Article: Hybrid Identity and Cultural Commons in the Foothills of Assam-Nagaland Border

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Hybrid Identity and Cultural Commons in the Foothills of Assam-Nagaland Border

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Abstract

This paper deals with the formation of hybrid culture in the multi-ethnic society of the border villages located at the Assam-Nagaland foothills. It shows that the process of assimilation of the ‘illegal’ Bangladeshi immigrants population with local indigenous communities is not free from socio-political tensions. In addition to the formation of hybrid identity, there is a sharp binary of hill-valley and indigene-immigrant culture. Thus, foothill villages also present a unique site of local cultural conflict management through a process of evolving socio-economic relations in the form of ‘cultural commons’. In the present situation, we also locate some latent tensions that have crept into these villages. In a way, it presents a unique site of socio-cultural experiences that is the focus of this paper.

Keywords: Hybrid identity, Foothill border, Cultural commons, Bangladeshi immigrants.

Introduction

The present study is an ethnographic account of how different ethnic groups live together in a conflict like situation due to the creation of arbitrary state borders in post-colonial India. It shows that hybrid identities in the villages located at the foothills of the Assam-Nagaland border offer a site of co-existence of new and old cultural identities. Notwithstanding, the formation of a new hybrid identity, there exists a sharp binary of hill-valley and indigene-immigrant identities. This paper examines the process of formation of a new cultural identity i.e. hybrid identity amidst existing old, but sharp identities. In this context, it examines some of the villages of the foothill of the Assam-Nagaland border, which present a unique site of co-existence of new and old identities, but not without tension.

The ethnic composition of foothill villages especially in the D Sector of the Assam-Nagaland border is a hotchpotch of various identities. It comprises various indigenous communities, migrant communities from Assam, and other parts of
India, and Bangladeshi immigrant "Miya" community, the local people in the Merapani foothills regard Miya as illegal migrants.

Before the advent of the British in the Brahmaputra Valley in the nineteenth century, the dense forests in the foothills were cleared by the Ahoms for their military arrangements to protect their borders from the hill tribes. Saikia (2008) argued that such temporary settlements by Ahom kings did not last for long, and the terrain soon reverted to the dense forest (p. 43). However, the officials of the East India Company found this no man's land very rich in timber resources. To extract forest resources in the name of the scientific Forest Conservation Policy, they converted the huge forest tract of the foothills into a Reserve forest. They not only converted "jungles" into "reserved forests", but also made way for human settlement in these forest tracts by establishing a forest village, locally known as "Bon Gaon" or "Taungiya Village".

In 1905, the forest department of Assam established four forest villages in the Doyang Reserve Forest in the Sivasagar district of Assam province. They were Merapani, Choudang Pathar, Kachomari and Amguri. These forest villages provide shelter to tribes, and forest resources provided them with a source of livelihood. However, the process of settlement for the people in the forest village is continuous and did not stop even after independence. Post-1950, the forest villages of upper Assam foothills witnessed a new surge of inflow of landless Assamese peasantry. The migration into these foothill forest villages took place due to the shortage of agricultural land in the valley due to a massive earthquake in 1950 which caused extensive landslides, subsidence, and fissuring in the valley. In addition, it also changed the course and configuration of the Brahmaputra and its tributary flows in the upper Assam areas. Many of these landless peasants migrated to the foothill forests villages in search of cultivable land. Saikia (2008) has argued that peasant migration in Assam was also encouraged by the then Assam government led by the Congress Party, primarily driven by their populist agenda to settle landless rural families in forest land (p. 44). Furthermore, the population increased in these foothill forest tracts due to the border skirmishes that emerged in the Assam-Nagaland foothill areas. In 1970, the then Assam government to safeguard its border from Naga intrusion created a habitation belt of half a mile width in Nagaland from Kakodunga to Doyang. This belt is known as "half–a–mile settlement", where the government allotted ten bighas of land to each landless family who had migrated from neighbouring areas. These forest tracts were further populated by another wave of immigration during the 1970 and 1980s when landless peasants arrived without the support and encouragement from the
government (Saikia, 2008, p. 44). Most of these immigrants were either displaced peasants from upper Assam due to inundated floods, or former labourers of tea gardens whose contracts had with the owners of the tea gardens come to an end. These landless people searched for cultivable land, cleared the forest tract in the foothill border and settled therein. The most recent wave of immigration to these forest tracts of foothill border is from lower Assam districts. They are none other than the erstwhile East-Bengali origin peasants, who settled in Assam since the last quarter of colonial rule. The reason behind the inflow of Bangladeshi origin immigrants to the forest tract of the foothill border could be that during the 1970s and 1980s, there was an agitation against the influx of illegal Bangladeshi migrants to Assam. Consequently, large infiltration took place in the foothill, and these illegal immigrants sought shelter under the aegis of Naga landlords in most of the disputed forest tract of the border. Thus, the giant forest tract of the Assam-Nagaland foothill border is converted into a multi-cultural society, which was earlier once no-man's-land.

