

Genesis of Tribal Land Alienation: A Study in Nagaon District of Assam

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Abstract

Land alienation among tribal communities is a critical and pressing concern in India. Especially in the northeastern region of India, this phenomenon has been increasingly identified as one of the major causes fuelling tribal unrest in the region. Land plays a significant role in defining the socio-economic structure of tribal livelihood, which is why its dispossession further procreates allied problems such as displacement, deprivation of resources and ethnic attrition. However, the problem of land alienation in Assam has its roots in colonial policies and has been evolving since then, leading to major demographic transformations and altered power dynamics within peasant communities in the region. A continued state of dispossession pushes these communities into a vicious cycle of socio-economic vulnerability, wherein they are forced to choose alternate means of livelihood apart from agriculture. In this regard, the Nagaon district of Assam, despite being a region exclusive of international or interstate boundaries, presents a distinct case of tribal communities facing land alienation on a considerable scale. The present study, therefore, attempts to examine the historical genesis of tribal land alienation in the larger framework of both colonial and post-colonial periods with special reference to Nagaon district of Assam, while also shedding light on the complex process involved in the explicit private land transfer among the tribal communities, providing a comprehensive analysis of the socio-political and economic repercussions on them. In addition to this, the paper also explores the ambiguous nature of land ownership and influx of migrants, particularly non-tribal inhabitants, further exacerbating the land alienation crisis.

Key words:

*Land alienation,
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Introduction:

This paper attempts to explore the genesis of land alienation among the tribes of Assam with special reference to the Nagaon district. Since ancient times, various tribal groups have been inhabited the region and enriching it with their distinct socio-cultural traditions. Like other tribal communities in India, tribes of Assam are also heavily dependent on land for survival. Despite land being a crucial part of their life and livelihood, land alienation among tribal communities in Assam has been a prevalent issue and a focal point of rural politics since the colonial period (Saikia, 2014). Almost every tribal community of Assam is facing alienation of land, and it has far-reaching ramifications on their livelihood as well as socio-cultural aspects of their everyday life. In such a context, the paper seeks to examine the sociological factors responsible for the growing land alienation among the tribal populace.

Alienation refers to a socio-psychological condition that involves the separation of an individual or group from something that belongs to their social existence. Alienation in relation to land thus implies separation from land, which may manifest in many ways, such as deprivation, displacement, transference, etc. In other words, land alienation indicates the detachment from the land or the transference and displacement of people from land. Particularly, land alienation in tribal societies indicates not only transferring but also encroachment of tribal land by outsiders under the guise of development projects.

Before the advent of British colonialism, the indigenous tribes in India exhibited a profound and symbiotic relationship with their environment and the natural resources therein. Within the broader context of colonial and modern Indian state dynamics (Shanmugam, 2005), alienation among tribal communities may be attributed to a number of sources, including the injustices inflicted by non-tribal agencies such as moneylenders, feudal landlords, and immigrants, governmental development projects, land legislation and policies, and also lack of proper education alongside regressive social customs within tribal groups. However, the intensity and causative relation between these agencies and land alienation may differ across various from states and tribes. It has been posited that during the pre-colonial era, tribal communities in India possessed unrestricted access to natural resources, encompassing land, forests, and other assets (Xaxa, 2011). Along with it, it was the established customary laws prevailing within these

geographically isolated communities that governed the utilisation and arrangement of land tenure. The British land administration, however, implemented a system that integrated tribal lands into a unified framework, thereby disrupting the traditional autonomy that tribal communities had previously maintained. The colonial land administration initiative designated land as private property and instituted taxation in return for monetary compensation. This initiated the process of transferring tribal land into private ownership.

Further, along with colonial land policy, developmental initiatives in post-independent India, along with the fragility of tribal customary political structures and practices, significantly galvanized the process of privatization of tribal land. This phenomenon resulted in a loss of large tracts of land and fragmented the prior sense of collectivity, giving rise to individualism within tribal communities (Nongkynrih, 2009). Thus, alongside external influences, internal factors such as the introduction of commercial values, the commercialization of community land, the growing importance of monetary transactions in the form of cash, etc. also contributed to this phenomenon (Shimray, 2006). At present, the concepts of displacement and alienation are frequently associated with the appropriation of land from tribal communities in India. This phenomenon encompasses not only the seizure of private land but also the encroachment upon communal land, which holds significant value within tribal societies, all under the guise of developmental initiatives and policies. The swift pace of industrialisation and urbanisation has significantly accelerated the phenomenon of land alienation across nearly every region of the nation (Sarkar, 2007) (Reddy, 2022). The phenomenon of land alienation induced by development is a common issue within the tribal communities of the Northeastern region, particularly in Assam.

