FOREST IN THE CITY: CONTESTED INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS ON THE HILLS OF GUWAHATI

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BY

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DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

I declare that this thesis entitled '**Forest in the City: Contested Informal Settlements on the Hills of Guwahati'**, submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy to THE UNIVERSITY OF TRANS-DISCIPLINARY HEALTH SCIENCES AND TECHNOLOGY, Bengaluru, is my original work, conducted under the supervision of my guide Professor Carol Upadhya. I also wish to inform that no part of the research has been submitted for a degree or examination at any university. References, help and material obtained from other sources have been duly acknowledged.

I hereby confirm the originality of the work and that there is no plagiarism in any part of the dissertation.

Place: Bengaluru **Signature of the Candidate**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this thesis, **'Forest in the City: Contested Informal Settlements on the Hills of Guwahati'**, submitted by Mr. Snehashish Mitra, was carried out under my supervision. No part of this thesis has been submitted for a degree or examination at any university. References, help and material obtained from other sources have been duly acknowledged. I hereby confirm the originality of the work and that there is no plagiarism in any part of the dissertation.

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This thesis brings down a temporary curtain on my tryst with Guwahati. A decade back I arrived in Guwahati for the first time to pursue my post-graduate studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and since then my academic and professional journey has revolved around issues of Guwahati and other parts of Northeast India. This would not have been possible without the warm and supportive presence of many people from the region, many of whom are close friends now.

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Introduction

Guwahati has had rich wildlife all around. In the 1950s a bison had entered Chandmari. In some of the forests around Guwahati, Royal Bengal Tigers were also present. Settlers have occupied the hills and that has caused environmental damage. We are therefore trying our best to protect the environment through legislation and putting adequate pressure on the government.

- Member of an environmental NGO in Guwahati

When I came to settle here there were no trees in large stretches of the hills. They were mostly chopped off and taken away. I was able to communicate with people across the hills just by shouting. There were a few paddy cultivations undertaken by the Karbis who used to own the land. Over time, as more people started settling here, we took the initiative to plant trees around ourselves; 'manuh thakile he gach thakibo' *[only if people are here will trees be there]. Some of the areas here were declared as forests in the late 1980s. But tell me, how can there be a forest amidst a city?*

- Hill settler in Guwahati

These narratives illustrate different ideas about the significance of the hills surrounding Guwahati, and how different groups imagine and relate to them. As the largest city in Northeast India, Guwahati has grown steadily since Indian independence, especially through in-migration. For many low-income migrants who come to Guwahati, the hills offer one of the few spaces where they can settle, given that the plains areas of the city are occupied mainly by business establishments and middle-class or elite colonies. In addition, the hills provide open spaces where they can recreate some of the household and livelihood practices of their native villages. On the other hand, environmental groups of Guwahati have campaigned for the conservation of the forested areas on the hills, and for the removal of these settlements, to address environmental problems. These environmental groups highlight that the green cover on the hills influences Guwahati's rainfall pattern (which has been erratic in recent years) and offers habitat for wildlife species such as leopard, deer and elephant. They also allege that the hill settlements are destroying the

green cover on the hills, thereby causing landslides, flash floods, and human-animal conflicts (leopards and elephants are increasingly coming into close contact with humans in Guwahati). The hill inhabitants counter such allegations by claiming that they are mindful of the ecological importance of the hills and pointing out that they have planted trees over the years around their houses. Further, they allege that luxury housing and business establishments have been built on the hills by clearing trees, yet environmental groups and the media do not target them.

Eviction drives against the hill settlements have been the most sensitive and contentious aspect of these contestations around the hills of Guwahati. Over the years, multiple court orders have been issued directing 'encroachments' to be cleared from forest areas, leading to evictions that in turn have provoked anti-eviction mobilizations. However, only some of the hill areas are under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department, while others are under the Revenue Department, leading to jurisdictional confusion and opening spaces for settlers to assert legal claims to land.

When I was a student in Guwahati (2012-14), I witnessed a massive gathering of people protesting against evictions in front of the Secretariat and demanding that land titles granted to the hill inhabitants. I found such demands to be very similar to the land movements in my native state, West Bengal, in the latter part of the 2000s, which ultimately led to the defeat of the ruling Left coalition party. I became increasingly curious about these conflicts around the hills of Guwahati and became curious about why these people are living on the hills in the first place. What led them there? What are their lives like? How did this conflict between environmental concerns and settlement rights begin? My interest ultimately led me to pursue these questions for my doctoral research.

The dissertation explores several aspects of the conflicts around the hill settlements of Guwahati, especially between demands for environmental protection and nature conservation, on the one hand, and the rights and claims of the urban poor to housing and security of land tenure, on the other. I focus on the experiences of the hill settlers and how they strategize to forestall evictions, both through organized anti-eviction mobilizations as well as through micro-politics employing a range of legal and bureaucratic tactics. The thesis thus contributes to the literature on conflicts around informal settlements in the global south and how marginalized groups make claims to urban space.

People from different communities – especially tribal groups -- live on the hills of Guwahati. In the thesis, I argue that the legal category of tribe in Assam, which is equated with indigeneity, has played a significant part in framing the politics of land and

environment in Guwahati. The claim to indigenous belonging has given tribal groups (even those not originally from the Guwahati area or Assam) a degree of agency and leverage in this struggle.

In the thesis I also show how the regional history of ethnic politics, anti-immigration movements, and (more recently) the national politics of citizenship have shaped the politics of land in Guwahati. During my fieldwork during 2018-19, Assam was in the process of updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) -- a controversial issue -- while vehement protests also erupted against the proposed Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). My conversations with Assamese and tribal settlers on the hills would often include discussions on these issues. These interlocutors – who are deemed indigenous and so cannot be excluded from citizenship – would equate their unquestioned national citizenship with their legitimate demands for urban citizenship through land rights. They would say, 'Are we Bangladeshis that we should be evicted from our lands without any rehabilitation?' While this articulation of indigeneity advances moral claims to settlement rights, it also accepts the 'othering' of another community (in this case, Bengali-speaking Muslims). The case study of eviction threat in a Dalit slum contrasts with the experience of tribal hill settlers, as they do not enjoy similar social and political leverage. Therefore, I argue that social identity plays a key role in determining how different groups respond to threats of displacement and marginalization.

Informal settlements have become a matter of intense debate and activism in cities of the global south. Drawing on the case of the hill settlements of Guwahati, this thesis explores how environmental politics and conservation agendas, clashing with demands for housing and settlement rights, become entangled in identity and citizenship politics, which in turn shaped the politics of urban informal settlements. By focusing on the hill settlers' responses to the threat of eviction, I highlight the different strategies employed by them to make claims to land and place.

Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 sketches the regional political and social context of Northeast India, with a focus on the recent history of ethnic and citizenship politics. It presents key moments in the history of Guwahati and contestations around the hill settlements, describing the different stakeholders in this issue. The chapter also

presents the research questions, outlines the methodology adopted, and describes the field sites.

In Chapter 2, I review the bodies of literature that generate the analytical framework for the thesis. These include the literature on urban informality in critical urban studies and social anthropology, as well as studies of cities of the global south that highlight how environmental discourses have been invoked to threaten or displace the urban poor. I also engage with literature on urban political ecology, which interrogates the politics of power relations and justice surrounding the environment and socio-nature processes in urban contexts.

The main body chapters 3, 4, and 5 present the research findings, organized around the main themes of the thesis. Chapter 3 traces the postcolonial urban expansion of Guwahati, focusing on how urban growth entailed the alienation of tribal lands and the displacement of tribal communities. I argue that the pattern of urbanization in Guwahati from the 1950s was exclusionary, setting the stage for the ongoing land conflicts discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 4 delves into the environmental and legal debates around the hill settlements of Guwahati. After describing how hill settlements are established by tribal migrants through a case study, I focus on the evictions from forest land that have occurred in Assam since the 1990s, with the hill settlements of Guwahati as frequent targets. The chapter then elaborates on two case studies of contestations around hill settlements, to show how people have challenged the administrative designation of the land as 'forest' in the courts and pursued efforts to have their land holdings regularized to secure tenurial rights. I argue that the grey areas in land administration have compounded the threat of eviction but also created channels for residents of informal residents to resist eviction. This chapter describes the range of strategies – legal, bureaucratic, and identity-based – that have been deployed by settlers to counter eviction drives on the hills of Guwahati.

In the fifth chapter, I describe and analyze two anti-eviction movements, illustrating the diverse strategies adopted by different organizations involved in Guwahati's land conflicts. Through ethnographic vignettes I explore the moments of confrontation during eviction drives and anti-eviction movements. In this chapter also present a contrasting case of eviction of a Dalit colony in the city to highlight the differential consequences of identity and social history in claim-making.