Merapani subdivision is located in the Doyang Reserve Forest along the disputed D-Sector of the Assam-Nagaland border. Its geopolitical characteristic is that it lies on both sides of the border. As an inter-state border demarcates Merapani, two different names are known on either side of the border. The area which belongs to Assam is known as Merapani Bazaar, and the other side is known as Merapani foothill for the people living in the Wokha district of Nagaland. Merapani Bazaar is the central location for the people on either side of the border. Merapani Bazaar consists of various business communities that are primarily settlers from outside Assam. They are Biharis, Marwaris, Bengalis, Punjabis, Manipuris and immigrant Bangladeshis. Apart from these communities, a few Assamese are also engaged in business there. However, there are hardly any Nagas in business and trade in Merapani Bazaar. Despite the presence of various outsiders in the central location of the Merapani, locals have a stronghold on the bazaar. The president and the secretary of the Merapani Bazaar Committee are Assamese. A few Nagas have their petty business in the Veloguri area of Merapani foothill adjacent to the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) camp.

Assamese is a linguistic group that comprises various ethnic groups. In Merapani village itself, various ethnic Assamese like Ahoms, Chutia, Bodo Kacharis, Thengal Kacharis, Sonowal Kacharis, Mishings, and Rabha exist. There is an interesting fact that among the Bodo Kacharis in Merapani village, only a few can speak Assamese, whereas others Bodo speak their mother tongue, i.e. Bodo. However, in common parlance, they are often referred to as Assamese.
Furthermore, the Assamese linguistic group has included various other migrant groups like Nepalese, Adivasi and Miya.

In the Merapani foothill, the dominant ethnic group is Lotha Nagas; most of them settled in the area after the Merapani War. Before the war, the Merapani foothill was used by the Assamese peasants’ as paddy fields. In my fieldwork, I met Nogen (name changed), a school teacher who owned ancestral agricultural land in Merapani. During the discussion with Nogen and his wife, they became emotional about their paddy fields in the Merapani foothills. To quote Nogen, "My father-in-law had paddy fields there. However, he sold the paddy fields to some Naga before things get worse pre-war. At that time, the Nagas used to fend us off at gunpoint. Furthermore, we had to sell the fields at nominal prices. Like us, many had to sell their land at nominal prices. Now the land belongs to them, and we still cultivate the fields together". Amidst these Lotha Nagas, few Nepalese, Adivasi, Manipuri and Miya live as sharecroppers in the Merapani foothills.

However, for the last few decades, the entire North-East has India resisted the settlement of the immigrant Bangladeshi. In the context of Assam, various scholars and local media asserted that the large settlement of the immigrant resulted in the displacement of the indigenous tribal peasantry. The migrants usurped the agricultural lands of the tribal who are engaged in Jhum (Shifting) cultivation. Most of the tribal groups abandoned their land and moved to remote areas and even to the forest areas to avoid living with strangers (Roychoudhury, 2009). However, this is not precisely the case at the Assam-Nagaland foothill border. There are a few places in the foothills like Negheribil, a few places of Merapani and Uriamghat, which are settlement sites for the Miya community. The respective governments of Assam and Nagaland to claim their authority over the disputed land settled various other communities from outside who are adept in agricultural activities. The landlords collect half of the harvested crops allowing the cultivators to retain the other half. They are ex-tea garden labourers, Nepalese and immigrant Muslim settlers. Places like Negheribil, Kuhuboto, Bokajan, Khatkhati and some other areas of Merapani village in the foothills of the D-sector are major sites of minority pockets. Interestingly, an altogether new identity is emerging in these border areas. The new identity, known as "Semiya", is an outcome of inter-marriage between Sema Nagas and Immigrant Bangladeshi settlers (locally called Miya).

Further, complexity in the human settlement has been aggravated with the deployment of para-military forces like CRPF, Assam Rifles etc. in disturbed border areas. These disturbed areas are known as Disturbed Area Belt (DAB).
areas. The fertile land of the foothill border has been used to build huge camps for these paramilitary forces. These camps are not only galloping the land for cultivation but also hampering hill-valley interaction. The military camps coming up in large acreages not only usurped traditional community land, by doing so they had also cast a disjunctive effect on the traditional social and economic life of the peasant society. Creating enclosures in large areas, also severely disrupted traditional inter-village communication in the foothills.

**PERSPECTIVE & METHODOLOGY**

As natural borders between the plains and the hills, the foothills occupy a crucial position in the socio-political and economic landscape of Northeast India. Kikon (2013) highlighted that the foothills are heavily militarised spaces with "[heavy deployment] …of military forces, competing insurgent groups and extra-constitutional regulations" (p. iv). Following the interactionist theory of H. Blumer (1969), the society of foothills in the Assam-Nagaland border is producing an "idioculture". Fine (1979) defined idioculture as "...a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and customs shared by members of interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction." (p. 734). The shared experiences of members in the group are used to construct social reality. Idioculture pretends as the culture is localised in nature. It is an invisible task to understand the cultural pattern of an entire society. The present study uses Blumer's premise of understanding culture and tries to understand the interaction in the society by considering culture creation as an outcome of this interaction (cited in Fine, 1979, p.733).

