are low-caste Hindus, they lack social support and could not establish solidarity with others who live around them. Low-caste status means, therefore, not only discrimination but also social isolation. Successful mobilisation depends on material conditions but also mutual support. Without social solidarity, resistance is unlikely to arise. Third, people from Ratargul did not resist because they

could not – and still cannot – specify who is responsible for the capture of their land: the government or the army. I argued that villagers blur the distinction between the government and the army because they are aware of the distributional coalition of powerful actors. Distributional coalition describes well how responsibility becomes diffused while power accumulates in the hands of bureaucrats, politicians, and military personnel, each mutually supporting the other in keeping their domination intact. Moreover, the blurring also reveals the on-going influence of the military on contemporary politics in Bangladesh. Since the 1990s, civilian governments have been unable to attain widespread legitimacy among the population of the country and continue, therefore, to rely on the support of the army.

Since the people of Ratargul are confronted today with increased economic instability, their daily life is determined by sustaining themselves from one day to the other. This has an impact also on their modes of agency. The desire for resistance did not vanish, but immediate existential imperatives overwrite these aspirations. Instead of engaging in political mobilisation they insist on stoic endurance, and endurance despite present difficulties is a way of dealing with their situation on their own terms.

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## 7 Violence, Agency, and Life in the Fabric of Power

### Abstract

The final chapter restates that political and existential matters represent not two separate realms, but rather become entangled in the struggles over land. At stake in these land conflicts are the farmers' ways of life but also the existence of the state, which requires continuous reinforcement in borderlands where state power is historically volatile and disputed. The chapter offers a discussion of the temporality of violence and explores the modalities of agency that go beyond popular forms of political mobilisation. It also addresses the two most important modes of living – belonging and becoming – that materialised in the struggles over land.

**Keywords:** temporality of violence, agency, becoming, belonging, survival

In this work I proposed to place life instead of land at the centre for analysing contemporary practices of land dispossession in Bangladesh. Through this reversed logic, I wanted to show that an excessive concentration on land conditions the researcher with methodological blindness and impedes seeing that what really becomes shaken up and impaired in the struggle over land is life. I claimed that if we deviate from purely economic explanations, land dispossession appears less an exercise driven by the desire for material accumulation than a practice animated by politics that revolve around the question of life. In the empirical cases presented, such life politics become important from two different vantage points.

First, it stands for clashing legitimacies of living on the ground, entailing at times fierce and highly visible but more often covert forms of disagreement between state functionaries and farmers over how to live and under which conditions. In many instances, such contestations have gone beyond simple disputes over acceptable forms of life – thus they simultaneously revealed attempts at upsetting the taken-for-granted assumptions upon



which a common understanding of humanity could be constructed. The most devastating effect of land dispossession is, therefore, depriving farmers not only of their material foundation – i.e. land – upon which their survival is based, but also devaluing their ways of life, destabilising community ties, and suspending a sense of dignity and self-worth. Dehumanisation might seem to serve as justification for the continuation of violent acts and the atrocities inherent in the practices of land dispossession. In a certain sense it is, but I think it is more important to see dehumanisation in these contexts as driven by ambitions of eliminating cultural differences and letting certain forms of life – i.e. *adivasi* ways of living – that do not fit into the image of political-national unity – i.e. a Bengali-speaking Muslim nation – sink into oblivion. This observation leads to the second aspect of politics concerned with life.

The attack on *adivasi* ways of life is part of the process of nation-state formation in Bangladesh. Creating cultural uniformity is about ensuring the survival of the polity upon which the political community, with its own specific history, has been established since the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country. That such practices crop up exactly at national margins is not accidental but highly relevant. Thus, borders by their nature symbolise the limits of state sovereignty and often represent dangerous leaking points exposing the frailty of state power. Such vulnerabilities are amplified by the fact that the border areas in focus are inhabited by people who do not fit into the homogenous imagination of the nation and whose civic loyalty has therefore been suspect and uncertain since the birth of the nation. As I argued throughout the book, land dispossession in this sense – at least in Bangladesh – is more a practice of closing the national frontiers and eliminating differences, either through absorption or ejection, of undesired minorities from the political body by creating conditions under which survival according to their own terms becomes difficult to sustain. This is exactly the point where the political and the existential fuse into each other in two different ways. Thus, at stake in these conflicts is not only the farmers' way of life but also the existence of the state, which requires continuous reestablishment and fortification in border areas where state power was always volatile and refuted.