In the Conclusion, I bring together the findings to argue that Guwahati, over the years since independence, has become increasingly exclusionary, driven by the logics of

urban planning and environmental concerns espoused by the non-tribal dominated state agencies and environmental groups. The tribal groups particularly faced displacement in the 1950s and 1960s and continue to be threatened with eviction in the period since the 1990s. Yet, the response of tribal groups to these efforts to displace them changed drastically between the 1950s and the present, as they became more active in opposing eviction drives. In particular, we find the settlers organizing under the banners of ethno-nationalist organizations that promote the rights of tribal groups as indigenous people in putting forth their claims and demands.

Thus, the conflict between environmental concerns and land and settlement rights for the poor in Guwahati reveals modes of resistance of the settlers of the informal settlements, which partially align with a majoritarian discourse of identity and citizenship in the region and the nation. The thesis also shows how concerns for environmental protection and forest and wildlife conservation shape urban politics in a growing Indian city, where the housing needs of marginalized groups demand rights to the same spaces where the bourgeois environmental imaginaries of the urban middle class are constructed.

Chapter 1
Background, Research Problem and Methodology

In this chapter, I provide background to the chapters that follow, by describing the spatial and socio-political landscape of the study, situating Guwahati within the history and geography of Northeast India, and tracing the post-colonial formation and politics of the region in relation to the Indian state. I then outline the research questions and describe the methodology employed for the study.

Locating Guwahati in Northeast India

Guwahati is the largest city in Northeast India, situated in the state of Assam. It serves as the gateway to India's Northeast as it is connected to different parts of the region and other regions of India by rail and road. According to the 2011 Census of India, the population of Guwahati was nearly 1 million. Assam's capital, Dispur, adjoins Guwahati in its southern border, making Guwahati the *de facto* capital of the state.

Historically, Guwahati served as a frontier outpost for different precolonial states, especially the Ahom kingdom.[1] The reinvention of Guwahati as a modern city began under British colonial rule, when it became a major administrative and commercial centre. Trade between Assam and Bengal through waterways that ran through East Bengal was crucial for the transportation of tea and jute from Assam to Calcutta and thence to other parts of the world. Guwahati's inland water port made it an important trading site.

During the colonial period, three major groups came to dominate Guwahati – Assamese, Bengalis and Marwaris – communities associated with the bureaucracy and commerce. Their settlements were located on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. Other communities, such as the Karbi, Bodo, Garo, Kachari, and Nepalis, lived on the outskirts of Guwahati, where agriculture was their main livelihood.

[1] The Ahom kingdom was the longest-reigning kingdom in the Indian subcontinent (1226-1826 A.D). The Ahom were natives of China's Yunnan province and entered Assam through Thailand and Myanmar.

Northeast India was a key site of resource extraction during British colonial rule (Baruah 1999), although today it holds a peripheral status in the Indian polity and economy. Partition, which made East Bengal a part of Pakistan, separated Northeast India from the 'mainland' and sandwiched the region between Bangladesh and Myanmar. This disrupted transportation networks (roads, waterways and railways) connecting Assam and Bengal and curtailed the link between Northeast India and the rest of India, resulting in the loss of logistical connections and social networks while creating political and territorial isolation. As seen in the map (Image 1), only a narrow strip of land (22 km in width) maintains geographical contiguity between Assam and the rest of India. Thus, Guwahati became one of the focal points of economic and infrastructural development in Northeast India following India's independence, leading to its rapid spatial and demographic growth. The area beyond the main colonial town was inhabited by numerous tribal groups engaged in agriculture and other livelihood practices. As Guwahati expanded into these areas, it resulted in the displacement and dispossession of the tribal inhabitants (discussed in detail in chapter 3).

Figure 1. Location of Guwahati in Northeast India
Source: Google Maps

Among the significant post-independence development initiatives centred around Guwahati were the setting up a broad-gauge railway line connecting Guwahati and the Northeast region with other parts of India, and the establishment of government offices, an oil refinery, and numerous manufacturing units. The increase in economic activity,

together with improved transportation and communication links led to a rapid increase in Guwahati's population – from 43,615 in 1951 to 100,707 in 1961, according to the Census of India. A government inquiry report (Government of Assam, 1966) ascribes this growth to the establishment of industries, big and small, in and around Guwahati, the establishment of the High Court, the University, a medical college, engineering college and various other educational, cultural and social institutions in the city, as well as the inclusion of new areas in Guwahati. Following Partition, refugees from East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) migrated to Assam and some settled around the periphery of Guwahati. Mindful of the legal requirements of occupying and settling on the land, the refugee population moved to regularize their landholdings. Land on the periphery of Guwahati was also sought after by various government departments for its projects, anticipating the city's future expansion. Settlements on these 'government' lands, including refugee settlements, were served eviction notices from time to time (see chapter 3). In several instances, land transactions between the landowner and the refugees were not recognized by the government on the grounds of legal discrepancies. Refugee organizations such as the All Assam Refugee Association (AARA), headed by Bengali Hindu migrants, actively pursued the refugees' claims to land and settlement rights by submitting regular representations to the concerned departments, such as the Relief and Rehabilitation Department. Guwahati was also the hub of the Assam Agitation[2] and other popular movements since the 1970s. Numerous political organizations across Assam head to Guwahati to register their demands and grievances.

The migration of people of different communities from across Northeast India and other parts of India has given Guwahati a cosmopolitan character. Several settlements, such as Manipuri Basti, Ahomgaon, Devkotanagar, and Maligaon, have a heavy concentration of particular ethnic groups, reflected in the names of the settlements. However, Guwahati is popularly seen as an essentially Assamese city, where caste Hindu Assamese dominate positions of power.

At present, Guwahati is the primate city of the region, with other cities and towns far behind in terms of population, economic activities and political importance. Almost every well-to-do person in Northeast India owns or aspires to buy property in Guwahati. In recent times, businesspeople from other parts of India have also begun to invest in Guwahati, as land is relatively cheap compared to other big cities of India. In contrast with

[2] The Assam Agitation (1979-1985) was a movement led by student groups demanding the identification and deportation of illegal immigrants (Barbora 2022).

other regions of Northeast India, Guwahati is relatively less disturbed by conflicts and subject to natural calamities, a status that encourages flows of capital investment and people to the city.

Since the 1990s, Guwahati has seen a dramatic transition, with increasing economic activities and spatial expansion. The transformations in land use reflect the burgeoning consumerism in the city, such as the numerous five-star hotels, bars, and restaurants that have come up along the Guwahati-Shillong (GS) Road since 2010. The rapid changes in the city's social landscape mirror – on a smaller scale – similar changes across other cities of the global south as they are transformed by inflows of global capital (Goldman 2021; Roy and Ong 2011).

The post-independence development of Guwahati, and the increasing in-migration of people from other places, had a significant impact on the tribal population of the areas surrounding Guwahati town, which I discuss in the following section.

Tribal Communities of Guwahati

Since 2012, I have spent a considerable amount of time in Guwahati as a student and researcher. However, before undertaking my doctoral research, I was unaware that tribal groups were the major inhabitants of the area around Guwahati until the 1970s. Guwahati's current demography is overwhelmingly composed of Savarna upper-caste Hindus, with some pockets of other ethnic groups.

The Karbi, Bodo, Garo, and Kachari were the main ethnic groups that inhabited the area where the city of Guwahati now exists. Their primary livelihood activities included agriculture, fishing and weaving. Across Guwahati, several physical markers signify the tribal heritage of the city, especially a few religious sites of the communities that have somehow managed to survive. One finds *Bathou mandir* (temples) of the Bodos, and Karbi *deohals* or *xils* (monuments), in areas of the city where there are hardly any Bodos or Karbis living at present. Guwahati's growth over time displaced the tribal settlements through development projects such as railways. The growing demand for land for housing and other purposes fostered the rapid sale and conversion of agricultural lands to the south of Guwahati to urban uses. In chapter 3, I elaborate on how some of these displaced tribal groups were forced leave Guwahati and settle elsewhere, while others moved up into the hills surrounding the city.

As noted above, people from various parts of Northeast India have migrated to Guwahati, especially since the 1980s, for economic reasons as well as to escape conflict situations and environmental disasters. Many of these migrants belong to tribal communities. For example, the Mising of Upper Assam[3] have been forced to leave their homeland to escape floods. Mising have been migrating to Guwahati since the early 2000s in large numbers and have settled on the hills adjoining the highway. From my fieldwork, I gathered that many of these settlers send money to their families at home in rural Assam. The declining prospect of income from agriculture makes such remittances vital to the survival for many village households. Occupying land in Guwahati and consolidating control over it opens up the prospect of selling the land and house in the future. However, settling in a new place with no prior human habitation comes with immense challenges, as there is no infrastructure or social networks to build upon. On the other hand, settling on the hills also allows the migrants to recreate dwellings and livelihoods like those in their rural native places. This strategy, while allowing them to participate in the urban economy, also affords them the space to grow some vegetables, rear livestock such as chicken and pigs, and brew rice beer.[4] Such practices would be untenable in the plains of Guwahati, inhabited mainly by caste Hindu groups who may not approve of the consumption of particular kinds of meat or liquor.

