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Politics and the Peasantry in Assam- Locating the responses in Doyang Reserved Forest

--- Indrani Talukdar

Abstract

The peasantry in Assam and Northeast India has been the subject of a plethora of academic literature, more so on its links to the ethnic-religious movements, yet less on its internal politics. It would be erroneous to assume that the peasantry is divorced from the wider social-political milieu or that it is dependent on the same. At the same time, it is also influenced by the process of globalisation brought along by the Indian state. However, the peasantry has its forms of politics that not only negotiate with, but also challenge the dominant structures in place. This politics takes myriad forms, ranging from everyday forms of resistance to organised protests. This analysis of its politics contributes to rural-agrarian protest movements, stemmed in multiple histories of migration, peasantisation, border conflict as well as ethnic conflict, yet it is missing in contemporary academic discourse. This paper shall attempt to draw on such insights to portray the peasantry as responsive rather than reactive to state and wider ethnic politics.

Keywords: Peasant, Reserved Forests, Northeast India, Peasant Politics.

Introduction

The discourse of peasant politics in the context of Assam and Northeast India rarely highlights the everyday instances of resistance and their transformative power in terms of state policies for the people. Analysing and placing the everyday peasant politics with respect to historical development of the nature and character of the state, helps us to understand how power operates and devolves through the institutional mechanisms in place, and what form of resistance is shaped around it. The idea is to converse beyond the understanding of the peasantry as ‘dependent’ on the outside world for their own politics and instead look at it as an autonomous unit capable of building its own narratives of resistance located in everyday experiences. What thus constitutes everyday peasant politics in an extremely heterogeneous location such as the Northeast, and why do the peasants take recourse to it instead of organisational politics? What is the relationship between
everyday politics and organisational politics? How do these forms of politics affect state policies and interventions? What is the need to understand the different forms of politics that the peasantry undertake? Such questions need close examination to understand how the peasantry addresses its grievances against the hegemonic structures in place and how and when there are negotiations.

As far as the actual potential of the peasantry for successful revolution is concerned, Marx believed that it would be the proletariat that would usher in a revolution. Even though he ascribed a secondary social class status to the peasantry that exists outside the economic class system of the capitalist class system, he saw in it a potential ally of the proletariat working-class movement. The peasantry, he thought, would be drawn into the revolution through growing capitalist penetration into the French countryside, and thus would become the ‘rural proletariat’. He notes, “... the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organisation among them, they do not form a class” (Marx 1951 [viz., Marx & Engels, 1950 Selected Writings, Moscow], Vol I, p. 303; quoted in Shanin, 1971, p. 23.) reflecting on the weakness of the peasant structure and values to constitute a revolutionary consciousness. James Scott argues the contrary, he maintains that the proletariat is fatally compromised because it is ‘organically linked’ to the capitalist class, whereas the peasantry is not similarly linked to a superior class because of its relative economic autonomy as a food producer (Scott, 1977, pp. 196-197) and cultural autonomy stemming from its social base, the village community, which is both functionally and historically prior to the city (ibid, p. 276). Mao however categorises the vast number of peasants in the countryside with the term ‘semi-proletariat’ who possess the strongest of tendencies to involve in revolution.

Scott (1977) mentions what he calls ‘everyday forms of peasant resistance’ by which he refers to the challenges that the peasant put up against those who seek to extract labour, food, rent and taxes and interest from them. These challenges are in the form of foot-dragging, arson, sabotaging, dissimulation, feigned ignorance and so on. These forms of peasant resistance however do not qualify to constitute a peasant ‘movement’, for it lacks the organisation required for a movement in conventional understanding. However, Guha (1983) would argue that small acts of violence even though do not constitute a movement, they at times amount to turning things upside down for the dominant society, an act of ‘inversion’ or ‘ambiguity’ (p 77). At the same time, he contends that some peasant insurgencies lacked neither the leadership nor the aim or some rudiments of a programme; however, they may have lacked the attributes of the matured and sophisticated historically more
advanced movements in the 20th century (1983, p. 10; cited in Shah, 1990, p. 80). In so far as the political economy of the peasantry is concerned, the concept of ‘embeddedness’ is a viable lens to assess the process by which the ‘peasant’ is to be analysed as part of a larger community.