However, land alienation among tribal communities in Assam involves a complex history shaped by a confluence of internal and external influences. When compared to the broader national context, the alienation of tribal land in Assam due to developmental projects is relatively minimal. In the context of Assam, the loss of land can rather be attributed to immigration and internal dynamics. The incorporation of Assam into British governance initiated a series of land-related challenges for the tribal communities in the region. Assam long served as a cradle for diverse tribal communities throughout its history. The aristocrats of Assam during the pre-colonial era lacked any formal regulations or established practices concerning proper

documentation of land or revenue administration. During that time, revenue was exclusively generated through the provision of physical labour (Hussain, 1989: 63-65). In the absence of regulations, the British administration implemented a modern land and revenue system, which subsequently became the foundation for land issues affecting both tribal and non-tribal populations in the region. Unlike the previous system of taxation that relied on manual labour, colonial administration implemented a monetary system for the exchange of land revenue. In addition to this, land became the property of the state, thereby introducing an individualistic perspective to its management. Most importantly, the establishment of the *patta* system categorized land as a concrete, inheritable and marketable asset under the colonial regime. This modern idea of land was foreign to tribal societies, where the majority of tribal communities owned and utilized land collectively.

Moreover, the dynamic nature of agricultural practices allowed tribal peasants to cultivate extensive areas of land. Here, it must be noted that it was in the late 19th century when the land problem was initiated among tribal societies in Assam (Daimary, 2008). The issue did not resolve; instead, it deteriorated further with the influx of immigration promoted by colonial governance. The primary migrant populations influencing the transformation of the demographic landscape and the significant alterations in land relations within the state included impoverished peasants from former East Bengal, subsequently East Pakistan and now Bangladesh, Nepalese individuals, plantation labourers or tea tribes from mainland India, and Hindu merchant communities (Daimary, 2008; Sengupta, 2006; Sharma, 2012). The majority of this immigration was intentional and, at times, coercive, serving the interests of colonial governance and their commercial objectives. It has been observed that both the demographic composition of the state and the influx of these external communities significantly altered the socio-economic and political landscape of the region. Particularly in the tribal regions, the influx of predominantly impoverished agrarian immigrants from former East Bengal negatively impacted the economic condition of the indigenous communities in the area. A considerable section of these impoverished immigrant agrarians were Muslims. Their initial settlement occurred in the char areas, subsequently transitioning to government reserves, with further encroachment swiftly extending to lands owned by local populations or tribal communities (Chakraborty, 2012; Daimary, 2008). The immediate consequence of these settlements was loss of lands owned by

tribal peasants in the area who were generally involved with shifting cultivation (Bordoloi, 1999; Sharma, 2001; 2012). To add to it, the unfamiliar cultural and social structure of these immigrant agrarians proved to be quite unsettling for the indigenous inhabitants. In pursuit of arable land, the tribal communities sought refuge in more secluded regions, relinquishing their former territories to the newcomers. This subsequently led to the alienation of land among tribal communities. The immigrants from erstwhile East Bengal were skilled agricultural laborers, and they introduced commercial crops to the local economies of the region. Gradual interference with them in the local economy led to the deprivation of tribal peasants from agriculture. Documented incidents also show land-hungry immigrant Muslims forcefully appropriating tribal habitation (Daimary, 2008). The peasants of East Bengal origin, predominantly Muslims, characterised their initiatives for land acquisition as assertive, driven by a fervent desire for land and supported by administrative backing, which led to the eradication of numerous tribal villages (Das, 1986). Systematic harassment occasionally resulted in tensions between these two communities, which differ ethnically, religiously, and socially, thereby exacerbating socio-economic risks. Recognising the gravity of the escalating unauthorised land occupation by immigrant peasants from East Bengal, the British administration devised a strategy in the early 20th century referred to as the 'queue/line system'. Within the framework of this safeguarding mechanism of the line system, three distinct categories of villages were established, viz., open village, closed village, and mixed village. In the villages classified as open category, immigrants are permitted to settle without restriction; conversely, in villages designated as closed category, the settlement of the immigrant population is limited. Moreover, in the mixed village, delineation was established that permitted immigrants to inhabit solely one side of the land designated for settlement. Regrettably, the line system did not succeed in safeguarding the land of the tribal communities as intended. While the intention was clear and aimed at safeguarding tribal land, it ultimately failed to address the issue of unauthorised occupation and encroachment by immigrant peasants on lands belonging to the tribal communities in the region. According to studies, both the open and mixed category villages, as well as those classified as closed category, have encountered unauthorised occupation and encroachment on tribal lands, leading to mass eradication of tribal villages. Nearly 50 tribal villages were eradicated from their existence in the Barpeta subdivision alone (Daimary, 2008: 136; Das, 1986: 31). The Nagaon district was among the first to undergo