Members of the Mising community were at the centre of anti-eviction protests when allegedly illegal settlements in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary were demolished in 2017 (see chapter 4). Numerous tribal organizations of Assam came forward in support of the land rights of the Mising and other tribal groups, claiming that the 'indigenous' people of Assam ought to be provided with a place to live in Guwahati. While several ethnic groups have settled on the hills over the years, my focus is on the tribal groups because – unlike marginalized and low-caste groups in other cities of India -- they have managed to voice their demands assertively by drawing on the larger politics of indigeneity in Northeast India.

[3] Upper Assam (*Ujoni Axom* in Assamese) refers to the region comprising of districts of Assam in the upstream of river Brahmaputra. This is not an official political unit but a popular understanding of a region.

[4] Most tribal communities of the region have a longstanding tradition of brewing local liquor, especially from rice – for consumption as well as sale.

Postcolonial Political Formation of Northeast India

The thesis addresses conflicts around land rights and environmental degradation in Guwahati. However, this conflict has been shaped by multiple socio-political issues of the region. For this reason, in this section I provide a brief background on the political context of Northeast India to provide the context for my analysis of the anti-eviction struggles in subsequent chapters.

Situated in the Eastern Himalayan region, the topography of Northeast India comprises of hills and valleys. Following the multiple state reorganizations that took place after 1947, the Northeast region now consists of eight states – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and Sikkim. The region shares international borders with Bangladesh, China, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar. Since India's independence, the Northeast has been regarded as underdeveloped and backward, in part due to ethnic stereotyping of its inhabitants, and has also been marked by frequent ethno-militant violence.

Following India's independence in 1947, several ethnic groups of Northeast India claimed autonomy and resisted incorporation into the Indian nation-state, leading to armed insurrections aimed at liberation or autonomy. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, quelled the aspirations of sovereignty in different parts of Northeast India through force of arms. Zachariah (2013, 70) notes: 'It was in the north-east of India that the Nehruvian vision took on its most brutal and violent forms.' Consequently, Northeast India has been governed largely through the heavy presence of the security forces, mandated through the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958,[5] often leading to the suspension of fundamental human and civil rights. In addition, ethnic tensions and conflicts have regularly erupted in the region. In several instances, rebel groups succeeded in negotiating the formation of new states or autonomous district councils. However, the reorganization of Northeast India into several states and autonomous councils within the states has taken place under the auspices of the central government, with local state assemblies barely involved.[6] Several peace accords, such as the Assam Accord and Mizo Accord, have been signed between the central government and the dissenting groups.

[5] AFSPA, 1958 was passed by the Parliament to grant special powers to the Indian Armed Forces to maintain public order in 'disturbed areas'. According to The Disturbed Areas (Special Courts) Act, 1976, once an area is declared 'disturbed', the status quo should remain for a minimum of three months. This Act was first applied in the Naga Hills (now the state of Nagaland) in 1958, and later was imposed in parts of Assam.

[6] On Autonomous Councils of Northeast India, see Barbora (2005).

There have also been numerous conflicts between different groups of Northeast India, often stemming from the majoritarian politics of an ethnic group after it secured some level of political autonomy (on the Bodoland Territorial Council, see Behera 2019; Dutta 2016; Haokip 2012). Northeast India has witnessed frequent movements targeting religious or linguistic minorities, the rise of anti-immigration politics, and demands for the expulsion of people with allegedly recent histories of migration into the region. Violence against Bengali Muslims in particular has erupted on multiple occasions in Assam (Kimura 2013; Mahanta 2013; Sharma 2021). In addition to physical violence, in recent years the situation of Bengalis (both Hindus and Muslims) has been made vulnerable through the updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC)[7] in Assam, adding to the complexities of the politics of identity and citizenship in the region.

Ethnic identity and citizenship debates

The long history of migration into and within Northeast India has generated multiple debates over citizenship and territory. Particularly in the state of Assam, the issue of citizenship has come to the fore in political discourse often since the colonial period (Baruah 1999). Much of the current debate around citizenship in Northeast India is the result of in-migration during the British colonial rule by groups such as Nepalis, Bengali Hindus and Muslims (*Miyas*), and Marwaris, who came from different parts of India. The Partition, followed by the Liberation War of Bangladesh, generated further waves of migration from today's Bangladesh (East Bengal until 1947 and East Pakistan from 1947 to 1971). Bengalis of East Bengal origin, especially Muslims, have faced frequent allegations of illegal entry into India, with ethno-nationalist political movements demanding their deportation. Ethnic, religious or regional identity is thus central to the everyday lived experience of the inhabitants of Northeast India.

The tribal communities of Northeast India are central to the political discourse of the region. They are better placed within the power-hierarchy compared to their counterparts in other parts of India. Most of the hill dwelling communities in Northeast India (speaking languages belonging to the Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman groups) are

[7] The National Register of Citizens (NRC) is supposed to be a register of verified citizens of India. There has been a political demand in Assam by some groups to update the NRC, with the objective of detecting and deporting illegal migrants. The updating of the NRC for Assam began in 2013 and the new list was published in 2019. The procedure was controversial at many levels, especially due to alleged discrimination against religious and linguistic minorities. The final NRC draft left out close to two million applicants, many of them Bengali Hindus and Muslims and members of other non-Assamese communities.

listed as Scheduled Tribes (STs) under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.[8] The valleys of the region are primarily inhabited by Hindu caste groups (Assamese,[9] Bengali, Meitei[10]) and Muslims (Assamese, East Bengal origin, Manipuri Pangal). In the areas designated for the protection of tribals (such as those governed by Autonomous Councils and Hill Councils), ownership of land is restricted to the indigenous communities.

The category of 'tribe' is enshrined in the Constitution of India (in the provisions relating to Scheduled Tribes), but the Government of India has never accepted the demands of some Adivasi groups for 'indigenous' status (Ghosh 2008). However, in the Northeast the term tribe is often understood, in everyday social and political discourse, to convey 'indigenous' status. However, several non-tribal communities, such as caste Hindu Assamese and the Meitei of Manipur, also regard themselves as indigenous. The question of indigeneity is crucial in Northeast India because not being deemed 'indigenous' exposes one to the exclusionary practices of 'majoritarian politics' in the region. More importantly, it subjects an individual or group to political scrutiny of their citizenship, such as during the update of the NRC[11] in 2018 (Barbora 2022; Baruah 2005; Mahanta 2021). Often 'anti-outsider' or 'sons of the soil' movements, stemming from apprehensions about economic or cultural subjugation by migrant groups, have selectively targeted groups with a recent or early history of migration into Northeast India (Weiner 1978).

Following the ascendance of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power at the centre in 2014, the demand for deporting alleged 'illegal immigrants' from Assam escalated. Such demands were made mainly by groups claiming to safeguard the interests of 'indigenous' Assamese people. The updating of the NRC, responding to the demands of several social and political organizations of Assam, was followed closely by the passing

[8] Scheduled Tribes are those communities listed in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution. Tribal communities of Northeast India are classified under the Sixth Schedule, while 'tribal' communities in other states (now popularly known as Adivasis) come under the Fifth Schedule. Here I use the term 'tribal' broadly to refer to Northeast communities listed in the Sixth Schedule -- a term that is accepted locally. The category of 'tribe' was introduced under British colonial rule to refer to groups characterized by geographical isolation, general 'backwardness', distinct physical features and languages, and other such criteria – although these criteria were inconsistently applied (Xaxa 1999).

[9] The term 'Assamese' popularly refers to someone who comes from Assam. However, in everyday use it signifies caste Hindu Assamese-speaking people, along with a section of Muslim (non-Bengali) Assamese.

[10] Meiteis, who mainly live in the Imphal valley of Manipur state, trace their origins to Yunnan in China.