This paper, an outcome of fieldwork conducted in the Doyang reserved forest in 2019, shall look at the politics associated with the peasantry situated in a conflict-prone zone in Assam. The data was collected through in-depth interviews with peasants who have been a part of the land rights movement over the period. The paper locates the Doyang reserved forest in historiography of land relations in forest areas and border conflict. Adopting a qualitative perspective, the paper seeks to address the gap in the available literature on peasant politics in Assam, particularly with respect to micro-politics which otherwise appear banal but possess increasing significance for the study of protests and movements. The paper shall delve exclusively into the ‘unofficial’ politics of the peasantry in the Doyang reserved forest rather than provide a linear historical description of the land rights movement itself due to limited space.

The Doyang reserved forest situated in the contested Assam-Nagaland border is the context for the study. A geopolitically strategic area, it is exposed to multiple streams of political movements. First, it was declared a reserved forest during the colonial period but today the area is dotted with widespread human settlements. However, till date, none of the communities, irrespective of the size of landholding or time of settlement, possess permanent land rights. Second, it is situated in a geopolitically sensitive location, sharing an inter-state border between Assam and Nagaland, which is disputed and also home to the longest-running autonomy demand in India since independence. Third, the human settlement itself is as heterogeneous in terms of social composition as the demography of Assam itself. And fourth, Doyang also hosts a unique history of the land rights movement in Assam, one that began in the 20th century and continues till the contemporary period. In the 21st century, it has contributed to the emergence of the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samity in Assam, one of the most prominent and significant mass organisations or a people’s organisations, that has also forayed into regional politics by floating a political party of the people for the 2021 state legislative assembly elections.

In order to arrive at a more detailed analysis of the rural-agrarian movements, it is essential that we explore the theoretical underpinnings to locate how resistance to the state manifests through the routine, seemingly banal instances. The idea is to
look beyond the control and allocation of resources by political parties, lobbyists, state authorities and agencies, and individuals trying to influence government officials and policies. Politics in this case refers and connotes to the control, allocation, production and use of resources, and the values and ideas underlying those activities. Resources include land, water, money, power, and education among other tangible and intangible things. Behaviour regarding producing, distributing, and using resources can range from cooperation and collaboration to discussions and debates, to bargains and compromises to conflicts and violence.

With this definition, the paper seeks to justify a more nuanced conceptualisation of politics, in contrast to a more traditional view of politics as an institutional domain i.e. of governments and states. The idea is to look beyond the control and allocation of resources by political parties, lobbyists, state authorities and agencies, and individuals trying to influence government officials and policies. In doing so, the paper intends to facilitate bridge the hiatus with respect to theoretical traditions and rural-agrarian studies of the 21st century. This paper would carry forward the idea/understanding of peasants within the structural arrangements in place such as the relations of production and the policies that define these relations vis a vis the state, but in their conscious deliberate exercise and experience of agency.

The case of the Doyang reserved forest

The Doyang reserved forest was named so under the Bengal Forest Act of 1886. The term ‘Doyang’ itself is a Bodo word, ‘doi’ meaning ‘water’ and ‘yang’ meaning ‘swirl’, referring to the Doyang river which runs through Nagaland and enters Golaghat. The land, even though was fertile for wet-rice cultivation, historically witnessed a scarce population towards the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as there were frequent skirmishes between both the Ahom and Kachari kingdoms. The British government classed this area under the reserved forest category, and for the extraction of labour services to maintain the forest resources, the first forest villages were established in 1905. The seventy-seventy-five families thus settled were given the responsibility of conservation of timber trees. In 1951-52, the Forest Department established four taungya villages with makeshift residences in Torani so that labour could be extracted by the Department as and when necessary for the plantation and conservation of the forest lands; in this manner the people had to render services to the department for twelve days annually. In return, the families were given five-ten bighas of land for cultivation to derive their subsistence.