The modes and rhetoric through which state functionaries questioned farmers' ways of life showed wide variations in Bangladesh. Different development programmes (community forestry in Chapter 5, ecotourism park in Chapter 4), national security measures (Chapter 6), and bilateral state agreements (realignment of the national border in Chapter 3) surfaced both as settings in which and as means by which state officials contested

farmers' right to a territory where they lived and cultivated throughout many generations. Yet, even if I am depicting state actions here by adopting a language of deliberate strategies, I still hold the view that the state practices discussed in the book appear systematic and calculated only retrospectively. Amid the process of land dispossession, the actions of state officials appeared as ambiguous and improvised, which points towards the inconsistent materialisation of state power on the ground and which contradicts the image of a stable and rationalised body politic. Such inconsistencies, instead of depicting deviation, rather represent the norm and constitute the way through which state power transpires – not on some abstract level but during a day-to-day swinging between impulses of protection and repression. Accordingly, 'the practices of the modern state' are not 'inherently pathological or benign'; rather they are everyday exercises in which 'protection and violence are intertwined' in unpredictable ways (Kelly and Shah 2006, 256). The interlacing of violence and protection indicates that the inception of state rule and law does not mean the eradication of violence but rather its redistribution (Das 2008, 286). Thus, under the aegis of modern nation-states, instead of 'enduring social peace, in fact terrible atrocities have been committed on populations that threatened existing perceptions of national unity and security by the agencies of the state' (ibid., 285). Accordingly, 'the state's monopoly [...] over violence does not end violence' (ibid., 286), since in the social contract the sovereign guarantees protection for the individual under the condition that he or she agrees to sacrifice his or her life in the name of the nation. Consequently, the idea of the nation-state is intimately linked to the idea of sacrifice and death. Therefore, state sovereignty and viability independent from the actual political system rests from the very beginning on the postulation of violence. Considering these observations, it is rather unsurprising that – next to life and agency – violence emerged as one of the main organising themes in this book. In closing the book in the following sections, I wish to pool the findings of the empirical chapters together and arrive at linkages across cases.

### Temporality of Violence

Violence defies easy definition, since what counts as violence in one social and historical context might be labelled differently under other circumstances. Moreover, violence is not exclusively instrumental but also symbolic and performative (Whitehead 2004). Its manifestation cannot be limited to extraordinary times, such as war, as it is often embedded in the structure of

the day-to-day, frequently growing out from it diachronically (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, 2). Accordingly, violence is by no means external to social life. Thus, it cannot be viewed as 'an expression of animal pathological forces that lie outside our humanity' (Jackson 2013, 59). Violence is 'a socially and culturally constructed manifestation of a deconstitutive dimension of human existence' (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, 6). It is a flexible, multiple, productive, destructive, and transformative phenomenon. While it might manifest itself as 'an action, an emotion, a process, a response, a state, or a drive', it is none of these (ibid.). All attempts 'to reduce violence to some essential core or concept are counterproductive because they essentialize a dimension of human existence and lead to presenting cultural manifestations of violence as if they were natural and universal' (ibid.). From all these observations, it follows that violence can be meaningfully approached only through everyday experiences, since 'the ontics of violence – the lived experience of violence – and the epistemology of violence – the ways of knowing and reflecting about violence – are not separate' (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, 4). Accordingly, my goal in the empirical chapters was – instead of starting from already established categorisations or an abstract notion – to unpack the phenomenon of violence by tracing its micro-manifestations across space and time with the help of emotional expressions. Such an approach allowed me to show that the forms of violent acts appearing in all four cases are nonlinear and fluctuating, impeding easy generalisations. They could not be comfortably categorised as rational or irrational, intentional or unintentional, productive or destructive, systematic or disorganised, extraordinary or ordinary, part of 'law making' or 'law preserving' (Benjamin 1996), but they seemed to move along the axes of all these poles. Despite this variability, there is, however, another organisational logic of violence possible considering its temporality. By focusing on the convergence of violence and time, I could gain insight not only into how violence surfaces in different temporal forms but also how violence alters the perception of time as a product of 'temporalized everyday practices' (Munn 1992, 116). In the four case studies, four different temporalities and rhythms of violence emerged that I term future, slow, continuous, and past.