[11] NRC is supposed to be a register of verified citizens of India. There has been a political demand in Assam by some groups to update the NRC, with the objective of detecting and deporting illegal migrants. The updating of the NRC for Assam began in 2013 and the new list was published in 2019. The procedure was controversial at many levels, especially due to alleged discrimination against religious and linguistic minorities. The final NRC draft left out close to two million applicants, many of whom are Bengali Hindus, Bengali Muslims and members of other non-Assamese communities.

of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 (CAA) by the Indian Parliament, which allowed the granting of citizenship to *non-Muslim* refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The introduction of the CAB (Citizenship Amendment Bill) was met with vehement protests in Assam, as across India, leading to deaths by police-firing on protesters.[12] Overall, the conjunction of the NRC and the CAA debates and protests further complicated the issues of identity and citizenship in the region. One result of this reoriented citizenship discourse, as I argue below, has been a strengthening of the political efficacy of assertions of tribal (and therefore 'indigenous') identity by some groups in staking claim to land.

Social groups such as tribals and 'lower' castes are often subjected to pejorative attitudes by the Savarna groups of 'mainland' India,[13] reflected in numerous exclusionary practices and discourses (Ranganathan 2021; Sundar 1997). Recently, scholars have argued that such discriminatory practises are often racial in nature (Cháirez-Garza *et al*. 2021). Contrary to the power equation in mainland India, however, in Northeast India the 'tribal' identity carries political weight in validating claims to citizenship, territory and resources as the rightful custodians of an ethnically defined territory (Xaxa 1999; van Schendel 2011). Tribal or indigenous identities have been deployed in protest movements across the region, for instance in resisting ecologically destructive projects such as hydroelectric dams in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, and in protesting against eviction and demanding land rights (Gohain 2017). During my fieldwork in the hills of Guwahati, tribal people frequently invoked their identity as the 'indigenous' people of Assam to justify their claims to land. But the 'indigenous' tag is not just limited to tribal communities. Assamese-speaking caste Hindu groups frequently refer to themselves as the *'khilonjiya'* (meaning indigenous in the Assamese language), particularly to contrast themselves with the alleged 'infiltrators' (see the discussion of indigeneity in chapter 2).

The main thrust of my research was to understand contestations over the hill settlements and land in the city of Guwahati. However, discussions about the NRC and CAA started emerging in my fieldwork from December 2018, a time when protests against the CAA gathered force in Assam, with Guwahati as the epicentre. The debates over citizenship suddenly started to inform struggles over land and settlement rights. The

[12] https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/assam-government-not-5-3-anti-caa-protesters-killed-in-police-firing-2189223 (last accessed on 20 September 2020).

[13] Here 'mainland' India refers to the parts of India other than the Northeast. According to van Schendel (2015, 274) India's partition in 1947 generated the categories of 'mainland' and 'Northeast India' while establishing a 'novel relation' between them.

vocabulary of claim-making by the hill settlers began to be shaped by these larger political discourses, and the assertion of indigeneity became a key platform for asserting themselves as the rightful claimants to land and settlement rights – an entanglement that I explore in chapters 4 and 5.

Environmental issues

As the previous section shows, issues of identity and citizenship continue to be a critical dimension of the politics of Northeast India, which has evolved in new directions since the debates around the NRC and CAA. As a result, the older tensions persist while new conflicts are generated, leading to a 'durable disorder' (Baruah 2005). But recent scholarship has shifted focus to other key issues of Northeast India, such as migration (McDuie-Ra 2012; Kikon and Karlsson 2019), urbanization (McDuie-Ra 2016), border trade (Samaddar and Sengupta 2019), and social governance (Samaddar 2015). Karlsson (2019, 9) argues that scholarship on Northeast India should also extend to questions of environment, to explore how intersections between human and non-human beings have led to the evolution of the region's 'extremely rich and highly diverse biotopes'. Moreover, the natural resources of Northeast India have been a lucrative source of extraction by the state and private capital, interventions that have at times been contested (Samaddar and Mitra 2019).

During the post-independence period, especially since the 2000s, Northeast India has witnessed a renewal of environmental conflicts, particularly sustained opposition to power projects such as hydroelectricity and uranium mining (Baruah 2011; Karlsson 2011). Such protests in the region are often intertwined with identity politics, leading to new subject formations (Ajin 2020). The control over resources and their extraction has also led to debates between local communities and state agencies regarding jurisdiction and autonomy (Vandekerckhove and Suykens 2008).

Natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods have had a significant impact on socio-political discourses in Northeast India. For example, the dismissal of threats of specific ecological events, such as the *Mautam* (bamboo flowering leading to increase in rodent population causing famine) in the Lushai Hill District (now in Mizoram state) as unfounded local beliefs, led to catastrophic consequences. It also triggered the Mizo nationalist movement leading to the formation of the state of Mizoram (Nag 1999). In Western Assam's Bodoland (an autonomous area), environmental management strategies,

such as the cultivation of lemon, have reshaped the human-animal relationship while providing a viable livelihood option in a post-conflict society (Kikon and Barbora 2020).

Forest management by colonial and post-colonial authorities has played a significant role in the environmental politics of Northeast India. For example, the categorization of 'jungles' as reserved forests during the colonial period (1826 onwards) was one of the early policy decisions that restricted the use of forests by local people in Assam (Saikia 2008). Such forest policies curtailed livelihood practices such as shifting cultivation (Saikia 2011, 10; van Schendel, Mey and Dewan 2000). It also reduced settlement options for people living in areas close to the designated forests. However, poor people from different communities have often lived in, or made use of, reserved forests, while forests have also served as rehabilitation sites for victims of ethnic conflict (Dutta 2018). In the post-independence period, contestations around forest notifications and subsequent restrictions on the use of forests multiplied (Barbora 2008; Misra 2013). Examining the peasant movement for land rights in Assam, Saikia (2008) highlights the intense demands to de-notify forest lands so that they can be taken under cultivation.

In addition, debates around the environment are taking shape in the cities and towns of Northeast India, in different forms (Mahadevia, Bhatia and Bhatt 2018). In Guwahati, tensions have emerged over the production and control of authoritative environmental knowledge and its implications for people's everyday lives (Auyero and Swistun 2009). Because the hill settlements are alleged to cause environmental degradation in the forest as well as the city, examining the asymmetrical social consequences of such allegations will reveal the 'multiple framings of, and forms of knowledge about, nature and environmental change' (Rademacher 2015, 142).

Mapping the Struggles around the Hill Settlements of Guwahati

Guwahati is richly endowed with natural resources. Situated on the southern bank of Brahmaputra, the city and its vicinity include multiple wetlands and ponds. Bharalu and Bahini, two small rivers, flow through Guwahati and join the Brahmaputra River. However, mismanagement of the water bodies over the years has led to severe pollution, with allegations of encroachment and illegal landfills frequently emerging. The Bharalu River has turned into a slow-moving drain, blocking the waterways and causing floods in Guwahati during the monsoon. Despite being richly endowed with water bodies, Guwahati

is largely dependent on groundwater for domestic consumption, supplied through water tankers.

Figure 2. A view of Guwahati from a hilly terrain in Kailashnagar
Source: Photograph by the author

There are 18 hills within the municipal jurisdiction of Guwahati (see Figure 2). Kamakhya temple, arguably Guwahati's most famous landmark, is situated in the Nilachal Hill. Several hills include officially designated forest areas, some of which are home to elephants, leopards, wild boars, macaque and other wildlife species. In some hill settlements in southern Guwahati, elephants have been reported venturing close to human settlements where they invade gardens. Recently, the sighting of elephants in areas where they had not previously been seen has been attributed to the decreasing forest cover. In Nilachal Hill, leopards are frequently sighted, and at times they get trapped in houses and must be rescued by the Forest Department. Thus, the hills have become a series of isolated forested areas amidst a bustling metropolis (see Figure 3).[14]

Land governance on the hills

As urbanization gathered pace in Guwahati, the city's ecological and environmental frailties have increasingly come into focus. These become most evident during the monsoon

[14] Few cities in India have similar forest areas within their boundaries. One example is Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai, which has been at the centre of controversies over the eviction of informal settlements and land acquisition for infrastructure projects. See: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/supreme-court-hearing-on-aarey-tree cutting/article29614673.ece (last accessed on 25 September 2020).

season. The hill settlements are often blamed for deforestation and other environmental problems such as floods.[15] The issue of environmental protection has become entangled with land contestations since the 1990s. In Guwahati, the categorization of some of the land on the hills as forest land has generated contestations between the people living on the hills and state agencies. While areas were designated as forest areas during the colonial period, others were declared as Reserve Forest and Wildlife Sanctuary more recently due to pressure from environmental groups. (Amchang was made as a Wildlife Sanctuary only in 2017.) These steps have been followed by eviction drives carried out by the Forest Department, which usually meet with little success due to opposition from the settlers.