In 1950-52 under the aegis of the Socialist Party, landless and marginal peasants
from Golaghat, Sivasagar and Jorhat districts mobilised to occupy plantation lands for the landless cultivators. In this manner, a process of ‘encroachment’ on forest land began to shape the socio-political dynamics of the Doyang forest (Saikia, 2008). This process of ‘encroachment’ gained momentum in the early 1960s, as a result of which the Forest Department began to take up eviction drives seriously. In 1968, the first-ever political struggle for land rights in Doyang was organised by the Left-leaning activists. In 1973, a small girl suffering from chickenpox died during one eviction drive in the monsoon season, and this incident intensified the protests against the Forest Department. The peasants’ demand was not for permanent land rights during that period, but the right to cultivation on the lands occupied by the marginal families. Meanwhile, incessant mobilisation and support from the Left-wing and All Assam Students Union led to the election of Soneswar Bora, a socialist leader as the Agriculture Minister under the Janata government in 1978. It was under his initiative that the habitants of the Doyang Reserve Forest began to press for permanent land rights from the state. The then Chief Minister Golap Borbora also agreed to open the Doyang Reserved Forest to the peasants who had settled there in the post-independence period. Hence the political mobilisation brought along a certain sense of security for the hapless peasants as there was a discontinuation of the eviction drives. During the same time, one Land Settlement Committee was constituted, and it began to measure and map (like a census) the demography and land possession of habitats in Doyang. However, the short-lived Janata government failed to deliver any permanent solution to their problems.

Meanwhile, Merapani in Doyang witnessed the severest of border clashes in 1985. Over the next decades, a series of developments took place with respect to the land entitlement movement. Local skirmishes with the state and its institutions continued. Towards the beginning of 2000, local leaders Soneshwar Narah, Hem Phukan and others tried to revive the protests at Doyang and another place called Tengani which was also prone to eviction drives by the state. It was at this juncture that Akhil Gogoi, the face of KMSS, mobilised the people in large numbers, and three issues gained centre stage—border conflict, granting of land titles and flood relief. Gogoi unified the peasant movements in Doyang and neighbouring Tengani, and in 2004 the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samity was formed. Since then the organisation have taken up a number of issues, such as addressing flawed governance and developmental projects, land rights for the indigenous, etc. It has also floated a political party for the 2021 state elections in Assam named ‘Raijor Dal’ or the People’s Party in 2020.

The narrative of people’s resistance in Doyang is, thus, one of a struggle for life
and livelihood of a community often defined as ‘forest dwellers, as well as ‘forest encroachers’ who have been put into a troubling trajectory of the struggle for livelihood under the state-defined discourse of development and conservation (Dutta, 2009). It is also a unique example of ‘universality in diversity where a community diverse in terms of caste, tribe, religion and ethnicity has been forced to live in unity for the cause of life and livelihood. It also reveals how a community struggling for a ‘constitutional right’ i.e. the right to life as guaranteed by Article 21 of the constitution of India indulges in ‘unconstitutional’ means i.e. forced occupation of the reserved forest and its resources and also establishes a parallel form of government amidst the faulty trajectory of ‘ecological conservation’. It also shows the bankruptcy of the post-colonial government and its inability to resolve the contradiction between ‘forests’ and ‘human’ as imposed by the colonial government (Dutta, 2009).

To contextualise the said contestations, the paper is divided into two sections. The first section examines the overarching structural changes in polity and in general the response of the peasants as part of the land rights movement in Doyang. The second section would shed some light on the ways peasant politics operate on an everyday basis, and how these small acts challenge not only the understanding of organisational politics but also the distribution and devolution of power in peasant society.

The state and resistance

The nature and character of the state have undergone a transformation over the decades, and needless to say, this impinges on its citizens and populations residing within its territory. As a direct outcome of the neo-liberal economic order, there is a push to both localise (in response to decentralisation of state) and internationalise (in response to globalisation) the actions of rural social movements. We witness therefore the rise of networks of horizontal solidarity, polycentric movements to confront the ever-changing structural threats posed by the state. The protests and movements are no more directly against the commercialisation of forest resources but related to a broad set of agricultural demands such as better access to markets, employment, subsidies for agricultural production and so on (Baumann, 1998, p. 104), most of which called into question the governing role of state-market-society nexus.