the implementation of the line system, as noted by Bordoloi in 1999. Further, in the 1940s the initiative to grow more food, introduced by the Sadulla ministry was later considered as the scheme to expand more land for immigrant peasants¹(Sharma, 2001: 4793; Daimary 2008: 137; Sarma & Majumdar, 2008: 240; Bordoloi, 1999: 7-8).

Not surprisingly, among the districts of Brahmaputra Valley, Nagaon is now one of the worse effected one by the settlement of immigrant peasants, after Goalpara (Kar, 1990) This resulted in a massive demographic change in the District, especially in the areas to north direction of Nagaon and the south bank of the Brahmaputra, including Dhing, Laharighat, Juriya, Laokhowa, Bakori etc. (Sharma, 2001).

Historically, it has been posited that various parts of Nagaon District were governed and populated by a diverse array of tribal rulers and communities, including the *Kacharis* and the *Tiwas*, among others. Over the years, the district has undergone tremendous land alienation and a reduction in its indigenous population, which correlates with the evolving demographic landscape. Although the district does not share interstate or international borders, the transformation of its demographic structure has been historically rapid, following the introduction of British administrative measures and policies, which included the recruitment of educated Bengalis for administrative roles, the influx of labourers for tea plantations, and the settlement of East Bengal-origin migrant peasants in previously unutilised lands. Moreover, the policy aimed at increasing food production in the 1940s, coupled with the adverse initiative to settle migrants from East Bengal, contributed to this demographic change. This initiative also resulted in the decline of both the tribal and non-tribal Assamese populations within the area.

Table 1: Density of population in Nagaon District from 1901 to 2011

Year	Density of population
1901	46
1911	53

¹ The ministry was headed by Md. Sadulla and the scheme ‘grow more food’ came up with the objective to open more lands in Professional grazing reserves and forest reserves including Laokhowa and Orang. Thus, the campaign encouraged fresh settlement of immigrant peasants even in the sub- montane area, specially inhabited by tribals.

1921	70
1931	99
1941	114
1951	156
1961	218
1971	302
1981	---*
1991	455
2001	582
2011	711

Source: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Govt. of Assam and Census 2001, 2011
 Note: *Census was not conducted in 1981 due to Assam movement

Currently, the district comprises a modest proportion of tribal individuals within its overall population, standing at 4.1% as per the most recent census report from 2011 (District Census Handbook Nagaon 2011). We can regard the extent of land alienation among tribal communities in the district as significant. There is also a contention that the district's implementation of Tribal Belt and Blocks has been ineffective. The tribal enclaves within the district, operating beyond the legal constraints on the transfer of tribal land, consequently found themselves ensnared in a detrimental cycle of land alienation, which was further influenced by various internal dynamics.

Database and Methodology

The present study is participant-oriented in nature. Data has been gathered from two villages under the Rupahi community development block, namely Belaguri Kachari Gaon and Ukahapar. The primary data is predominantly sourced from tribal inhabitants at field sites, non-tribal Assamese individuals, and government officials. Furthermore, the research papers, journals, books, and statistical and census reports pertinent to the topic formed the foundation for the compilation of secondary data.