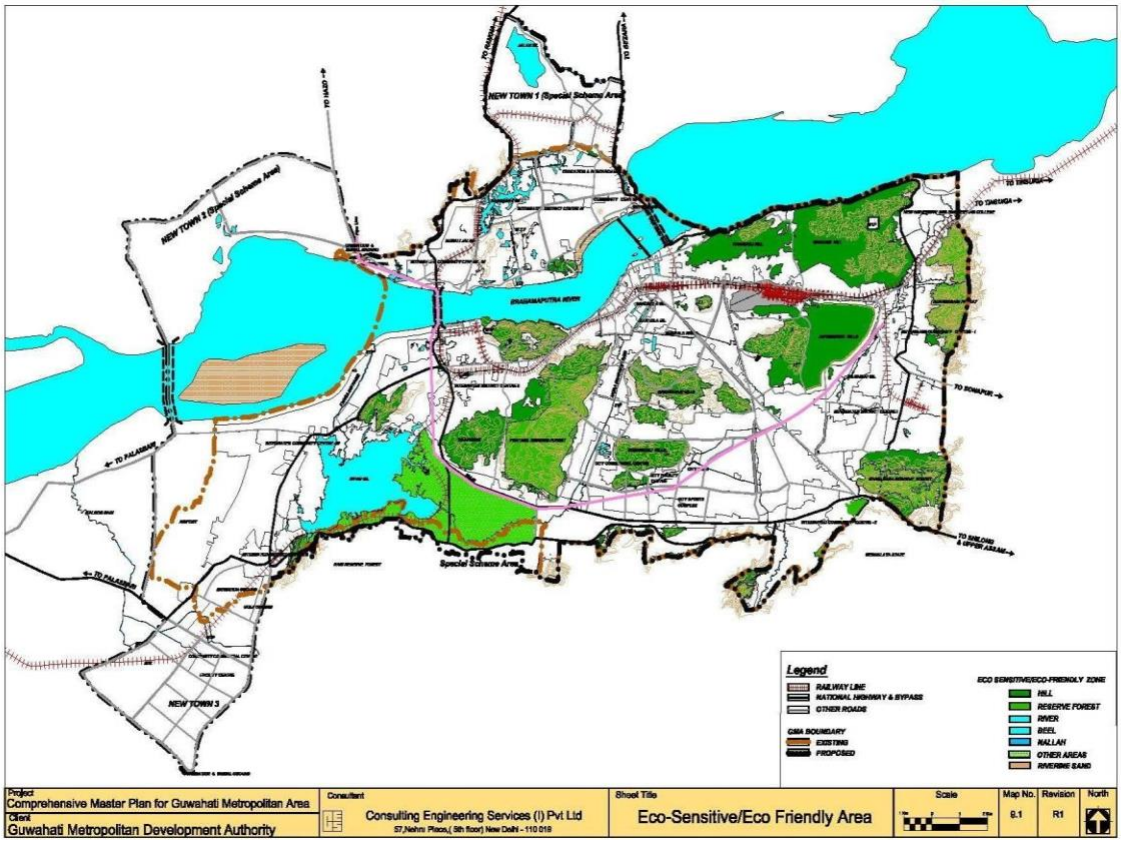

Figure 3. Map showing the existing (as of 2009) and proposed boundary of Guwahati Metropolitan Area along with the hill and Reserve Forest areas
Source: Eco-sensitive area, Master Plan Guwahati 2025 Maps, Guwahati Development Department 2009.[16] Image is in the public domain.

[15] See: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/houses-on-hills-cause-flash-floods-in-guwahati-himanta-biswa-sarma/story-9WT0HRQJEzMv6iMWIAEaAP.html (last accessed on 12 September 2020).

[16] https://gmda.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/gmda_webcomindia_org_oid_4/menu/document/9.1-Eco-Sensitive-Friendly.pdf (last accessed on 20 September 2021).

As I discuss in chapter 4, jurisdictional ambiguities in relation to land in the hills have led to conflicts between the Revenue Department[17] and the Forest Department. In Assam, there is a history of inter-departmental feuding between these departments regarding landless peasants settling in forest lands in the 1950s, during which the Revenue Department tried to assert its dominance over the Forest Department. The Forest Department gained some control over forested tracts after the Indian Forest Conservation Act was passed in 1980 (Saikia 2014, 294-295). The jurisdiction of the hills of Guwahati is also complicated by the fact that some of the land is Non-Cadastral[18] (*nonke* in colloquial Assamese), leading to conflicts regarding departmental control and individual ownership.

As noted above, during the colonial period Guwahati town was located on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra River. It later expanded southward till it encountered the hills which form a border between Assam and Meghalaya. As the municipal limits were periodically extended, some of the hills got incorporated administratively within the city. Concurrently, increasing migration led to a rapid growth in hill settlements. As more settlements started emerging in the hills, the jurisdiction over these areas became fuzzier, leading to multiple contestations (as I elaborate in chapter 4).

Key stakeholders

The thesis focuses on the hill settlements of Guwahati and their struggles to resist displacement. In addition to humans, the hills are home to non-human actors and forests. Environmental groups advocate the eviction of human settlements from the hills on the grounds of environmental protection and nature conservation. The settlers have mobilized against such measures under the banner of different organizations to assert their land rights. Because this is a long-standing and complicated conflict, before delving into details in the following chapters here I briefly lay out the key actors in this struggle.

[17] The Revenue Department in India is responsible for levying and collecting different kinds of taxes on products and services. As a legacy of the colonial period when taxes on land and agriculture were paramount, the Revenue Department continues to be responsible for recording and governing agricultural and other lands in rural areas. The Forest Department is responsible for the governance of 'forest land', but due to exigencies of history and administration, the boundaries between the two types of land are often quite fuzzy (Hull 2012).

[18] A Non-Cadastral area is one where a cadastral survey has not been carried out. The cadastral survey, the hallmark of the colonial land settlement system, determines extent, value, and ownership of different plots of land, especially for taxation purposes. The government would not conduct cadastral surveys in regions where people were highly mobile or where agriculture was of little value from a revenue point of view – leaving some 'non-cadastral' areas, especially in hilly regions.

Human inhabitants

The hills of Guwahati have long been a site of multiple livelihood activities (see Figure 4). The tribal people practised shifting and paddy cultivation on the hills till the 1980s. Even now, paddy is cultivated on Kalapani Hill (see chapter 4). The Karbi community engaged in orange cultivation in some areas.

Figure 4. Map showing wetland and hills in Guwahati
Source: Mishra *et.al* (2017). Image is in the public domain.

With the spatial expansion of the city, some tribal communities were displaced and began to settle on the hills. Although most settlements appear to date from the early post-independence period or later, some hill settlements (such as Kalapani) are over 200 years old. However, most hill settlements are only 50-60 years old. According to a study commissioned by the Guwahati Municipal Corporation in 2011, there are 65,892 households in the 16 hills of Guwahati. Out of them, 10,208 households are situated on Reserve Forest land and 40,121 households on government land (revenue land) other than Reserve Forest (AC Nielsen 2011). However, land rights activists of Guwahati give a much higher estimate of the number of households on the hills (Desai and Mahadevia 2014).

As noted above, the expansion of Guwahati over the years generated employment opportunities, making it the most important city in Northeast India. People from different parts of India, especially from the Northeast, migrated to Guwahati in search of livelihoods. Many of these migrants, especially those who are poor and depend on informal

sector activities for their livelihoods, settled on the hills to avoid having to pay rent for housing elsewhere in the city. A significant section of the hill settlers belongs to different tribal communities of Northeast India. Several hill settlements have been established along the lines of ethnic identities (such as Nepali, Bengali, or Manipuri). Bengali Muslims (colloquially known as *Miyas*) from Lower Assam and Mising from Upper Assam are two of the most prominent groups to migrate to Guwahati since the 1990s and settle in the hills.

One hill may have multiple settlements, depending upon the land available and the capacity of settlers to negotiate with local administrators and politicians to secure basic infrastructure (such as roads, electricity, and drinking water). The number of houses in each settlement ranges from 50 to 400. In many settlements, the people used their own labour to make the settlement suitable for habitations since there was no support from state agencies. In chapters 4 and 5, I describe how the hill settlements were formed and made habitable and how the settlers have asserted their rights as legitimate urban citizens.

Natural environment and non-human inhabitants

The main point of contention with regard to the hill settlements is their ecological significance in the view of the Forest Department and environmental groups (due the presence of green cover and wildlife). Environmental activists claim that until a few decades back, bison and tigers were sighted in Guwahati's peripheries, and they blame the hill settlements for the increasing conflicts between humans and wildlife. They also assert that Guwahati's floods are due to deforestation on the hills caused by human settlements. Contesting these claims, hill inhabitants say that there was barely any vegetation on the hills when they settled there, and they suspect corrupt government officials of cutting the trees to sell them for additional income. After building homes on the hills, they planted trees around their settlements and started rearing chickens, pigs and ducks. In the thesis I explore how 'nature' is constructed by these different actors in the midst of this conflict, and how their imaginations of the hills influence everyday practices and policy decisions.