Often, there are two sets of contenders proposing their agendas with respect to natural resources. The environmental or conservationist approach is used to challenge the economic struggle for livelihood in forest lands either in public
debates or state rhetoric. For instance, an organisation called the ‘Xeuji Xomobay’ (Green Cooperative) was established in Doyang by local Congress supporters and members who argued that increasing encroachment on forest lands are harming nature and that it leads to widespread deforestation. It was thereby a ploy to delegitimise the land rights movement in the name of conservation. Interestingly this issue has been appropriated in the charter of demands and agendas during the later stages by the KMSS who demand not only subsistence economy but also environmental conservation. Meaning, that more balanced conservation as well as sustenance of economic needs can only be possible at the hands of the local communities, rather than the private enterprises or centralised state control. For KMSS, this is the national interest.

The responses of the grass-root voices are thus shaped by the relative access to power structures, and the ability as well as the willingness of those structures to negotiate with the people. In terms of the experiences of the peasants residing inside forests, the presence of the state in its permeable form pervades the ‘every day’ of the habitants in the forest of Doyang. In 1985, due to an escalated conflict between the Assam and Naga police forces, central forces had been deployed to maintain law and order. Prior to this, the negotiating power of the residents with the Assam Police was relatively more. For instance, some the households began constructing permanent pucca houses even without official permission. Another interesting event that coincided with the Merapani conflict was the destruction of documents and records of ‘criminals’ accumulated at the Merapani police outpost in the process of conflict. Due to the bombing, the outpost caught fire and all resources were lost. In this process, some of the complaints registered against protesters during the land rights movement in the late 1970s disappeared in smoke, much to the relief of the poor villagers who were called to court at regular intervals even after 1980. Now they could go scot-free. With the positioning of the central forces, however, the interaction between the state and the citizens increasingly assumed a ‘distant’ nature, yet the former’s presence exerted a more rigorous and stringent influence among the people. Residents are, for instance, barred from constructing two-storeyed houses and strict tabs are enforced on the movement of the hills and valley people through check gates. Meanwhile, to construct a new pucca two-storeyed house at the ‘disputed site,’ especially closer to the Naga hills, residents now have to seek permission from the DC office, not only in Assam but also in Nagaland.

The state thus attempts to not only exhibit ‘concern’ for its citizens at the grass-root level by seeking to involve them at the implementation level of policies, whilst
seemingly maintaining a dialogic relationship with them as stakeholders, but it retains its high handedness in almost all aspects of decision making. What is missing is a genuine engagement with grass-root level communities directly, instead of involving third parties, or manoeuvring through its local ‘agents’. The market-led model of economic globalisation gives rise to the new notion of economic and political ‘order’ derived from the principles of the corporate organisation rather than representation accountability (Sheth, 2004). While at the same time the local authorities are in a position to negotiate with the local people and thus extend governance measures for their benefit, in lieu of political office of course, over the period it has been observed that their interventions mostly provide short term relief rather than long term security.

As such, the politics of claim making by different actors- state, environmentalists, habitants over the contested forest space in Doyang point out to three parallel processes in the contemporary period. First, the “multiple genealogies of belonging” imbibed over the last hundred years by colonisation, i.e. growth of plantation economy and subsequent forest policies, demographic changes in terms of in-migration due to displacement, the subsequent history of land-use and land cover changes as well as the post-colonial forest policies, that the state ignores. This also takes into account the narratives that negotiate and counter the dominant narratives of conflict between the hills and plains people. Second, the blurred boundary between forest and non-forest in Doyang. That is to say the contestation between the making of forest subject and the creation of disputed-area subject within the same geographical space by the state. Thirdly, the attempt to centralise control over forest space by ignoring the “multiple genealogies of belonging” through a state politics of decentralisation which adduces to ethnic history claiming over deemed non-forest space. And overall, the denial of property rights (economic justice) and provision of citizen rights in lieu of the former to the habitants in Doyang through education, health care, development of roads and other means of communication and so on.

The trajectory of Doyang’s land rights movement, the demands of the people, on the other hand, have always been about the need for security of life and livelihood, one that can only be achieved through permanent land rights. As citizens, they are entitled to a bundle of rights, irrespective of caste-tribe-class affiliations, which the state provides in bits and pieces, community-wise. Residing along the border they are prone to a double pressure- from the state as ‘illegal encroachers’ in forest reserves while being legal citizens, and ‘encroachers’ in the much-coveted homeland politics of the Assam-Nagaland border. Nevertheless, there are a series
of negotiations, conflicts and resistance that the people put up with power structures. While these acts appear small and marginal, they constitute and enrich the discourse of peasant politics in many unconventional ways.