In order to understand the hybrid identities in the foothills, this paper looks into the foothills through the lens of Bhabha's concept of "Third Space"vii. Foothills are a third space where the cutting edge of "translations" and "negotiation" occurs. This study tried to understand such negotiations and translations by analysing social interactions and social networks that generally prevail in the foothill border. The society in the foothills consists of several communities/ethnic groups, whose relationship with one another is often marked by cohesion-conflict; disputes are often related to land and other mineral resources. However, live as neighbours and share varied common lived experiences. In the existing social interaction, the different ethnic groups develop nexuses and various working relations and maintain their distinct social identities and boundaries. Thus, foothills can be considered a third space, which appears to be messy and chaotic, and where ethnic groups practice hybrid culture and social practices locally known as "khichri culture"viii.
Here, the hybridity arises from the flow of information and the movement of people around this is ever-evolving, interconnected and interactive space. It is witnessed that the culture in foothill is mostly looked down upon by both the hill and the plain people just like in colonial discourse', hybrid identity has been used as a term of abuse for those who are products of mixed-breeds or miscegenation (Irdus, 2012). Various proponents of hybrid culture believe that the mixing of migrant and the local (host) cultures has been advantageous and constructive for socio-economic development and the progress of shared identity (ibid.). While Bhabha defines hybrid culture, enunciate the importance of hybridity:

"...the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge." (Rutherford, 1990).

Thus, the emergence of this new position set up a new structure and power. In the present study, it will be explored how the new structure is emerging (emergent collectivity) in a multi-ethnic society located in a space "in-between".

It has been found that in Nagamese, the people of hill and valley are referred as *pahar manuh* and *plain manuh* respectively, whereas the people of foothill are referred with an abusive term 'gondogul jegar manuh', also referred by Kikon (2013). The use of abusive terminology by the people of both the plain and the hill areas reflects how they consider the position of the people residing in the foothills. The foothill people, practice both shifting and settled agriculture. They are even engaged in cash crop plantations like rubber and tea, where profit maximisation is the main motive. The foothill people also celebrate both hills and valley festivals and have kinship ties within both groups. In the foothills, few communities like Nagas and Ahoms have strong ties with their kins in the highlands of northwest Burma and Thailand. At the same time, other groups like Nepalis, Muslim Bengalis, and Adivasis trace their historical ties with the communities in the Brahmaputra valley and beyond, even in the Chotta Nagpur plateau of Central India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. In the above social and historical backdrop, the paper explores how the residents of the foothills are negotiating, and establishing social orders in the midst of arbitrary "border conflict" and ethnic feuds between both the states Assam and Nagaland. The "life-world" and everyday lived experiences of people living in the foothill border of Assam and Nagaland are always overshadowed by violence and militarisation. Here, the paper tries to capture the everyday lived experiences of the different communities in the foothill villages, their negotiations,
and sharing in different fields like economics, culture, and polity.

An ethnographic approach is a preferred methodology to describe the culture of any social world [foothill] (Fetterman, 1989; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993). In the present study holistic ethnography was opted to study multiple groups within a social unit, as such the same approach was used in having detailed experiential perspectives of different ethnic groups in the same foothill village. Using holistic ethnography in the present study, the culture of the foothill has been described by analyzing the beliefs and practices of the people living on the fringes. The behaviour and interactions of the different ethnic groups with each other in the foothills question the hill-valley dichotomy and indigene-immigrant dichotomy.

The study was conducted between the spring of 2017 and the winter of 2018 in the foothill villages of the Assam-Nagaland border. The primary data for the study was collected mainly through participant observation and semi-structured group interviews with the various stakeholders like villagers, politicians, government officials, NGO and social service organizations, businessmen, journalists, student union leaders, para-military forces jawans and officials, etc. To study some specific events and persons for which case study method opted. Field notes were taken during nine months in the field which were later on used for data analysis. In addition, discussion or dialogue was organised with participants rather than interviews. As such, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with the respondents. The household listing of the village was done to know the demographic pattern and social networks in the village. Secondary data consisted of archive data, pamphlets of political parties, wall writing and hoardings, and artefacts collected from a variety of sources.

Unless and until the data are referenced in the paper, the other data used are collected during my fieldwork with the communities of the foothills. However, it was very difficult to conduct fieldwork in such a volatile area where the identity of a person is always suspected. I have disclosed my identity to my respondents wherever necessary that I am a research student from the University of Delhi. In any sociological research conducted on human subjects, as a researcher, I should take all the steps necessary to protect the privacy and confidentiality of my subjects/respondents especially when I am working in a region where everyone's identity/ is suspected. As such, I tried to keep the anonymity of my respondent's name and their place of interview and other details were kept confidential. Mostly the names used for my respondents in the paper are fictitious. Furthermore, as a women researcher, I found a lot of difficulties in collecting data for which my
research area was later narrowed down. For instance, the life of Merapani during the daytime is very different from the night. As a woman researcher, I was not allowed by the locals (especially my host family) and even not advisable to collect data during the night because it was very risky to observe "illegal" subjects/processes.

**FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD**

**Formation of Hybrid Identity**

The post-partition migration of Bengalis, particularly Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh to North-East India has long been an explosive political issue. The local communities have apprehension about being overwhelmed by migrants. Despite the apprehension, it is observed that a hybrid identity i.e. Semiya offer a critique of the indigene-immigrant dichotomy in the in-between space. All multi-ethnic societies do not follow the same policies and practices to integrate with immigrants. Different societies have different histories, cultures, and institutions. As such, cultural adaptation and integration policies and practices will differ accordingly.

Inter-community marriages in a multi-cultural society are inevitable. In Merapani, inter-community marriages between Assamese and Nagas, Nagas and immigrant Bangladeshis, Assamese and immigrant Bangladeshis are found. Many local respondents believe that the Miya community deliberately enters into marital relations with Naga society. As a consequence of inter-communities marriages, new identities are emerging in these border areas. The new hybrid identity known as Semiyas is an outcome of inter-marriages between the Sema Nagas and the Bangladeshi immigrant settlers (locally called Miya). M.A. Singh (2009) mentioned that Semiya or Sumia was first coined by a local journalist in 1980 who investigated Niuland in Dimapur District.

During my fieldwork, I often enquire with the Naga elders of Merapani, "Why Naga girls are getting married to immigrant Bangladeshis?" In reply, I often came across the statement, "We do not allow such marriages in our village. We are making our girls aware of the consequences of such marriages. It will bring a crisis to our Naga society. If some of them are marrying, it is also a fault of our Naga youths. Our boys are very lazy bums; they hardly work. So, most of the household and economic responsibility is taken care of by the women of the house. Our girls, to lead an easy life, are marrying Miyas."

Nagas are also facilitating the settlement of the Miya community on the foothill
border. Borgohain and Borgohain (2011) mentioned a few things that keep Nagas numb about Bangladeshi (Miya) "invasion" of their lands. They mentioned that the most important reason is that the Miyas are very hard-working and they work in agricultural fields and construction sites of the Nagas at very low wages. Besides, businesses need cheap labour, politicians need vote banks, and insurgent groups need people for extortion and using them for smuggling and other petty crimes. It is observed that fertile and sparsely populated land in the newly created subdivision of Nagaland, like Niuland, is a breeding ground for the Miya population. Their resilience is quite commendable. It is also to be noted that their assimilation rate is much higher than other communities in the region. They quickly adopt the language where they live, because communication is a significant tool for earning their livelihood.

Miyas are bonding with Naga society through marriages, but Nagas also try to accommodate them through practices like family adoption. The business families or landlords in the foothill villages and towns adopted Adivasi, Nepali and Miya children, teenagers or families who are mostly migrants. The relationship between the landowner and the adopted family is very exploitative. When landless migrated families are adopted, they are given the household family name and are often given new names and counted as family members. Both the male and female members of the adopted family work as labourers for the landlord. The male members work as labourers in the landlord paddy fields and rubber plantations, as construction workers, and also help the family in their business, etc. Most of the adopted female members work as agricultural labourers in the paddy field and work as domestic helpers in the landlord's house. The adopted family/individuals have to toil their labour without many incentives. When the adopted families and individuals perform well, they hold a good position in the family and community. However, when they fail to perform, they are reminded of their landlessness status and lack of culture. The exploitative adoption practices in the foothills of the Assam-Nagaland border also determine the social and political networks of the landless adopted families/individuals. The landless migrant/immigrant communities had no choice other than to live and accept these exploitative relations to obtain security and protection. Kikon (2013) rightly pointed out that the family in the foothills adopted the rhetoric of kinship to consolidate labour service, exchanges and payments. The exploitative adoptive policies in the foothills render social recognition to the adopted migrant/immigrant families/individuals. It also helps them to acquire a piece of land in the foothills.

Another important economic feature that helps to strengthen cultural ties in the
foothills is the practice of sharecropping. It is witnessed that in the disputed foothill border, the Naga encroachers practice sharecropping with migrated minority groups like Adivasi, Nepali and Miya. In Nagaland, sharecropping has no legal status as in the state of Assam, but it is widely practised. Nagaland has a unique landholding pattern under Article 351 (A) that restricts land leasing.