State agencies

Several government departments are directly associated with governance in the hills of Guwahati. Most of the land on the hills falls under either the Revenue or the Forest Department. The creation of protected forest area (reserve forests and a wildlife sanctuary) on some of the hills have brought the Forest Department to centre stage in these conflicts around the hill settlements. The role of the Forest Department becomes most visible when

they object to the presence of human settlements which they regard as encroachments. However, settlers have alleged, and legal petitions have indicated, that the Forest Department has failed to demarcate the forest areas on the hill correctly, and that the misinterpretation of forest boundaries has led to evictions of settlements located in non-forest areas (such as on Revenue lands). Land-related claims and disputes are dealt with mainly by the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup (Metropolitan).[19]

Politicians and local representatives, such as the Municipal Councillor, Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), and Member of the Parliament (MP) for these areas, are also relevant actors in the struggle around land. Politicians at times facilitate development works in the hill settlements, such as road construction, water supply, and provision of ration and voter cards. Several of these representatives reportedly supported the settlers' claims to land rights, while others have been indifferent or opposed to the settlements.

Social and political organizations

Multiple political parties, advocacy groups, NGOs and civil society groups have been associated with the hill settlements over the years. As I discuss in chapter 3, several Left organizations have been active in the land politics of Assam since the 1940s, and in the late 1960s the Left led a major anti-eviction mobilization in Guwahati. Since the 1990s, the hill settlements have been key sites of political demands, negotiations and contestations by several social and political organizations. Multiple political parties, like the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), and the Congress Party, have been involved, either in favour of or against evictions. Civil society groups such as Mahanagar Unnayan Samiti (City Development Organization, hereafter MUS) were particularly influential in bringing the question of the hill settlements into the debates on Guwahati's development and linking it to other urban issues. Since the 2010s, Assam's foremost peasant organization, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (Farmers' Liberation Front, hereafter KMSS) has aggressively pursued land rights for the settlers and organized resistance to eviction drives (see chapter 5). In addition, several NGOs have been functioning in the hill settlements, mainly focusing on education and livelihood programmes. In particular, Youth Unity for Volunteer Action (YUVA) has a notable presence in the hill settlements and other informal settlements in Guwahati. In the

[19] Guwahati is situated in Kamrup (Metropolitan) district of Assam.

subsequent chapters, I explain how these different actors have influenced the politics and discourse around Guwahati's hills over the years.

Research Questions

The foregoing discussion provides the background and context of the contestations around the hill settlements of Guwahati. The main objective of the study was to understand these conflicts, especially those stemming from environmental concerns, and to document the counterclaims and strategies used by the hill settlers to resist attempts to evict them.

While pursuing fieldwork on these questions, I was led to trace the history of Guwahati's post-independence urban expansion and how it impacted the tribal people of the region. I began to draw linkages between Guwahati's earlier and current urban trajectories, both of which have had exclusionary effects on tribal and other marginalized groups. By combining fieldwork findings with archival data, I could develop a deeper understanding of the trajectory of urbanization in Guwahati and how tribal communities were dispossessed of their land over time. Based on these insights, I then focused on the legal, bureaucratic and juridical dimensions of governance of the Guwahati hills, which have given rise to conflicts and also influenced how the settlers have pressed their claims to land. Finally, led by my findings from research in the hill settlements, I widened the lens of the study to examine how the evolution of anti-eviction politics has been shaped by the politics of citizenship and indigeneity in Guwahati and more broadly at the regional and national scales.

The thesis describes and analyzes the politics of a particular category of urban informal settlements – hill settlements located within a large city but (in many cases) under the (often ambiguous) jurisdiction of the Forest Department. This situation has meant that the settlements are under constant threat of eviction, but the specificities of the settlements and their claims to indigeneity also provide them with political leverage to contest their displacement.

The main research questions I address in the thesis are:

1. How did informal settlements emerge on the hills of Guwahati in the context of rapid urbanization and migration post-independence?
2. How have different state agencies dealt with these informal settlements in the hills and on forest land?

3. Why have the hill settlements been subjected to eviction, and how have the settlers responded to attempts to displace them?
4. What strategies have the hill settlers employed to assert their rights to land and to claim legitimate urban citizenship?
5. How have residents of informal settlements in Guwahati mobilized politically against threats of eviction?

In the next section I describe the methodology employed for the study.

Methodology

The thesis is based on a combination of field and archival research. The methods are broadly located within the disciplinary framework of social anthropology, drawing on ethnographic methodological strategies. The methods used were mainly qualitative, including in-depth and open-ended interviews with the hill settlers, observations, and 'hanging around' in the field. I conducted semi-structured interviews with government officials and volunteers of environmental NGOs. In addition, I collected relevant official and unofficial documents from government offices, lawyers, activists, and other individuals. During fieldwork I mostly took running notes in my diary, while recording the conversation on some occasions, with the permission of the respondents. The notes were later typed up on the computer. In some instances, when I could not document the interaction in writing, I had to rely on my memory to write the field notes.

My initial research plan was to conduct ethnographic fieldwork along with relevant data collection. However, after spending some time in the field and interacting with academicians from different institutes and universities in Guwahati, I realized that to have a deeper understanding of Guwahati's recent history of urbanization I would need to explore the State Archives. In the archives, I came across helpful gazette notifications, Assembly debates, newspaper clippings and reports which provided valuable insights about Guwahati's planning trajectory over the decades since independence. Through research in the Assam State Archive and Assam State Library, I collected archival material on Guwahati's post-colonial urbanization and land movements in the 1960-70s.

Fieldwork and field sites

I conducted fieldwork in Guwahati from June 2018 to April 2019, mainly in the hill settlements of Guwahati that have faced the threat of eviction. Fieldwork was conducted mainly in seven hill settlements spread across four hills, as well as in several foothill settlements. I gained entry to these settlements as an 'outsider' through my connections at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Guwahati, where I completed my post-graduation studies. I was introduced to a network of activists, lawyers and social workers who have been involved with the hill settlements. These networks also provided opportunities to be present at engagements of this network with informal settlements of Guwahati, including an anti-eviction campaign in a Dalit colony.

Fieldwork in the settlements was primarily comprised of in-depth, open-ended interviews. I did not use a questionnaire, but conducted open-ended conversations focused on a few key themes relevant to the research. I asked my respondents questions such as where they came from, why they chose to settle on the hills, and how they did so. I also focused on the issues of eviction and insecure land tenure. From the tribal people, I enquired about their way of life and dwelling in the hills and their cultivation practices and lifestyles in their native places. With some respondents in Guwahati, I also explored how tribal inhabitants were marginalized as the city expanded.

I also interviewed several political and social activists about their involvement in anti-eviction movements. From interacting with lawyers, I learned about the complexities of land laws in Assam, which are mostly a legacy of colonialism. Social workers shared their experiences of intervening in the hill communities, which gave me an idea about the economic and demographic profile of the hill settlements. Interaction with government officials provided an overview of Guwahati's recent urban trajectory, especially policy changes, which alerted me to the numerous complications stemming from issues of inter-departmental coordination (or lack thereof). Finally, from interacting with officials of the Forest Department and environmental NGOs, I developed an understanding of their perspective on the issue of hill settlements.

In addition, I interacted with housing rights activists, members of political parties, peasant organizations, and tribal bodies to get an overview of the contestation of the hills of Guwahati. During the fieldwork period, Assam was going through a significant political upheaval over the update of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA). Several of my activist respondents were involved in these issues,

and I was often invited to political gatherings and seminars focused on the issue of citizenship in Assam. This exposure helped me to understand how the question of citizenship is essential in claims over land and resources in Northeast India, including my field site Guwahati.

Position as researcher: Ethical and political considerations

I entered my field sites as an 'outsider'. However, my earlier engagements with Guwahati allowed me to present myself as someone who was interested in understanding complex issues of governance and land in Guwahati. The networks through which I entered the field ensured that people trusted me enough to allow my presence in their settlements. My awareness of Guwahati's social history and Northeast India's intricate matrix of ethnic politics enabled me to interact with several ethnic groups.

While several prominent movements in Assam were directly or indirectly anti-Bengali, I did not face any issues because of my Bengali identity. This could be because I am from Kolkata, which suggests a privileged social position, and also because I have a good grasp of the Assamese language, which helped me to communicate. In the field, my identity as an upper caste Hindu (as indicted by my name) prompted some respondents to uninhibitedly blame Bengali Muslims for the immigration issues in Assam. While such incidents made me uncomfortable (as this view does not align with my personal politics), these conversations helped me to understand the importance of social identity and ethnicity in staking claims to land and resources in Assam.