The outside of conventional peasant politics- locating the everyday

Locating the peasant with the agency of his/her aims to comprehend that politics is not something ‘out there, far away from common people going on with their daily lives. Rather reinforce the understanding that politics is in the everyday. Everyday social institutions, be it family or religion, schools and universities also involve the control and allocation of resources. The question thereby is how do the common people negotiate with politics in their daily lives, without consciously attempting to challenge the state? From cracking jokes to passing snide comments in private on superior forms of authority, be it state officials or big peasants, or employers, one does indulge in politics. It necessarily involves the responses to positions of power and authority, be it traditional or rational-legal. Thus, all forms of power, be it state or non-state, are to be brought about within the fold of exercising politics. Power and politics are therefore the central organising themes in this section of the paper. Highlighting specific examples as well as narratives, an attempt would be made to delineate peasant politics in Doyang which is not only a conscious manifestation but also to a large extent autonomous compared to traditional party politics in any state. It is articulate and creative, and involves active participation of the common people in terms of identifying what is just and unjust!

An interviewee, an ex-AASU leader in Golaghat, chuckled and remarked during his interview-

Doyang is probably the most politically vibrant place in Golaghat!
You will be taken aback by the kind of discussions they hold daily- whether this one place should come under the development scheme, or how to access and confront corrupt units of the public distribution system.

Discussions and debates retain the vibrancy of politics in Doyang as per the interviewee. The topics may range from access to land, wages, grains, availability of education, health care, based on the common values that people share pertaining to dignity of civil life, to the values underlying institutional arrangements in place denying them the basic economic right, i.e. right to own land/property. All of these may hardly feature in organised ways, but rather they appear in conversations at tea stalls, among guardians waiting outside schools forwards, in the fields, in the
offices. Politics therefore no longer solely remain within the confines of the government or its offices or limited precincts of elections and parties. The notable feature of this politics is also the banalness of everyday village life.

Politics of everyday experience or everyday forms of resistance among the peasantry have been outlined and analysed by a wide range of scholars, foremost among them Scott (1977), Guha (1983) and Chatterjee (1988). These authors have contributed immensely to understanding the moral economy and political consciousness of the peasants rooted in the community as the site of solidarity. They delve into the subject matter with a structural framework that talks about the networks of solidarity for resistance, while a more holistic approach to everyday politics including resistance and compliance is proposed by Kierkvliet (2009). Kierkvliet believes that these everyday practices have the potential to challenge and change the direction of national policies. The conscious conversations are rooted in the socially developed collectivised (not organised) understanding of what and how resources should be allocated. Questioning or revering the structural institutions of power and authority is the key take away from the understanding of politics. The awareness of political issues and social-economic problems of the villagers and the right to address the state on them illustrates the villagers’ level of political awareness beyond the confines of elections. This is in stark contrast to what the likes of Hobsbawm (1973) and others defined peasants as rooted in a local community, isolated from the purview of political processes. Let us now briefly discuss and contextualise the conceptual forms of politics.

Kierkvliet discusses three types of politics- official, every day and advocacy. Official and advocacy politics have a plethora of conceptual as well contextual literature. Official politics involve the authorities in the organisation, be it a university or a family. Advocacy politics on the other hand take recourse to direct and concerted efforts to support, criticise and oppose authorities or the institutional arrangements in place. Everyday politics involve direct experiences and practices (rarely organised) of embracing, complying, evading, and adjusting to authoritative norms and rules pertaining to the production and allocation of resources. Often, informal and illegal activities practised by authoritative personnel may canvass as everyday politics, hence it is difficult to maintain a rigid distinction between the lot. Everyday politics may also serve as the precursor to advocacy politics; collective discussions may bring the people together and organise efforts to directly confront the authoritative measures in place. The example cited above by the said interviewee, of discussing the problems of local agents of free ration for the target population, have aided in the consolidation efforts to demand fairness and
transparency in the public distribution system by the KMSS. The similarity of experiences of the poor across the state of Assam also led the organisation to expose the prevailing rampant corruption of the government.