Violence manifested foremost as a *future* threat in Chapter 3 related to the circumstances of Nolikhai. The different shades of fear and grades of alarm in Nolikhai illuminated how the danger of separation from land finds articulations which are lived in the present. Villagers are trapped in the constant anticipation of the potential loss of their land. While the loss is not yet realised, their fear nevertheless transports the peril of the future into the present. Yet, their constant uncertainty in relation to the future is

not only about the anticipation of possible dislocation and disintegration but also reflects uncertainty over whether the agreement will be enacted, if it will be executed, and what kinds of consequences it will have. This also changes perceptions of time; thus, villagers' attention and senses are directed in a heightened way towards the future. While the past is almost completely absent in the accounts of the villagers, the present appears as something that has lost its appeal. The concentration on the future and its uncertainty overwrites other senses of time. The aspects of future violence differ from standard definitions of violence. The latter is rooted in a western legal understanding that considers only realised physical harm as violence. In contrast, future violence 'occupies an incomprehensible place in the logic of the modern. It is a place that cannot easily be marked, quantified and responded to' (Jenagathan 2000, 112). Future violence collapses not only the legal definition but also hampers easy explication, given that it is not yet enacted but instead is perceived in the present as a possibility – as always coming – with the capacity of continuously reshaping the everyday.

In contrast to Nolikhai, in Latrymbai (Chapter 4) violence stretched time and surfaced *slowly* in the form of bureaucratic prolongation and the protracted expansion of the ecotourism park. Villagers from Latrymbai reacted to and registered these slow interferences with a mixture of boredom and annoyance (*de kot*), as well as anxiety (*jingjar*). The everyday in Latrymbai was overloaded with a sense of saturation and exhaustion. Like future violence, slow violence can easily slip from view since it 'occurs gradually and out of sight'; it is 'typically not viewed as violence at all' and, therefore, its 'delayed destruction' can be missed as well (Nixon 2011, 2). Moreover, even those who are directly affected by slow violence find it difficult to articulate the kinds of forces which inconspicuously but gradually alter their lives as the case of Latrymbai showed. Thus, the central quality of slow violence is its lack of certainty, due to its slowness, 'facts', and evidence that tend to 'disappear' or morph into something else, fomenting hesitancy about concretely naming and reacting to its abstracted form. In this way, those who are affected fall into a double invisibility.

In Madhupur, violence appeared *continuous*, leading to a sense of amplification. Such intensification came into being on one hand due to the large number of forest cases filed by the Forest Department against forest dwellers, and on the other due to the desire for vengeance cultivated by the wrongly accused farmers. Retribution, as an aspect of *aakrosh*, fostered the continuation of violence based on the idea of reciprocity (Jackson 2008, 42–45). Thus, '[t]he logic of reciprocity governs relations with those one loves and with those one hates and provides a rationale for both giving

and taking life' (ibid., 42). Reciprocity represents, therefore, an ambiguous social relation containing not just a positive act of giving and receiving but also uncertainty and suspicion (ibid.). Thus, one is never sure how much repaying an act of giving requires. Such doubt can be 'reversed and violence rests on the implementation of this logic of reversal when the involved parties cannot decide when a score has been settled or debts have been paid' (ibid.). The case of Madhupur allows a glimpse into the reciprocity and continuity of violence. Through retribution, forest dwellers in Madhupur are pulled into the cycle of destruction, dismantling not only the forest but also community ties. The perception of time is altered here in the sense that vengeance provides the illusion that the clock can be turned back, that demolition will assuage the loss of an entire lifetime that evaporated as they were forced to hide in the forest.

Ratargul's case illustrates how experiences of loss reverberate from the *past* and determine the present as well as the future. Violence has a tomorrow here (Nordstrom 2004) – but in a different sense than in the case of Nolikhai, and thus the gaze is directed not so much towards the future but towards time gone by. *Dukkho* lingered in the everyday and revived the past constantly. Yet not all senses of previousness were activated by *dukkho*. Only those that resonated with the grief felt in the present rose in the memory. Veena Das (2007, 99–100), drawing on Henri Bergson's concept of time, asserts that the past 'makes an appeal according to the requirements or the needs of the present situation. In making this leap we place ourselves not generally in the elements of the past as such but in a particular region of the past' that 'come to define the affective qualities of the present moment'. The interlocked relationship between time and violence enabled through the long process of land dispossession renders violence actual and potential in Ratargul. For the residents of Ratargul, this simultaneous actualisation of violence has frozen time obstructing their sense of duration and their ability to distance themselves from past. Villagers are aware that constantly looking back to the lives long gone carries the danger of turning them into a pillar of salt (Boym 2001).