Further, the study is conducted by using qualitative data. However, data has been quantified whenever it is necessary. Oral narratives, focused group discussions, and unstructured interviews, observation are employed as tools of data collection. In addition to that, to investigate

more empirically about land alienation among tribal communities of the area, the researcher conducted a household survey.

The study focuses on the issue of tribal land alienation; thus, the household survey is exclusively comprised of tribal households. According to the records maintained by the village headman, *Gaonburha*, there exist a total of 128 households belonging to the Bodo-Kachari community and 81 households from the Tiwa community. The study area encompasses a total of 209 tribal households, from which 100 households were randomly selected for the survey. Nearly half of the total tribal households in the area under examination are comprised of this particular household type. Additionally, within a sample of 100 households, 50 are identified as belonging to the Bodo community, while the remaining 50 are affiliated with the Tiwa community. Furthermore, half of the total households chosen for the survey are drawn from Belaguri Kachari gaon revenue village, while the other half is selected from Ukahapar within the Gatanga revenue village. The researcher has gathered information from the field visit regarding numerous occurrences of land transfer from tribal to non-tribal populations. Besides, a substantial expanse of government land that previously functioned as communal space for the tribal villagers has also been alienated.

Study Area

Rupahi has been selected for the collection of empirical data pertinent to the study. Rupahi is located to the north of Nagaon and to the south of the Brahmaputra River. The approximate distance from Rupahi to the district headquarters of Nagaon is 12 kilometres. Rupahi currently functions as a developmental block within the administrative framework of the Assam Government. Additionally, Rupahi holds significant commercial value as well. Apart from that, the region is situated beyond the confines of the Tribal belt and Block, thereby lacking any legal impediments regarding the transfer of land from tribal individuals to non-tribals.

Historically, Rupahi was populated by indigenous communities. Extensive areas along the banks of the Sonai, a tributary of the formidable Brahmaputra, remained unoccupied and densely forested. Extensive areas were utilised by indigenous populations for agricultural purposes, which exhibited a dynamic character. It has been noted that the name Rupahi is

directly linked to Kachari King Mahmanikya (Bora, 2012:22). Nonetheless, the present demographic landscape diverges significantly from the historical context observed in the study area. Currently, the predominant segment of the population in Rupahi is comprised of individuals belonging to a religious minority. They are historically the Muslim immigrants from East Bengal, formerly known as East Pakistan, and currently recognised as Bangladesh. In the region, one can also observe the presence of non-tribal Assamese caste groups, such as Brahmins, Koch-Kalitas, and scheduled castes, among others. Moreover, one can observe the presence of Hindu migrant communities, including those of Bengali and Bihari descent. It is evident that the tribal population occupies a minority status within the demographic composition of the region. The Bodo-Kachari and Tiwa tribes inhabit the region. As per the district census handbook of 2011, merely eight revenue villages within the Rupahi Community Development Block are home to a tribal population. The locations in question include Halowa Gaon, Pani Gaon, Pub-Amrakanda, Hathi-Pukhuri, Nanal Dowra, Rupahi Bhakat Gaon, Gatanga, and Belaguri Kachari Gaon, as detailed in the District Census Handbook for Nagaon, 2011. In these revenue villages, the proportion of the tribal population is notably lower in comparison to that of the non-tribal population. Among these villages, Belaguri Kachari Gaon and Ukahapar have been selected as the sites for the collection of empirical data relevant to the study. Belaguri Kachari Gaon constitutes a revenue village in its own right. Furthermore, Ukahapar is situated within the jurisdiction of the Gatanga revenue village, which is part of the Rupahi developmental Block.

The demographic composition of the villages encompasses individuals from the immigrant Muslim community or erstwhile East Bengal origin migrant peasants, the non-tribal Assamese caste groups of Koch-Kalita, and a tiny section of the scheduled caste and tribal inhabitants of the Bodo community and Tiwa community. The non-tribal population constitutes the majority in the region; however, historical accounts suggest that this area has traditionally been associated with the tribal communities of the villages. The area presents rampant alienation of tribal land. Besides private land, huge tracts of government land which once served as common land for the tribal villagers are also alienated.