Often the people’s ideas about the right way to allocate the resources are at odds with the state’s. Thus, there emerges two sets of contenders- one which envisages the right to occupy, reside and own lands (irrespective of forest or non-forest lands) by virtue of leading a dignified life as a peasant, and the other *writ* of the state that banks on the accumulation of forest resources and dispossession of forest dwellers. For the former the forest happens to be in their vision of a cultivable landscape. To counter the state, there are numerous and banal attempts at seeking respite, as people are dependent on land and forest produce for their sustenance. These everyday peasant politics may take different forms. Everyday resistance involves little or no organisation; for instance, the nasty, derogatory remarks in private, jokes against the superiors be it their landlords, employers etc. Outward signs of acceptance of impoverishment, and exploitation are facades beneath which the peasants harbour alternative visions of how resources should be produced, distributed and used (Kerkvliet, 2009, p. 234). In spite of continuous repression by the state during the late 1960s and early 1970s, batches of displaced people continued to occupy the forest lands, driven by the belief and understanding that as humans and citizens they were entitled to basic rights, i.e. food, clothing and shelter. Irrespective of how many times the Forest Department broke down their huts, the people collectively built them again. This is an example of resistance. The resistance was not directly directed towards the authorities, but for their sustenance.

Often, these everyday resistances become important precursors of open, confrontational, advocacy forms of politics under favourable political circumstances. Or this may also happen with the emergence of leaders and groups who are able to ‘frame’ discontent and resistance in ways to confront the peasants’ fear and collectively confront the authorities concerned. This method involves situating the local ideas and experiences of oppression with the broader ones. The consolidated organisational efforts of Soneswar Bora, Socialist Party and Janata Party, AASU, and the KMSS represents this form of advocacy politics building around everyday narratives of politics. Resistance thus essentially involves practices of subordinate peoples *against* superordinate. Let us consider the following narrative of an 85-year-old woman-

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Sometime in 1996, the then MLA from Golaghat went to inspect the border situation. Learning about his arrival, Naga militants set fire
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to the bridge over Selseli noi (rivulet). On that evening, we had guests at our place for dinner at Kulajan. When I heard the news of the attack, I blurted out saying that why should the state interfere in how we are living? If we pay the Nagas yearly or when they demand, they spare our houses and cattle. And this kind of fire does not happen. It was only after the guests left their identity was revealed to me. It turns out that I had blurted these statements in front of the MLA himself!

Without knowing the identity of the guest, this old lady was engaged in a discussion where she expressed her frustration against the state for interfering in the affairs of the village. This criticism was not directed at the authority per say, but a general comment on how poor people need to negotiate with a host of factors to live their lives without the intervention of the state, which comes more as an inconvenience in disguise rather than a knight/saviour. This appears as a conversation between the host and the guest who arrives at the former’s residence without prior announcement, otherwise a common practice in rural Assam. Further, this also indicates how the issue of borders is viewed through the lens of security and strategic control by the state and government authorities as uncompromising or non-negotiable, but from the lens of the villagers, it is a daily narrative of adjustment and negotiation. Inter-state borders in the context of Northeast India thus illustrate the dual nature of human interactions- at the local level one of conflict and negotiation, at the macro level one of recorded discussions and debates with no permanent solution in place.

The second type of everyday politics conducive to the present study is that of compliance. everyday politics is not confined to the subordinate people only, but also super-ordinate aka big peasants, forest villagers whose form may not be resistance, but compliance, like for instance compliance with the idea of constitutional border making by the post-colonial state. For the forest villagers, big peasants and other dwellers/peasants (both superior and subordinate) the legitimate border is the one demarcated in 1963, abiding by the outlined plan in the post-independence period. The example of an ex-forest guard canvasses across official, every day as well as advocacy politics; in an official position, they were involved in the activities of the state, and in the process was also aware of the atrocities involved in the everyday life of the ‘encroachers.’ Sometimes they may also have passed a word in advance to the latter about the impending eviction drives. In an official position, they were party to a combination of both official politics (against
the state through activism) and everyday politics (by participating in discussions and debates with the villagers). It is thereby interesting to note that they joined the Janata Party as an organised political collective demanding land rights during their post-retirement life. This is one example of the all-encompassing and surpassing nature of forms of politics in Doyang.