The exploitative sharecropping system is popularly known as Adi in the foothills. The Nagas, with the ulterior motive of garnering the fruits of cultivation in the encroached land on the foothills of the border, are encouraging the creation of pockets of landless minority people like Immigrant Bangladeshi, Adivasi, and Nepalis who are quite adept in agricultural activities. As mentioned earlier, the Nagas collect half of the harvested crops and allow the cultivators to retain the other half. Similarly, Assamese landlords also practice sharecropping with the migrant communities. The migrant sharecroppers do not recognise themselves as farmers but as Halwa. They are cultivators and do sharecropping on others' land. They do not possess any land in the foothills. The following excerpt and analysis from the field will throw light on the exploitative sharecropping practices in the foothills. In the field, one day while I was travelling in a local conveyance, I met Sibu Goyary (name changed), an Adivasi sharecropper, landless, vulnerable, and exploited by the landlord in the foothills. On that journey, he informs me about his occupation, where he lives in the foothills and finally he also invited me to his hamlet in the foothills. When I visited him in his house on a winter afternoon, he started narrating about his hard life in the foothills. He always dreams of owning a piece of land and becoming a farmer. He also informed me about the exploitative nature of sharecropping practices in the foothills. He mentioned that "Ideally as a halwa, our landlord should provide us ration, clothes, houses and other necessities, but we do not get anything from them. Sometimes they do not give us the agreed half of the harvested crop". Casual labour earns Rs. 250 to Rs. 300 per day in the foothills, whereas the earning of a sharecropper is much lower than even casual labour. Still, most of the people of migrant communities prefer to become a sharecropper than casual labour. Sharecropping practice provides legitimacy to the landless migrant communities in the foothills. When I asked migrant settlers about their arrival in the foothills, they often replied, "Go and ask my landlord. They will tell you about my arrival in the foothills." The landlord and migrant settlers (sharecropper) relation is cordial and deeply treasured because migrant settlers rely upon the landlord families to fortify their conspicuous settlement in the foothills.

Landlord families often adopt landless poor migrant families in the foothills. During the fieldwork in Merapani, in the host family, I met Rubiya Bai (name
changed), a Miya woman who used to be a house helper for them. She informed me: thirty-five years ago she was adopted by my host family. In the neighbourhood, she is also popularly known as 'Bubu hator gharor Miyani'. She is working as a maid in Bubu's house for the last three and a half decades. She does all the household chores in Bubu's house. In an afternoon, she narrated her story:

"I came to this place with my family before the Merapani War. My family was impoverished, and Abba was a Halwa in Bubu's paddy field. I was just a toddler when the Merapani war broke out. We lost our small paddy field in the war; a pair of cows, a goat, and even our small hamlet were burnt to ashes. The war pushes our family into a more impoverished condition. I never attended school, and from a very young age, I was adopted by Bubu's family. Bubu's eldest brother was my age, and we used to play together in our childhood. Gradually, I become gharor manuh for Bubu's family. They treat me as their family member. I also perform most of the household chores in the family, from cleaning to cooking. When I lived with Borma (Bubu's mother, who now lives in the ancestral house) in the Gaor Ghar, I accompany her everywhere. Borma also takes me to village Namghar to attend Gupini Naam every Thursday. Almost ten years back, I also took Xaran (proselytisation) under the Namgharia (local priest). After I took Xaran, the other village elderly also take food from my hand. When Bubu's elder brother got married and shifted to this new house in the town, I also shifted from an ancestral house to this new house to help natun buwari (new daughter-in-law) with the household chores. So, I am greying my hair with this family since my childhood."

Rubiya Bai's story is common in the foothills. Business families and landlords of Merapani foothills adopt the children or teenagers of migrant landless families. These migrant landless families mainly belong to Nepali, Adivasi and Miya communities. However, these adopted members of the family; contribute to the household chores, fields and plantations. They were required to work their way into the hearts of the family. Very often, household members reminded them to "work harder" and be "grateful" for the benefits and advantages they get in turn. It was a double-edged sword. Like Adi (sharecropping), there is another reciprocal free labour service system, which is locally known as "Howri". The system of Howri also strengthens the networks and social ties in the foothills.
The various socio-economic practices in the foothills like sharecropping, family adoption, and inter-community marriages give birth to the hybrid identities that can be identified as 'cultural commons'. Whether it is in kinship/familial relations or a multi-ethnic society, conflict/tension is bound to arise about one thing or another. So, to resolve the dispute/tension, one would have to step back and construct some criterion or criteria—for adjudication of the conflict, which can be from their practices and habits that transcend those social ties. Thus, the socio-economic settings which emerged in the space in-between -primarily drawn from a non-discursive, the repertory of customs, habits, and practices- can be located as foreground principle of conflict management in the foothill border.