The temporal dimension of violence runs through all chapters. This is what strings them together while simultaneously elucidating their distinctiveness. The empirical findings in the cases presented here point towards the relevance of the convergence of time and violence. How close attention to violence's temporal dimension contributes to an understanding of violence both as a temporalised happening and simultaneously as a force that alters the experience of time is a question on which further investigation could dwell.

## Agency beyond Resistance and Indigenous Activism

Agency gained popularity in anthropology through the emergence of social movements during the 1960s and 1970s that required new empirical and theoretical reflections to understand and explicate social and cultural transformation, for which structuralist and functionalist theories were rather ill-suited. In these earlier writings, agency was often used synonymously with resistance, which not only led to confusion as to what counts as defiance but also reduced human action to the binary logic of dominance and subordination. Another stream of writing, influenced by liberal theory, linked human action to the concepts of self-realisation and autonomy. Because of this, other forms of action – wherein free and rational will played little to no role – were either ignored or considered passive and irrational. Both understandings of agency have come under scrutiny recently. Accordingly, agency cannot be used synonymously with resistance, since there is a range of actions through which humans do not attempt to challenge established power positions but rather act based on different motivations (Abu-Lughod 1990). Resistance in this sense is just one possible type of action. Also, the connection between agency and autonomy is now thought to be the outcome of specific historical conditions of the Western philosophical tradition and has been proved to be less essential in other social and cultural contexts (Das 2007; Mahmood 2005). Despite this critique, the concept of resistance persists. Buttressed by indigenous movements all over the world, it is commonly used to explain the politics of the marginalised and oppressed in opposition to the state. At first glance, this might apply also to Bangladesh. Since over the last two decades, indigenous rights discourse in Bangladesh has emerged as a popular frame in which *adivasis* formulated their demands for more recognition and greater inclusion in wider Bangladeshi society. Furthermore, this discourse rests on a mobilisation of hope, encouraging certain repertoires of political action buttressing resistance and protest. Yet, the actions I discussed in the empirical chapters do not fit these frames since they rarely rest on resistance nor invoke a language of indigeneity. Despite restrictions and repeated attacks, farmers' responses rarely took the form of laudable political mobilisation or transgression. Their modalities of agency did not lead them to question the existing political and social system, but rather, moving within its frames, they tried to enlarge the possibilities of living within the everyday.

The mobilisation of hope in the context of Nolikhai could possibly have come into being due to the uncertainty over the results of the interstate agreement between Bangladesh and India. This is because state power

manifests in Nolikhai not exclusively in its repressive form but also as a protector of villagers' interests. In Latrymbai, villagers reacted to bureaucratic prolongation and the slow expansion of the park by waiting, evoking simultaneously an agonising state of being surrounded by uncertainty but also a strategic reaction of *wait and see*. However, by slowly constructing a different living place, the people from Latrymbai are not only in the process of moving on but seem to have also relinquished the hope that connected them to the place that they still inhabit. Their example suggests that hope and the ability to act and speak are not inherently linked to each other. In Madhupur, the agentive power of the inhabitants manifested in the form of revenge and, in fleeting moments, of wittily criticising government practices. These were all appropriate responses to the simultaneous surfacing of a weak developmental and the drastic punitive state. In Ratargul, the scenario was completely different. Against the army and in the context of enduring poverty as well as social isolation no rebellion could emerge, yet hope was not completely eradicated either. The promise of a better life in the hereafter is the source of the villagers' strength to endure and persist in the now. How can one make sense of such actions?

Apart from the theory of resistance, two alternative perspectives have been advanced in anthropology in relation to agency today. One, drawing on Max Weber, defines agency as a goal-oriented, quasi-intentional action (Ortner 2006). The other line, following pragmatism, emphasises that agency is situational and there is no predefined goal; rather, the circumstances determine the means through which we might specify our intentions (Desjarlais 1997). If one takes a closer look at the empirical cases in the main chapters, then it seems that in fact the reactions that farmers displayed in the context of dispossession move along the axes between these two poles of intentional planning and situational reaction. Therefore, instead of viewing agency in dichotomous terms, I instead propose to acknowledge that people at times are capable of making plans, while at other times they improvise. Thus, instead of linking agency to one pre-established definition, one should pay attention to the different modalities and concepts of action evolving in particular historical and cultural settings (Mahmood 2005). Context is important because it constitutes not only change but also the means through which transformation is possible (*ibid.*, 65).