Further examples of compliance with the regional government representative’s decision to settle ethnic communities within the half-mile belt near the foothills of Naga hills. This compliance, in the beginning, was in the form of discussions rather than organised collective efforts indirect and overt form. At the same time, the decision to settle the ethnic families was also a result of everyday politics! In a way, the state tried to control the foothills from further occupation by the Naga villagers. To flag off, the same attitude is however missing for the relatively newer settlements of the Bengali Muslims; the solidarity of peasant-hood is missing in this community vitiated by the dominant discourse of ethnicised politics in the statevi. What took place and has continued ever since is a cycle- wherein official politics may inform different forms of everyday politics, which in turn informs advocacy politics. On the other hand, the narratives and acts of cooperation between the communities across the inter-state border are also everyday resistances to the military-authoritative diktats of boundary making.

Structural constraints in the form of forest policies, and constitutional border making resonate in the discourse of policy and lawmakers, the political consciousness of the common man as evident in Doyang goes beyond the exercise of votes and organised contestation of power. It is rooted in everyday consciousness, the same consciousness which fosters social and economic relations among fellow people. Irrespective of the top-down instructions of maintaining distance from people across the border, solidarity in economic activities is observed. These transactions are not conscious and organised acts of defiance or resistance against the authority figures who seek to further their exclusive ethnic-homeland goals. Rather, these acts are conscious means of sustainability and survival in the wild, and yet they enrich the discourse of resistance in everyday life. During one brief visit to the hillside, it was observed that an ex-tea garden community family was residing among the Naga families. The head of the household was taking weed with a Naga man, his neighbour. Upon discussion, it was found that he had been living there for quite some years now and reported that he could draw electricity from both the states- Assam and Nagaland. Since the particular area had Naga households, that area was recognised as a revenue village by their council, so he could use free electricity from their government and not have
to pay the electricity bill to the Assam government. There are also quite a few cases of cross-ethnic marriages; Naga-Bodo, Naga-Mising, etc.

In terms of everyday resistance to the state, some examples listed down show small acts of survival aided in the formulation of advocacy politics. They also managed to modify quite a few policies at the regional level, if not at the national level. The continuous occupation and rebuilding of homes stopped eviction drives altogether, the act of bribing officials, and land sales between the villagers are everyday forms of peasant resistance. These acts articulate the peasants’ normative values and opinions regarding who and how should be resources controlled and access distributed. There is a significant gap in the availability of literature and primary records pertaining specifically to the Doyang valley post-1935 to India’s independence period. But some word-of-mouth tales point toward a very gradual process of encroachment at the reserve forest through the act of bribing state officials. Over the decades, villagers began to secure more land for occupation under the forest department by bribing the state officials who were ‘accessible’ to them. These lands were allotted deep inside the forests beyond the purview of regular patrolling of the state. They were then occupied by the kin of the existing forest villagers but in a discreet manner. If caught red-handed, there were evictions and punishments in place for the ‘encroachers.’ If bribing was possible, then the ‘official’ protests needed no amount of coercion or force to put forth demands considering that the colonial state was already taking care of their basic livelihood. Lands inside the forests were sufficient for the families, the rights even though we’re limited to ‘occupation’ and not ‘ownership’ these families were self-sufficient to a large extent. Over the decades, the size of these families increased at a gradual pace, including extended kin migrating in. Should these developments then be called specific forms of resistance? The answer is yes. Forms of resistance need not necessarily be official in the form of protest meetings and building up of networks. A parallel unofficial resistance exists side by side; in such, the site of resistance shifts from the macro to the micro with the individual as the unit. The very act of bribing to secure one’s kin members in a space as guarded as a reserve forest connotes that the governance of the very state can be compromised! And at a macro level, such individual acts of resistance to the state have the potential to build an organised network of collectivism such as the KMSS.