Findings

The fieldwork reveals population mobility, large in amount from the mid-20th. This mobility took place among tribals from both the Bodo-Kachari and Tiwa communities in search of arable land. The narratives cited three major factors which are responsible for the population mobility among the tribal inhabitants, which can be identified as push factors. Initially in the study area agricultural fields were affected by flood, as most of the agricultural plots of the tribal inhabitants are located at the south bank of the Sonai River, yet it was not the major cause in the case of land alienation in the area. Secondly, the impact of immigrant Muslims and their organized disturbance in the agricultural fields of tribals can be considered as one of the significant causes of land alienation of tribals in the area. Thirdly, due to land fragmentation at the time of property distribution among the family, the amount of agricultural land becomes insufficient for economic survival. Thus, tribal households relatively deprived of agricultural land mobilized in search of agricultural land in other places. Additionally, the study identifies a pull factor too in terms of population mobility in search of agricultural land, which is opening reserve land for cultivation.

Thus, it is found that the population mobility in search of agricultural land follows more or less some particular places. Tribal people from the area mobilized themselves to Jonai, Gahpur, Rangapara, Biswanath, Karbi-Anglang, Golaghat, Dhemaji, etc., which are located outside the district. Inside the district common areas where population mobility took place are Kaliadinga and Sutirpar; villages near Lawkhowa, namely Singimari, Sunsahar, Baranguri, Salpara, and Bangaon; Raja Pathar, Kaki, Kaliabor, etc.

Further, it is observable that the mobility in search of agricultural land is, in most of the cases, permanent in nature. In search of more remote areas for settlement, tribal people from the study area thus procreate new villages both inside and outside of the district. Five Bodo villages near Lawkhowa are inhabited by the tribal population from the study area. Also Kaliadinga is another forest village, the population of which originated from the study area. Besides, the procreation of new villages as a consequence of population mobility from the area took place outside the Nagaon district too. Some of the new villages outside the district are Jaljuri, Ganeshpur, Baliyan, etc.

The significance of this population mobility in terms of land alienation is that at the time of mobilization tribal people transfer their land. It is observable that the location of the land matters at the time of transfer. The study reveals that land at the north bank of Sonai, such as the Rowmari and Mowamari areas, is transferred mostly to immigrant Muslims and a few fellow tribals. Also, in some cases, tribal people are compelled to withdraw their ownership and leave the land for free, later to be occupied by immigrant Muslims. While land on the south bank of Sonai or inside the village was transferred mostly to tribal people from their own community or given to brothers or relatives informally. This, along with land alienation, creates internal disparities among both the tribal communities in the study area.

The study divulges the fact that tribal people of the area are not landless, yet they are paperless in terms of land holding and ownership. Extension of the Assam Land and Revenue Settlement Act, 1886, into the tribal areas of Nagaon District emerged as an unavoidable evil, as it involves regular payment of revenue by the cultivators and introduced *patta* for documentation of ownership (Bhattacharjee 1990: 20). This enhances incidents of sale, mortgage, etc. to fulfil the need for money in tribal areas. Besides, non-tribals and elites from the tribal community also use this as a privilege against the fellow tribals who are incapable of documenting land, further adding class disparities inside the community. Thus, the outcome of individual ownership is the concentration of land in the hands of a few individuals or families within the tribe and the consequent disparity within the community. (Bhattari, 2008:151). The narratives cited causes such as drinking habits, illiteracy, laziness and simplicity among tribal people in the area, which are used strategically by non-tribal and tribal elites to grab their land.

In addition to this, the role of govt. land officials seems to be biased as per the study. There was a gap between govt. land officials and tribal masses. It seems from the narratives that officials are more accountable towards the elite section among the tribals. Besides, cases of false registration in the land document are found.

Apart from that, it is also noticeable from the study that tribal people also show laziness in updating their land document. They are also not very serious in preserving the land documents. Ambiguities around name, title, and measurement of land are still relevant among

them. Also, informality in terms of selling, exchanging and mortgaging land, especially inside the community, is largely found.