Moreover, working out different modalities of agency is important to better understand collective and individual lives at a crossroads, as well as how life is not simply determined but rather is continuously emerging and becoming – yet not apart but instead embedded in social fields of unequal and ever-shifting power relations. Not losing sight of power is important,

since an exclusive focus on agency runs into the danger of oversimplifying historical processes and neglecting large-scale cultural and social forces at play (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). Assuming that actors can triumph through their actions and will over structural constraints, is not simply naive but would mean intentionally overlooking that needs and expectations are in many instances culturally configured and that actions often have unexpected outcomes that run counter to individual or collective desires and hopes (*ibid.*).

One more question remains. How can one explain the absence of indigenous rhetoric in the four case studies? I will suggest three answers. First, while during the last two decades many *adivasis* have participated in political mobilisation, these actions brought only momentary success and could not impede the process of their marginalisation. As the protests have slowed down, the incorporation practices of the state through land dispossession nevertheless have further contested the *adivasis'* rights to land. Second, during my fieldwork, I observed several times disillusion with indigenous rights activism. Today in some places in Bangladesh, *adivasis* who are not directly involved in activism distance themselves from this discourse and display deep disappointment as well as resentment, not just towards the rhetoric but also towards some activists who find success as entrepreneurs with the help of indigenous rights activism. Many *adivasis* view these activists as opportunists who do not fulfil their promises but rather exploit the possibilities that arise.

Alpa Shah (2010), in the context of the Indian state of Jharkhand, draws attention to similar processes. By introducing the concept of the 'dark side of indigeneity', she argues that indigenous rights activism carried out by middle class people in city centres far from the margins of the state involuntarily contribute to the reinforcement of the marginalisation of poor *adivasis*. In so doing, instead of eradicating class differences, such activism exacerbates them. Thus, the claims activists raise against the state are rarely pertinent for *adivasis* inhabiting the margins. While I agree with Shah, I wish to go one step further with my arguments. My assertion is that many activists are not interested in delivering definite solutions to the problems that *adivasis* in Bangladesh encounter. Rather, indigenous rights activists in Bangladesh are implicated in what Tania Murray Li (2007) calls practices of assemblage, a messy project in which an array of actors with very different ideas and techniques temporarily come together only to disintegrate again. The main characteristic of assemblage is that actions never reach a level of fulfilment. Instead, incompleteness is the main goal; if the postulated objectives would be realised, there would be no justification for further action. Such an



explanation is suitable also for indigenous activism in Bangladesh. Many activists, by working towards momentary results that only briefly bring relief, are therefore unconsciously involved in maintaining the conflicts. Thus, if they delivered absolute resolutions, especially regarding land rights, there would be no need for their existence as activists. Consequently, indigenous rights activism today seems to have slowly run out of steam in Bangladesh, and *adivasis* who are not directly involved in political activism increasingly turn to alternative ways of action to secure their existence.

### Modes of Living: Belonging and Becoming

Life in War-Khasi is called *im*, in Pnar *em*, in Garo *janggi*, in Laleng *dana*, and in Bangla *jibon*. People with whom I worked used these nouns in relation to plants, animals, and humans that exhibit a form of living, most particularly breathing and growing. Things that do not display signs of such energy are rarely imagined as occupying a place in the realm of living. Yet, there are also exceptions to this rule. For instance, many *adivasis* assume that dead ancestors and spirits live but inhabit the other side of the world, which remains invisible to humans. The farmers in focus in this book also considered land, most particularly the forest, as a living place in a double sense – on one hand as containing life and on the other hand as providing a location where one can dwell and carry out activities, such as cultivation, that assure survival and the sustenance of living. Interlocutors often described land as a locus for enlarging the human horizon spatially and temporally. Outlook, therefore, requires, above all, an anchoring point. Moreover, farmers valued land as a place where one returns after venturing out into the world, and thus they closely tied land to the notion of home, evoking a meaning that Miriam Kahn (1996, 168) calls ‘emotional territories’.