The very term ‘encroachers’ is used by the state officials to point out these peasants, yet this term has been used by the villagers in their day to day activities often to discuss how they are better off without state support or endorsement in some exceptional cases. Firstly, they need not pay any tax to the state since they do not
have a land ownership document. Secondly, mentioned in the previous paragraph, the buying and selling of land among the people require no permission from higher authorities, leading to a parallel co-existence of the formal and informal market exchanges. It is these activities that led to a negotiated vote-bank politics by the MLA representative of Golaghat. She announced Gomariguri in Doyang as a mahkuma (district subdivision) even though there is no permission from the Central government to convert the area into a revenue belt. Secondly, the setting up of functional Community Health Centres in Doyang is a result of the increased demographic change in the reserved forest. Thus, everyday politics is what Harry Boyte describes as philosophical, based on values such as participation, justice, and plurality, not ideological; it revolves around significant public problems, from housing shortages to environmental hazardsvii.

Furthermore, compliance also factors into the social construction and perpetuation of differences between classes. Everyday politics hence not only challenges the state but also complies with existing inequalities, going in tandem with how the people view society should be, what and how should the resources be allocated and so on. The networks of solidarities in interpersonal relationships involve households and families, neighbours, big peasants and sharecroppers, through which access to land, labour, money and emergency assistance is a big part of people’s everyday politics (Kerkvliet, 2009, pp. 235-236). Small peasants—especially from the lower castes, ex-tea garden communities as well as Bengali Muslims on occasions do odd jobs as services to the upper caste-middle and big peasants’ families without any compensation.

**Conclusion**

The Doyang reserved forest provides a unique case study to contextualise the peasantry-politics conundrum, a topic which has perplexed many a scholar of the Northeast region. Questions of ethnicity and development continue to grapple with most of the research questions of academic literature on the political economy of the region. Whilst such questions have their significance, one must also simultaneously interrogate how the political economy shapes the politics of the peasantry, their everyday experiences, and in turn how the peasants themselves frame the ethnic-national questions. The relationship, hence, is mutual. Everyday peasant politics equip the peasants to address their grievances in a regular manner without the struggle of the organisation or collective mobilisation. As citizens, they are entitled to discuss issues they find interesting and this helps not only in the dissemination of views but also consolidation of resistance. Everyday politics, in
fact, aid in the collective mobilisation and formation of advocacy politics, or politics of the organisational kind. Through the examples cited across the paper, one finds that these forms of politics affect state interventions and governance measures. Everyday peasant politics helps to locate the contestations over power outside the realm of political parties and government offices. It recognises the politics of the different form may assume in different contexts. The Doyang movement happens to be one of the longest-running land rights movements in Assam, yet it has been hardly analysed. Particularly the myriad of instances and experiences which help in consolidating peasant protests in an organised manner is important to be looked at.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to outline a narrative of peasant struggle against state policies and structured inequalities in place. This narrative reflects the peasantry’s ability and capability to abide by, confirm to, negotiate with, as well as challenge the power equations put in place by colonial modernity, uneven development, class hierarchy and ethnic assertions. The ability to resist places the peasantry in a conscious web of political ties, one that is not only rooted in solidarity but also in alliances with interested agents. The peasants take recourse to everyday politics in personal capacities, and over the period these acts may converge as organisational politics that have the potency to bring long term changes in the inequalities. Perceptions of how policies should be and what kind of positive impact it must make in the lives of the common people are shared by the community, and this contributes to the meanings they associate with the idea of the nation, the state and the people.

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\(1\) The paper is an integral part of the author’s ongoing doctoral thesis.


\(3\) Which seek to address the peasantry in terms of its relationship to the market and development, but does not throw much light in the structural changes as well as political action that shape the political-social agency of the peasantry itself.

\(4\) Taunya system of labour is temporary in nature, i.e. the Forest Department permitted the labourers to settle in make-shift residences inside the forest during the tenure of labour only. While the forest villages are permanent in nature, i.e. the villagers had to render compulsory service for a fixed period of time, and in return they were allowed to cultivate inside the forest and pay an annual tax.

\(5\) The phrase is used here to denote the multiple histories of the communities settled in the Doyang reserved forest, using Foucault’s concept of genealogy, to argue who should possess the rights over resources inside the forest-scape and who should not, i.e. who belongs and who does not. The perspective is hence of the communities themselves
rather than that of the state or external agents. For more on Foucault’s conception, see https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/

vi When prompted, field respondents pointed out that the timeline is important; the Bodo-ethnic families were settled way back in 1977, but the Bengali Muslims came much later towards the 1990.

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