The study finds that a substantial amount of private land belonging to both Bodo-Kachari and Tiwa villagers is transferred through the ways of sale, mortgage and lease. It is noted that the transfer of private land is not a very recent phenomenon in the study area. While conducting fieldwork, the researcher identifies many cases of private land transfer. As a result of which the land holdings of tribal people in the area are decreased. From the narratives the researcher identifies that not only the external factors but also internal issues prevailing in the tribal community are responsible for such kind of voluntary alienation. As per the narratives, internal factors responsible for private land transfer can be pointed out as drinking habits, illiteracy, laziness, poverty, indebtedness, exposure to a new market economy, internalizing commodity value in the tribal culture, the unwillingness of youth to engage in agriculture and the search for alternative livelihoods. Private land transfer from tribal to non-tribal in both the tribal villages takes place without any significant role of a middleman. Non-tribal Assamese and immigrant Muslims both come under the category of buyer. Further, private land transfer is sometimes also done inside the tribal community itself. This type of land transfer takes place in the urgent need of money. Sale of private land can be found in both formal and informal ways. Mortgage is done generally by following informal conversation or on the basis of trust. According to the narratives, the need for money prompts some tribal people to sell land, as it is the primary tangible asset of the tribe. Land sale for education, treatment and other domestic consumption; the pressure of performing socio-cultural rituals also prompts the transfer of private land among both the tribal villages.

Additionally, land is also transferred for productive purposes, yet the rate of success is low. This in the study area includes the transfer of land to brick kiln industries in nearby areas, including Beltoli, Laogaon, Bherbheri, etc. Land transfer to brick kilns happens in the study area in the following three ways: Firstly, land is sold to the brick kiln owner. Secondly, there is an agreement between the landowner and the brick kiln owner where the brick kiln owner cuts the land and pays per foot. Thus the former agricultural land is converted into fishery. While the first two are one-time investments, the third one, the land transfer to Brick Kiln, is repetitive in

nature, which is renting out land for drying bricks in the season. Thus, much of the agricultural land of the tribal people is transferred for the use of small industrial setups. The second and third ways of transfer to the brick kiln are also found inside the villages. Further, construction of fisheries in the midst of both agricultural and residential land inside the tribal village initiates the problem of land erosion in the nearby plots of land of others. In addition, it also gives birth to further allied issues in agriculture.

However, the study reveals a huge amount of private land transfer among the tribal inhabitants of Ukahapar and Belaguri Kachari Gaon, where the majority of the buyer community belongs to immigrant Muslims. Though this kind of private land transfer can be termed as voluntary land alienation, the narratives reveal the fact that the tribals of the area are compelled to do so in many cases of private land transfer. Encroachment of immigrant Muslims is the primary cause in this regard.

The study discloses the issue of encroachment as a major factor that impacted tribal land alienation in the study area. Besides encroaching into the private land of tribal people, encroachment on government land, which once served as a village common, was also found in the study area. A significant portion of private and public land, which historically belonged to the Tiwa and Bodo-Kachari tribal people, is now occupied by immigrant Muslim inhabitants. Historically, the origins can be traced to migrants from undivided East Bengal. The majority of the immigrants Muslims are from Mayimanshing. On the basis of their land occupation mechanism or landholding positions, immigrant Muslims of the area can be divided into three categories. The first category holds those who bought private land from both tribal and non-tribal Assamese inhabitants of the area. The second category includes those who initially encroached on the common or govt land forcefully or strategically and later got legalized in terms of land holding. Thirdly, illegal encroachment is largely found in the Govt. land or land of village common. The narrators from both tribal and non-tribal neighbouring villages cited that these people came from different districts of Assam and they are most probably the victims of eviction, land erosion, religious conflict, increasing land scarcity due to population growth etc. Illegal encroachers do not utter about their previous place of habitation, from where they came to the study area. It is very much noticeable that they share a strong community network.

One of our respondents said that people of immigrant Muslim/erstwhile East Bengal origin migrant peasants in the area have an organized way of land occupation. They are good at documentation. They are very careful and conscious. They had all the documents and paper works in which even indigenous people are lacking. It is observed that people from immigrant Muslim/ erstwhile East Bengal origin migrant peasant population have a tendency to secure their land rights. It is because of their historical roots in erstwhile East Bengal, where they were landless and exploited under Hindu landlords. Further, historically they were under a feudal structure and familiar with the notion private or individual ownership of land. Thus, in Assam they are identified as land hungry (Sharma, 2001; Kar, 1990).