Yet, land as a site of emplacement connotes more than a simple location in space. It enables social embeddedness. As Simone Weil (1952, 40) writes, ‘[t]o be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. [...] A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future’. Participation in the life of a community can be described with the term ‘belonging’, which expresses a basic human desire for interpersonal connections as well as social and material attachments. Belonging is also about ‘being integrated with and integral to a wider field of being’ (Jackson 2013, 32). While belonging during moments of tranquillity

represents an ordinary and tacit practice, it turns into an audible social and existential experience at times when it is jeopardised (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2012).

Being deprived of land endangers these multiple and complex senses of living. Thus, land emerged in all four cases as more than an easily exchangeable material possession, but rather as a place that through hard social work and extended cohabitation matured into a home and a site of commonality conveying a general desire of living and staying together. Farmers rarely appreciate land only because of its market price but rather because of 'use values' (Rodman 1992, 647). Consequently, land must be understood above all as a place of complex social constructs, and the relationship between places and humans as equally multi-dimensional. This means that land cannot be viewed merely from a utilitarian perspective but must be seen as a site of multiple attributes of social performances: physical through hard work, moral through obligations, and emotional through caring. All of these performances are crucial to understanding struggles over land because '[p]eople don't just dwell in comfort or misery, in centres or margins, in place or out of place, empowered or disempowered. People everywhere act on the integrity of their dwelling' (Feld and Basso 1996, 11), even at the expense of their lives (see also Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin 2011, xxi). Only when one develops such a perspective can one begin to grasp what is really at stake if land is lost.

Belonging, however, does not exhaust the modes of living that I presented in the four case studies. Since living is not only a matter of belonging but also a matter of becoming (Jackson 2013, 33). Life – especially in crisis – is in a state of flux. Yet, even in peaceful settings life is unstoppable. Being is not a fixed essence 'that one has or does not have' (Hage 1999, 20). Rather, life as an inherently intersubjective exercise is 'tied to contexts of interaction with others' (Jackson 2013, 33). It is useful therefore to think about life as a 'potentiality that waxes and wanes, is augmented or diminished, depending on how one acts and speaks in relation to others' (ibid.).

There are yet two other important aspects of becoming. One is connected to a human desire of seeing the future as open, where one can project expectations and aspirations or new imaginations of living. In all four case studies, farmers imagined land as a site imbued with imaginations of the future. Land anchored life, but it also made dreaming – playing with future possibilities – viable. The second aspect of becoming is connected to inventions and transformations of the self and the transfiguration of how one relates to the world amid individual or collective struggles. Similarly, to loss, the quest for living is a transformative experience. As Kalpana Kanbairan (2006) writes, belonging 'encapsulates' becoming. While performing

belonging, new subjectivities and configurations of relatedness emerge. Therefore, the fusion of belonging and becoming is inherently paradoxical. While the former is related to preserving something already established, the latter is a movement towards something new while investing effort in maintaining the common foundation upon which a sense of belonging was already established. With every restatement of belonging, one moves ever further away from its 'original' meaning. Jacques Derrida (2007) calls this 'iterability', meaning that every iteration is at the same time an alternation or modification of the same. Thinking belonging and becoming together is a useful way of reflecting on how, from the very beginning, the 'old' and the 'same' always contains within itself the 'new' and the 'other'.

However, neither belonging nor becoming can be viewed exclusively as positive social experiences (see Biehl and Locke 2017; Geschiere 2009). Both carry dangers, and both have darker sides. Belonging from its more sinister angle can mean refusal and removal of alternative perspectives that are perceived as threatening to internal cohesion. Safeguarding social boundaries might at times flip into policing and silencing individual desires that deviate from imaginations of what constitutes a shared ground upon which a sense of solidarity is constructed. Moreover, belonging to a group – be it a biologically, ethnically, economically, or politically defined formation – has its price, and payment might be expected through a lifelong commitment. An investigation of the price of belonging guides one's attention towards sites of social life that are shadowed and charged with tensions frequently emanating from the ambiguity of proximate human relationships. In all four cases I invested effort to tease out such shadows. Simon's faith in the context of Nolikhai, Victoria's painful exclusion in Latrymbai, the dangerous aspects of *aakrosh* in Madhupur, and the continuous retrospections in Ratargul all point towards everyday hurt and betrayal that do not emanate from the outside but rather are born from relations of intimacy. Yet, not only belonging also becoming carries negative overtones. Here I am referring less to the dynamics of internal relations than to the process of loss. Losing land presupposes and projects a future of becoming stateless, displaced, and subject to further violence. The creative and positive potentiality of transformation must be held against the negative effects of change that are prompted by the loss of land.