**Latent Tensions in the Foothill Villages**

The assimilation processes in the border villages are, however, not without some latent tensions, leading to more hostility among the ethnic groups living in there. Many local people, academicians, and pressure groups are concerned about the looming hybrid identities and Miya community in the border villages. A study conducted by IDSA (Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses), 2009 pointed out that "...immigrants are desirous of marrying natives to secure social sanction for their settlement, and this is particularly reported in areas bordering Assam." Borgohain and Borgohain (2011) made a sinister allegation that there is an official strategy to alter the states' demographic pattern, and offer monetary incentives to the immigrant Bangladeshi on marrying a Naga woman. The emergence of Semiya community remains very controversial and sensitive. During the fieldwork, it was found that the Nagas want to deny the existence of hybrid identities. One of the respondents remarked, "Semiya is just a joke. It is a baseless claim." While another respondent (Aao Naga from Mukokchhang) also cautioned, "Do not indulge yourself in these subjects. It will be risky for you to research Semiya. Those places are highly criminalised. You will not be able to conduct your field research amidst those criminals." Further, he also mentioned that some people accept the existence of hybrid identities like Semiya, whereas some may take it as an insult to the entire Naga society. However, few social media pages accept the presence of Semiya. One of the Facebook pages named "Nagas by Blood" has a post titled "Immigration in Nagaland", authored by Zhokusheyi Rhakho, and mentioned the presence of Semiya. Rhakho also quoted Subhir Bhowmik's celebrated work 'Trouble Periphery', and provided a count of Semiyas that is about 80,000 to 100,000, foreboding a major threat to Nagaland demography, a possible source of future tension. Rhakho opines that the Nagas have felt the danger of such demographic change, but they are either helpless, too lazy, or selfish to do anything. Once a Naga
student leader even claimed that

"The children of the immigrants, who marry local girls, are often referred to as 'Sumias'... These children are also confused about the religion they should adopt. In most cases, they are given Naga names. So, they cannot be detected by the authorities concerned when they apply for advantages like jobs, which are meant only for the indigenous people of Nagaland..." xvii

The Naga Student's Federation (NSF) also imposed restrictions on Naga girls to marry Miya. A regional daily The Assam Tribune reported a statement of Naga student leader that NSF will impose a ban on Naga girls marrying immigrants from Bangladesh, but at the same time, he also stated that this ban could not be strictly imposed xviii. The NSF and other student bodies of the state put regular checks to prevent the influx of illegal immigrants. Especially during the wake of the publication of the draft and the final National Register of Citizenship (NRC) report in Assam, the NSF assigned its student volunteers to verify the documents of non-locals and even directed the Inner Line Permit (ILP) holders to carry documents like voter ID cards, AADHAR cards, etc. The defaulters would be handed over to the district administration and police for further legal actions xix. In the wake of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019, the opposition parties in Nagaland, like Nagaland Pradesh Congress Committee (NPCC), alleged that exemption of Nagaland from CAA based on ILP is just "a plain hoax to fool our people xx." They argued that "the act of exempting states/areas under ILP and Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution was complete eyewash since any immigrant getting asylum in any part of the country and after obtaining citizenship could easily travel and sneak into those protected areas to settle down xxx." 

The Dimapur incident of mob lynching of Mr Sayed Farid Khan in 2015 was claimed to be the result of resistance toward marriage between Naga women and immigrant Bangladeshi in the foothill areas of Nagaland. On March 5, a mob broke into the jail, dragged him out, stripped him naked, beat him up, pelted him with stones and dragged him towards the centre of Dimapur town. It was reported by a section of media houses and intelligentsia that the root of this violence could also be traced to Naga's antipathy towards immigrant Bangladeshi settlers marrying Naga women. The offspring of these marriages are demanding ST status. Even various national and international media houses also claimed that the brutal killing of Khan was an attempt by a section of Naga society to tell the immigrant Bangladeshi settlers to stay away from Naga women and the entire episode had the
National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) backing. However, Kikon (2015) is different from the above argument and pointed out that while characterising Naga society as xenophobic, the voices of the citizens of Dimapur, who were the first to condemn the gruesome action of the mob, were drowned out. Apart from this, we also forget to question the existing patriarchy in the foothill society in the whole episode. Kikon (2015) further argued, "...the task of locating the dignity and purity of any society is unquestionably placed at the hands of leaders and collectives who consider women and the marginalised and poor as non-speaking subjects without any agency."

The study "A Study on Illegal Immigration into North-East India: The Case of Nagaland" claimed that many interviewees in the study raised concern about the possibility of the voters' list in Nagaland being doctored to include the Semiya as well other immigrants. Furthermore, various academicians of the region also raised their concern about the growing aspiration of immigrants in commercial hubs and foothills of the Assam-Nagaland border. Patricia Mukhiem, the editor of Shillong Times in 2003, wrote an open letter to the then Chief Minister of Nagaland Mr Neiphiu Rio, which raised concern about the threat from immigrants who are curving their niche in Nagaland:

"It may not be too long before somebody with the power of numbers (population) demands a Union Territorial status in Dimapur. Its market areas already look like a mini-Bangladesh, albeit more lucrative.xxii."

In my fieldwork in Dimapur, Ms Manisha Borkotoky, a social activist (Education Advisor, Education Initiatives Pvt. Ltd), also informed me that in the city of Dimapur, Naga Student Union recently stopped the recitation of "Azaan"xxiii on the loudspeaker. It is evident that Miya is trying to raise their status in the local social hierarchy; they encounter fierce resistance from the indigenous communities, especially from the Nagas.