While engaging with diverse actors in the struggles around the hills during my fieldwork, I had to either assume a neutral position or assure my interlocutors that I agreed with their positions, in order to secure access to the field. Given the political situation of Assam at the time, I avoided getting drawn into political debates, as I feared these discussions would compromise my ability to conduct research. Nonetheless, I had discussions with many people about politics.

In view of the sensitive nature of the research, I have used pseudonyms for all personal and some place names, except where the information conveyed is already in the public domain. This is to ensure the confidentiality, privacy and safety of my interlocutors. I have adhered to the ethics protocol approved by my institution in carrying out the fieldwork and have taken adequate steps to ensure that my work or writing does not put anyone at risk.

Challenges in the field and limitations of the research

As the research strategy was mainly ethnographic, I intended to spend a few days in each of the selected hill settlements to get a deeper understanding of the settlers' lives. During my earlier fieldwork in different parts of Assam, I was voluntarily hosted by villagers, and I had expected a similar reception in Guwahati. However, here I realized that the settlements which have faced eviction in the past are wary of outsiders visiting their settlements. Therefore, I had to employ my networks to access some of the settlements. When I expressed my desire to stay in the settlement for a few days, people were not very keen on the proposition. I realized that, besides their apprehension about an 'outsider' like me, this could be because most of the men of the settlement go out to work every day, leaving the women and children at home. I surmised that they may not be comfortable with my presence in the settlement under those circumstances.

The period when I was in the field in Assam was very intense politically, and there were numerous strikes which impeded the fieldwork. My interactions with government officials were limited to a few respondents since many were involved in NRC-related duties and they also had to prepare for the upcoming general elections.

Another challenge I faced, which limited the scope of my research, was that I was unable to interact with Bengali Muslim settlers on the hills. In several settlements, when I expressed interest in visiting the Bengali Muslim settlements, I was told that it is not safe to do so. My caste Hindu interlocutors stressed the doubtful citizenship status of Bengali Muslims as a source of danger. These warnings clearly reflected their biases rather than practical concerns for my safety. However, given the politically charged situation in Assam at the time, and my need to develop rapport with at least some settlements, I felt constrained to heed their advice and avoided visiting the Bengali Muslim settlements.

Despite these limitations, the thesis seeks to highlight how the conflicts over land and settlements in the hills have unfolded over time, detailing the ways in which the settlers make their settlements habitable and consolidate their control over land. By documenting the anti-eviction struggles in Guwahati with focus on the tribal hill settlers, the thesis explores how urbanization has had differential impacts and how ethnic and citizenship issues frame land politics in a growing city in South Asia.

* * *

In this chapter I have provided the salient background to the research problem and outlined the research questions and the methodology adopted for the study. I also set the context by briefly describing the history and key political and environmental issues of Northeast India, focusing on questions of identity and citizenship. In the next chapter, I discuss the literature relevant to the thesis.

Chapter 2

Contestations Around Informal Settlements in India and the Global South: Review of Literature

This chapter draws on several bodies of literature relevant to the study of land contestations on the hills of Guwahati. The thesis explores how the residents of informal settlements in a growing city in India assert their rights to land and housing against pressures of eviction from the state and environmental activists. To help interpret and theorize the empirical material, in the first section below I review literature drawn from postcolonial and critical urban studies on contestations around urban informal settlements. This body of work focuses on the constitution of urban informal settlements, the pressures to displace them, and how settlers mobilize against eviction. In the second section, I discuss the role of urban environmental politics in contestations around informal settlements and review key concepts from urban political ecology which contribute to my analysis of how environmental politics shapes the claims of different groups over urban spaces in Guwahati. The third section takes up questions of tribal identity and marginalization in India as well as the politics of indigeneity, especially in struggles around land in Northeast India.

Informal Settlements, Environmental Politics and the Urban Poor

In this section I review selective literature on recent urban transformations in the global south and struggles around informal settlements and land. Much of the scholarship has examined how urban landscapes have become deeply contested, as marginalized groups living in informal settlements come under ever-increasing threats of eviction and displacement, especially in the wake of the widespread adoption of neoliberal economic and urban policies by national and state governments. These contestations around urban land and space, and the increasing exclusion of the urban poor as urban land becomes more valuable, reveal the contradictions of urban development in the global south. This

literature also demonstrates how the urban poor stake claims to the city through varied and often unanticipated strategies.

As postcolonial cities face significant challenges of providing adequate and affordable housing for urban residents, especially recent migrants, the poor and marginalized groups are forced to live in informal settlements (such as 'slums' or *bastis* in mainland Indian cities, *vengs* in towns of Mizoram in Northeast India, *favellas* in Brazilian cities), characterized by poor housing, lack of adequate facilities and access to services, and insecure land tenure (Caldeira 2017; Kamath 2012, 2020). Such informal settlements coexist with modern and globalized urban spaces, leading to market induced displacement and further social segregation (Harms 2016a; Ren 2018). The demand by real estate developers for land in prime locations to build luxury houses aimed at the affluent classes has also put pressure on informal settlements (Khurana and Beier 2022; Searle 2016; Shatkin 2008).

However, it is not only the economic logics of neoliberal urbanization (Goldman 2021) that exacerbate inequalities and exclusions – southern cities have long been spatially segregated on the basis of caste, race, religion and other social markers, especially through the operations of colonial urban planning regimes (Doshi 2012; Ranganathan 2021). Indian cities were divided into 'planned' and 'illicit' spaces, creating institutionalized informality as a mode of urban planning and governance (Blomley 2008; Roy 2009). This strategy served the dual role of facilitating capital accumulation and controlling (mainly Dalit) migrant labour (Chhabria 2019; Shaikh 2021). Across South Asia, the residential segregation of cities along caste, religious, and ethnic lines have restricted marginalized groups to areas with fewer amenities and poor infrastructure, where they are subjected to greater risks of pollution, disasters, and other vulnerabilities (Batra 2017; Desai, McFarlane, and Graham 2014; Zeiderman 2013). As a result, such groups mostly live in various kinds of informal settlements, which are often officially designated as 'slums'.

This pattern of spatial segregation is reflected in contemporary urban politics, struggles around land and settlement rights and contestations around planning, often reinforcing exclusions based on caste (Ranganathan 2021), religion (Doshi 2012), or allegations of illegal immigration (Ghertner 2013). Such examples illustrate that urban inequalities often reflect other categories of inequality based on systematic and asymmetrical power structures (Pulido 2017; Safransky 2014).

In the next section, I discuss how environmental concerns have become central to debates on informal settlements by focusing on how aspirations for 'clean and green' cities have exacerbated processes of 'exclusionary urbanization' (Kundu 2009).

Urban environmental politics and exclusions in southern cities

In addition to the spatial manifestations of economic and social injustice, megacities of the global south embody 'ecological apartheid and social apartheid' (Dawson and Edwards 2004, 6). Informal settlements tend to be equated with pollution and dirt and are regarded as an unruly presence in city landscapes. On the one hand, informal settlements are inadequately serviced, making them degraded sites; and on the other hand, they are accused by urban elites and governing institutions of disrupting the city's development and 'global' image by engaging in unsanitary, unhygienic practices. Rademacher (2009), for example, probes how housing becomes framed as an environmental problem in Kathmandu through shifting ideologies of belonging, morality, and governance that animate urban environmental anxieties. Broadly, this body of scholarship examines how experiences, ideas and notions of environment can generate exclusions in cities of the global south (Harms 2016a; Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan 2013, 12). A key dimension of such exclusion are elite desires for 'clean, green and beautiful' cities (Ghertner 2015; Harms 2016b, 51). In Guwahati as well, the conflict around the hill settlements has broadly been generated by the environmental concerns of the urban middle classes, NGOs and the state (Mahadevia, Bhatia and Bhatt 2018).

Across the world, environmental protection and urban greening interventions have become central to addressing concerns about the sustainability and climate resilience of cities (Connolly *et al.* 2018). Such measures are supposed to benefit citizens and protect environmentally sensitive areas, built infrastructure and settlements (Wachsmuth and Angelo 2018). However, such projects – especially in the global south – tend to ignore urban tensions, contradictions, and trade-offs between different social groups (Quastel 2009). The implicit assumption of 'green' trickle-down has been critiqued on the grounds that most greening initiatives do not apply an equity lens to ensure that they 'benefit all residents and, in particular residents and communities who are historically vulnerable to environmental racism, displacement, or both' (Anguelovski *et al.* 2020, 1744). Greening interventions in cities often lead to exclusionary outcomes through 'green gentrification', such as dispossession and other environmental injustices (Pearsall 2012; Safransky 2014). In addition, in countries like India, the middle-class desire for 'clean, green and beautiful'

cities has deepened the exclusion of the urban poor living in informal settlements. Here, more than a concern for urban 'nature', a normative sense of aesthetics espoused by urban elites to achieve 'world class' status – what Amita Baviskar (2003, 90) terms 'bourgeoisie environmentalism' – influences governing decisions.