### **Concluding Remarks: Survival or an Undivided Approach to Life**

It was early in the morning, at seven o'clock, when Matthew and I met a few women in Madhupur to talk about the everyday difficulties women face

when their husbands or sons are forced to hide, are detained, or must move to a different area due to the forest cases. We sat outside on the veranda, on a mud floor covered by a blue plastic bag. More than ten women came to meet us. The younger women sat behind the eldest and thus maintained a distance of respect from those who were older. The eldest, Pushpo, a 60-year-old woman, took her place exactly in front of me. She also led the discussion. This is what Pushpo said:

Life is full of troubles (*kosto*). We work for our family. We get 200 Taka per day. This is the work for the daily workers. And work is work. We do not need to consider whether it is low or high because we need work to survive (*bedhe thaka*). But we do not get work every day. The day we get work, that day is a good day for us. We can buy rice and vegetables for the family. But when we do not get work, that day is a difficult day (*koster din*). That day we realise very much how difficult this life is. We try to save some little amount of money from our daily earning. But in total we have a lot of trouble to look after our families. People do not value (*mullo*) us, as we do not have money. Daily we have the pressure of managing our life, but it has become a habit for us. If we want to survive (*tike thaka*), we must work and accept this pressure. But if we stay at home without working, we will not have the chance to earn money and we will not be able to tolerate (*sojjo kora*) the pain of the stomach because the belly will not listen to you.

In his last interview published in *Le Monde* in 2004 a few days before his death, Jacques Derrida stated the following:

I have always been interested in the question of survival, the meaning of which does not add to life and death. It is originary, life is survival. Survival in the conventional sense of the term means to continue to live, but also to live after death. [...] Everything I have said [...] about survival as complication of the opposition death-life proceeds with me from an unconditional affirmation of life. Survival is life beyond life, life more than life, and the discourse I undertake is not death-oriented, just the opposite, it is the affirmation of someone living who prefers living, and therefore survival, to death; because survival is not simply what remains, it is the most intense life possible.

I believe that what connects the words of Pushpo and Derrida – two people living in different places, times and contexts – is the issue of survival. With

his last words, Derrida addresses an old issue in philosophy and anthropology, the unfeasible opposition between biological and political life; *zoë* and *bios*; *mere life* and *qualified existence* (Fassin 2010). With the concept of survival, Derrida seems to dissolve this dichotomy and instead makes possible a fusion of the existential and the political. Thus, life lived in fact 'integrates its various forms without rupture, linking bodily existence and immaterial survival, nature, and history' (Fassin 2010, 85). Moreover, Derrida's notion of survival refutes the widespread view that only the 'good life' can be qualified as life and consequently that the struggle to survive is merely an avoidance of death, but not living. On the contrary, the art of living is not necessarily a life lived well but attains a value through the quest for life (Kleinman 2014).

What are the consequences if one holds the view that survival is on the side of death? Does this mean that all the farmers in the focus of this book already inhabit a realm that it is incomprehensible from the perspective of the living? Does it mean that they are already at the threshold of final exit, even if they exhibit signs of living? Identifying someone as dead or alive has ethical and political implications and is not only a scholarly exercise. By determining the struggles for life as not yet or not anymore a full life, one de-affirms signs of living that exhibit different ways of existing. The above questions serve also as a restatement of my original claim that the existential cannot be separated from the political and the social. The concept of survival places life in the field of multiple pressures while resisting a divided approach to life.

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Drawing on two years of ethnographic research in the north-eastern borderlands of Bangladesh, this book focuses on the everyday struggles of indigenous farmers threatened with losing their land due to such state programmes as the realignment of the national border, ecotourism, social forestry and the establishment of a military cantonment. In implementing these programmes, state actors challenge farmers' right to land, instituting spaces of violence in which multiple forms of marginalisation overlap and are reinforced. Mapping how farmers react to these challenges emotionally and practically, the book argues that these land conflicts serve as a starting point for existentially charged disputes in which the survival efforts of farmers clash with the political imaginations and practices of the nation-state. The analysis shows that losing land represents more than being deprived of a material asset: it is nothing less than the extinction of ways of life.

**Éva Rozália Hölzle** is a social anthropologist working as a research associate and lecturer at the Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University, Germany since 2011. She studied sociology and social anthropology at Eötvös Loránd University in Hungary and at Bielefeld University, Germany. For this book she did extensive 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Bangladesh along the border to Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura.