CONCLUSION

Merapani or various other foothill villages on the Assam-Nagaland border are a space in-between where cutting edge transactions take place among different ethnic groups. Few groups like Assamese, and Lotha Nagas in the Merapani foothills consider themselves as native or 'son of the soils' is dominant in terms of numbers, land resources and power. Whereas the migrant communities like Miya, Adivasi and Nepali try to adjust themselves to the local society of Merapani. Gradually, the Miya population is numerically overpowering the other migrant communities and
native ethnic groups and giving birth to hybrid identities like Semiya/Sumia through social intercourse. They are also trying to raise their social status in the local social hierarchy and secure the social sanctions for their settlement through inter-community marriages, adoption and sharecropping with the local communities in the bordering villages.

Notwithstanding the features of 'cultural commons', the foothill villages sometimes reflect a hostile environment. The social and economic processes were held to forge solidarity in the highly fictionalised society of the foothills; however, it could not create social solidarity among the ethnic groups living on the fringe. People lived together, but it is a "forced" collectivity because a constant resistance from the local people affected the assimilation process among the locals and 'others' in the foothill villages. The hybrid identities did not represent the real nature of the emerging social structure. The harmony visible on the surface was manufactured, mainly for the "economic interdependence" among the various ethnic groups in the foothill villages. In the foothill villages, the different ethnic categories with distinct social boundaries emerge from dynamic yet anxious inter-ethnic interactions. As Barth points out,

"...ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a social system does not lead to its liquidation through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence" (Barth 1969, p. 10).

Within all sorts of complexities, one can see some form of togetherness and reciprocity. Patricia Mukhiem (2016) pointed out that in the North-East, it is safe to assume that "othering" camouflage many other disorders - social, political and economic. It is observed that only a handful of politicians and elite media houses try to create a rift between hill-valley and indigene-immigrant; they neglect the fundamental problems of foothill villages of the border. Singh (2016) pointed out that conflict is inbuilt or inherent in collectivity, but people still live together separately.

Notes:

1 D-Sector: There is a bone of contention between Assam and Nagaland over a 434-kilometre long border. In other words, about 66,000 hectares of land are disputed. This interstate border is divided into six sectors A, B, C, D, E and F. These sectors include Sibsagar, Golaghat, Jorhat and Karbi Anglong districts, all of which presently lie in Assam. Nagaland claims that sectors A, B, C and D belong to the Naga tribes and should not be a part of Assam.
In the present study, I will refer entire East Bengali Muslim Peasant Community who settled in the Brahmaputra valley as Miya. During my fieldwork, I encountered the word Miya frequently used by the Nagas, ethnic Assamese, Adivasis, Nepalese and Miya themselves. In the popular media such as Newspaper reports, Facebook pages and local publications and even academic writings and government records the Miyas are referred to as Immigrant Bangladeshis. This is the reason I used the words ‘Miyas’ and ‘Immigrant Bangladeshis’ for the same group throughout the paper. Going back to the migration history of Miyas or Immigrant Bangladeshis, they entered Brahmaputra valley during colonial times as East Bengali Muslim Peasant Community. Like any other frontier region, the population density of Assam was low and the local wage labourers were not attracted to the plantation. As such, the colonial rulers recruited labourers from other states of India, especially from Chotta Nagpur Plateau. This community is referred to as “Adivasi”. It was estimated that tea garden workers and their descendants become the sixth-largest population in Assam by 2021. However, the colonial government did not stop there. They also saw potential in the low lying areas of the Brahmaputra flood plains for earning revenues. Subsequently, in the early twentieth century, the colonial administrators encouraged the settlement of Muslim migrants locally known as 'Miya' from densely populated deltaic eastern Bengal. Especially, when the demand for raw materials for the jute industry went up in Bengal, the Miya community migrated more in large numbers. Thereafter, the poor peasants started coming on their own as social networks were established between the two regions. This inflow of poor peasants never stopped to the Brahmaputra valley till date.

The Assamese linguistic group: The left rhetoric in Assam argues the aspiration of neo-elites to make Assam a nation province for the Assamese. This led to the widening of Assamese linguistic identity to accommodate the Muslims of Brahmaputra valley as well as the tea tribes within the fold of Assamese nationalism. Muslims of Assam was rechristened as Na Asamiya (New Assamese) and encouraged to barter their identity and strengthen the claim to make Assam the nation province for the Assamese. The immigrant Muslims from erstwhile East Pakistan readily shifted their identity to save their stomach.