It has been observed in the study that people from immigrant Muslim communities share a strong community network, and strategies for securing land rights are also collective in nature. As a result of which tribal people are compelled to sell the land or give it in *adhi* or *sukti* to immigrant Muslims. The majority of the tribal peasants sold their land, as they were unable to secure the production or was deprived of the production from their own agricultural field, as per the narratives. However, in some cases the tribal people also left their agricultural land for free.

A farmer, aged between 75 and 80, from Belaguri Kachari gaon, remarked:

Individuals from our tribal village have sold land in Rowmari. I possessed 5 bigha of land in Rowmari, endeavoured to retain it, but ultimately decided to sell it later. The land is situated at a considerable distance from our residence, amidst a community of individuals who trace their roots to the migrant peasant population of East Bengal. I transferred ownership of the land to a buyer, specifically a Muslim peasant, in return for a sum of 5000, which equates to 1000 per bigha for a total of 5 bigha. The year was 1958. Subsequently, I acquired a parcel of land in Karbi Anglong. Additionally, I possessed 3/4 bigha of land adjacent to Rowmari beel, which I regrettably had to relinquish without any financial compensation. The area is now inhabited by migrant peasants of East Bengal origin. In Mowamari, I possess 1 1/2 bigha of land in one area and 3 bigha in another. The land is characterised by the presence of migrant peasants of East Bengal origin. In that region, they cultivate jute and compensate me with a portion of the total yield, specifically two-thirds of the production. They requested that I relinquish the land in return for monetary compensation, yet I declined to part with it. If we are

inclined to sell the land to them, they are prepared to offer 4-5 lakh per bigha in return. However, we are currently not inclined to sell it. They inform me that if I decide to sell it, they will proceed with the purchase.

An Assamese narrator, who does not belong to a tribal community, recounts his personal experience regarding the issue of encroachment. In 1983, a family of humble origins, hailing from the migrant peasant community of erstwhile East Bengal, established their residence in a corner of our plot, which encompasses two bigha of land. Their family experienced the repercussions of religious conflict during the Assam agitation in 1983. The narrator states:

My father expresses compassion towards them, noting their impoverished condition and suggesting that, in due course, they will obtain the means to relocate to a different area. However, the individual has passed away, yet the encroachment persists through his descendants. Subsequently, my brother and I engage in a discussion, and we determine it necessary to sell 1 katha of land from our total of 2 bigha. We engage in negotiations in this manner, as pursuing legal action would incur substantial financial costs. We reached a consensus with them and sold 1 katha of land located at the corner of 2 bigha in exchange for monetary compensation from the family. In this endeavour, my brother and I present two alternatives to them: a) they may vacate the land, or b) they are required to remit a specified sum of money in exchange for the land. Their selection was the second option.

In this manner, agricultural land belonging to tribal communities, particularly in regions such as Rowmari, Mowamari, Fakali, Barpeta, and Bherbheri, is being transferred to immigrant Muslims. Moreover, immigrant Muslims are now unlawfully encroaching on the Belaguri Grazing Reserve, which remained desolate until the 1980s.

Conclusion

Tribal communities have experienced a growing degree of marginalization throughout the socio-political history of the State. The modern state often perceives tribal economies as backward. Despite the implementation of protective measures aimed at enhancing the socio-cultural and economic conditions of these communities, the results have fallen short of anticipated outcomes. It has been observed that challenges to the ethnic identity of tribal groups are often associated with matters concerning land rights. Among the myriad challenges

confronting tribal populations in India, especially in the North-East, issues such as indebtedness, poverty, and insufficient access to education and healthcare are prevalent. However, land-related dilemmas have surfaced as particularly pressing concerns. In the modern era, tribal communities seem to be facing challenges that jeopardise their identity and survival, with land dispossession being a crucial factor in this predicament. The denial of land rights seems to have intensified their vulnerability, especially in relation to their ethnicity and identity. The marginalisation faced by these communities is not merely an isolated event; it is an ongoing process, exacerbated by a multitude of intricate and interrelated challenges stemming from land deprivation. Therefore, it is extremely important to emphasize the necessity of meticulously crafting protective strategies to effectively address the prevailing challenges faced by tribal societies and to foster their ongoing advancement.

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