The Merapani War: On June 4, 1985, a war was fought between two neighbouring states-Assam and Nagaland, the war not only have political importance but is also important from a socio-economic standpoint. It took a heavy toll on the life of people and affected the age-old social relations which were maintained between Nagas and Non-Nagas in the foothills. It affected the entire Doyang region which lead to the displacement of 7,996 families Gupta, Shekhar (2013). Merapani village between Assam-Nagaland border becomes a bloody battlefield, India Today, retrieved from https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19850630-merapani-village-between-assam-nagaland-border-becomes-a-bloody-battlefield-770165-2013-12-20

Sharecroppers: Here in the foothills, the sharecroppers are mostly the migrant settlers like Adivasi, Nepali and Immigrant Bangladesi (Miya).

Disturbed Border Areas: In view of the deteriorating law and order situation in the areas on the Assam-Nagaland border especially after incidents of 5th January 1979, prohibitory orders under Section 144 Cr.P.C., were promulgated as a precautionary measure, prohibiting the movement of civilians from dusk to dawn. Subsequently, the Reserved Forests and some other areas along the border were declared as 'Disturbed areas' under the provisions of the Assam Disturbed Areas Act, 1955 and Armed Forced Special Power Act, 1958 from time to time.
The Third Space is a term coined by cultural and post-colonial theorist Homi. K. Bhabha in his seminal work 'Location of Culture'. It refers to the interstices between colliding culture, a liminal space that gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.

Khichdi is a crude mixture or a hotch-potch of all food we consume, rice, lentils, vegetables which is a common dish in Indian subcontinent. But here, my respondents are referring to a mixed culture exhibited in the foothills village of Merapani.

Homi Bhabha refers to the "in-between" spaces as "terrain[s] for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself….It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the inter-subjectivity and collective experiences of nations, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated." - Bhabha Homi K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London : Routledge, (p. 1-2).

Nagamese is a Creole spoken widely among the people of foothills. The growth of Nagamese as a lingua franca of Nagaland and its foothills can be date back to the Pre-British era. There are about twenty-three Naga languages, all mutually unintelligible. The Naga tribes live in close proximity to each other but within a geographical territory, a specific tribe lives in. As such, there was no common tongue for them. But gradually, a common medium of communication emerged between the Naga tribes which later termed Nagamese.

With the re-arrangement of colonial Assam into different states since 1963 the issue of inter-state boundary disputes became one of the nagging issues in Northeast India. The bone of contention between Assam and Nagaland, however, is the British 1866 notification. Assam stands by the 1925 notification as it finally demarcated the boundary between Naga Hills District and its neighbouring districts in Assam. But, Nagaland does not. It, instead, is in favour of the 1866 Notification, and therefore, wants its territorial re-adjustment in this line. But it is not acceptable to Assam. In fact, Nagas were not ready to accept 434k.m. long boundary adjoining Sivsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hill Districts of Assam.

Landholding Pattern: In Nagaland, the land is owned either by the village community as a whole or by a clan within the village or by individuals. There are no records for conferring upon such ownership rights but the individual rights are exclusively determined by tradition which is also referred to as customary laws. These Customary Laws are un-codified, and yet very effectively applied and interpreted by the traditional Village Councils in the event of any dispute. Thus, the landholding pattern in the state of Nagaland is unique, most of the land (more than 88%) is owned by the community. To establish individual landholdings in the state is an arduous task. Clan or community lands are allocated to willing individuals for cultivation. Outsiders are not allowed to possess/own land in Nagaland. - Government of Nagaland (2012). Vision 2025: Food for All, Department of Agriculture and Allied Departments, Government of Nagaland. Retrieved from https://agriculture.nagaland.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/VISION-2025-DOCUMENT-low-resolution.pdf

Halwa is a colloquial Assamese term for a land tiller in farmlands.

Like any other frontier region, the population density of Assam was low and the local wage labourers were not attracted to the plantation. As such, the colonial rulers recruited labourers from other states of India, especially from Chotta Nagpur Plateau. This community is referred to as "Adivasi". It was estimated that tea garden workers and their descendants become the sixth largest population in Assam by 2021.
In the Merapani region, especially in the foothills, many landless ex-tea garden labourers settled as sharecroppers with either Naga or Assamese landlords.

\(^{xv}\) Bubu (name changed) is one of my respondents in the Merapani foothill. He was also my host family during my fieldwork in Merapani which I conducted in the year 2017-18.

\(^{xvi}\) Cultural Commons: are non-discursive practices that are possibly used as law and norm in the governance of a social group. Akeel Bilgrami (2021) mentioned two features of cultural commons: they must be \textit{shared} without rivalry among the agents involved. A second feature, more obviously true of the land and the environmental commons than of the knowledge commons, though increasingly true of the latter, is that agents \textit{sustain themselves} on it.


\(^{xix}\) See "NSF to Check Illegal Influx", Assam Tribune (Gwahati), August 8, 2018

\(^{xx}\) See "CAA camouflaged by ILP to deceive Nagas: Cong", Nagaland Post (Dimapur), December 17, 2019

\(^{xxi}\) Ibid.


\(^{xxiii}\) Azaan: A call for prayer/namaaz by Muslims.
REFERENCES:


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