Several scholars have highlighted the intersections between environmental politics and debates about informal settlements and housing for the urban poor. Often, informal settlements (or 'slums') are viewed by elite residents, urban planners and government officials as detrimental to the environment, both biophysical and social,[20] and their presence is therefore framed as an environmental problem (Baviskar 2020; Coelho and Raman 2013). In India, the urban elite and middle classes have invoked legal and institutional structures to facilitate the erasure of informal settlements – popularly regarded as dirty and polluting – particularly from the vicinity of their residences (Bhan 2009; Doshi 2019; Ghertner 2015). The equation between pollution, perceived unsanitary practices, diseases, and slums has a longer, colonial genealogy (Anderson 1995), which was manifested in the segregationist policies of town planning practices that relegated marginalized groups to peripheral or separate geographies (Chhabria 2019).

In the contemporary period, slums have been deemed a 'nuisance' and targeted for removal and rehabilitation, usually on the edges of the city. Ghertner (2013, 250) shows how in Delhi, slums are associated with 'dirt' and viewed as 'deviant zone of criminality and defilement' by the residents of middle-class housing complexes, who mount a moral argument in favour of their eviction. This perspective has translated into lawsuits demanding the clearance of the slums based on arguments about citizens' rights to well-being and environmental protection. In addition, where the urban poor have settled on ecologically sensitive spaces such as riverfronts or hillsides, the logic of environmental protection drives demands for evictions (Rademacher 2009). Environmental improvement projects thus serve as the moral trope for the dominant groups to sanitize and claim urban spaces for their own benefit by excluding marginalized groups.

In the context of cities, 'environment' can mean two different (but often interconnected) things. The first is biophysical nature, or 'urban nature' (Rademacher 2015, 138), understood as urban ecosystems including human presence and social processes (Pickett & Cadenasso 2006). The second is the 'environment' as experienced by residents, where biophysical nature is shaped by 'spatial configurations, social experiences, and claims

[20] The word *mahaul* in Hindi captures the dimensions of the environment in which one finds oneself, signifying an assemblage of sensorial experiences of a place, including visual, olfactory and aural.

to power embedded in the socio-natural processes' that operate in dense human settlements such as in cities (Rademacher 2015, 139). The politics of this experiential environment is shaped by the differential capacity of different groups to negotiate and/or enforce their vision of a given space. For example, much of the moral positioning of the urban middle class and elites is based on often-unquestioned notions of what is desirable for the environment, leading them to support exclusionary planning orthodoxies or improvement projects (such as 'greening' interventions') meant to create 'smart' and sustainable cities (Kaika 2017; Wolch, Byrne and Newell 2014). Scholars of urban environmental politics argue that an understanding of such politics must be grounded in 'regional environmental and social processes', which vary from one site to another (Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan 2013, 8). From a methodological perspective, ethnographic analyses foreground the 'social life of environmental knowledge, perception, and problem definition in cities' (Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan 2013, 9).

Struggles around informal settlements have emerged as a critical site to explore how governing logics and subject formations (of urban planners, voters, dwellers, identity) intersect to generate myriad forms and outcomes of environmental politics in southern cities.[21] In the thesis, I highlight how environmental concerns and discourses of illegality are used to label the hill settlements in Guwahati as impediments to rational urban planning and the well-being of citizens, even as environmentally damaging elite projects are allowed to go forward. This biased logic of urban planning and governance is of course seen in other Indian cities as well (Roy 2014).

However, environmental agendas do not always generate opposition from marginalized groups, especially when they anticipate long-term benefits from such projects such as the possibility of securing formal land rights or better housing. Slum residents may support pro-environment agendas, depending on the political context, to demand access to land and substantive citizenship rights (Elinoff 2014; Rademacher 2011). Doshi (2018, 114) argues that analyzing environmental subject formation is key to understanding how the politics of displacement relates to greening interventions, which in turn requires an understanding of 'histories, institutions and territorial logics of postcolonial development and urbanization'. A close examination of environmental politics in cities reveals how various environmental ideologies, espoused by different groups, co-produce urban socioecological outcomes through conflicts and alliances (Ettlinger and Bose 2020).

[21] See Datta (2012), Doshi (2017), Meehan and Strauss (2015), Sultana (2011).

Several scholars have drawn on the theoretical framework of urban political ecology as a framework to analyze how urban social and environmental transformations takes place in tandem, by attending to the multi-scalar changes (such as globalization) and peoples' lived experience. Urban political ecology brings into focus the inherently environmental character of the urban landscape and how it is formed through human agency mediated by social and cultural constructs and political structures (Rademacher & Sivaramakrishnan 2013, 15; Robbins 2012, 72; Sivaramakrishnan 1999, 282). As Anguelovski *et al*. (2020) argue, initiatives for environmental and ecological improvement, in both cities and countryside, are deeply political projects. According to Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan (2013, 10), an urban political ecology lens applied to Indian cities should attend particularly to social stratification and uneven urban experiences emanating from structural inequalities.

Within urban political ecology studies, a key concern has been the inequitable nature of environmental policies and practices in southern cities. For instance, state planning agencies often promote 'clean and green cities' and luxurious living to attract investments (Anguelovski *et al*. 2020). But Doshi (2013) argues that exuberantly advertised government projects such as '*Swacch Bharat'* ('Clean India') have been responsible for perpetuating the displacement, dispossession and neglect of the urban poor, thereby consolidating their marginality. The neoliberal focus on securing returns from private investments, together with weak urban governance, has facilitated capital accumulation for the elite while dispossessing the urban poor as impediments to environmental improvement plans. Thus, 'greening' initiatives, despite being framed as universally beneficial, often lead to 'ecological gentrification' in the global north (Dooling 2019, 629-631; also see Checker 2011) and forcible evictions in the global south (Anjaria 2009; Coelho and Raman 2013; Ghertner 2011, 2013, 2015). Anna Zimmer (2015, 590) argues that it is particularly vital to focus on the postcolonial experience of cities through an urban political ecology lens, to acknowledge the complex questions of identity, subjectivity and social relations which manufacture pluralities of urban imaginaries and experiences through inclusion and exclusion. Such a framework helps to interrogate how the claimed benefits of environment improvement and greening projects in cities parsed out among the different population groups depending on how the interventions are deployed (Wachsmuth and Angelo 2018). Environmental inequities in Indian cities are broadly an outcome of exclusionary practices such as denial of housing or infrastructure, social discrimination and other indignities (Dutt 2019; Valmiki 2003; Yengde 2019).

In the Indian context, members of the lowest caste groups (Dalits), tribals and minorities are often relegated to the most environmentally degraded as well as precarious spaces in cities, only to be targeted as 'encroachers' when their land is required for environmental or infrastructure projects. Marginalized groups are often located disadvantageously, whether within the city or in the peripheries, where they are subjected to vulnerable and polluted landscapes and often involved in hazardous and stigmatized labour (Bullard 1983; Gidwani 2015; Reddy 2021). Based on her work in Bangalore, Ranganathan (2021) argues that caste-based discriminations embedded in ecological narratives provide legal grounds for slum evictions.

Unequal power relations between different groups generate diverse views and ideas about how a city space should be governed, resulting in 'politics of imaginaries' (Burnham *et al.* 2017). In the cities of the global south, one finds constant battles and negotiations between the 'conservation ecology' perspective (green spaces, afforestation, open spaces) and a 'political ecology' approach (the claims of poor and marginalized groups to housing, settlement rights and livelihoods). Thus, the political formation of environmental subjects is central to the analysis of urban environmental discourses (Agrawal 2005). This discussion suggests that the urban political ecology framework can contribute by understanding how social, cultural and political life is experienced in cities in relation to non-human life and the physical or natural environment. By prioritizing the needs of marginalized groups and addressing durable inequalities, cities can be more just and inclusive (Anguelovski *et al.* 2020).

As discussed above, Indian cities have witnessed multiple contestations around rights to land and space. Economic and planning rationalities advanced by elite groups are often countered by the urban poor invoking moral and political claims, resulting in a diverse set of negotiations, contestations and debate. These struggles are discussed in more depth in the next section.

Negotiating Informality, Claiming Settlement Rights

In response to the diverse pressures on urban informal settlements discussed above, the urban poor have often pushed back against the threat of eviction and created spaces for themselves through diverse strategies (Caldeira 2015; Holston 2008, 2009). One such strategy is to negotiate with local power brokers to maintain and consolidate their settlement and tenurial rights. As electoral subjects, slum residents become important

constituencies for the contenders in local municipal politics, which may allow them to oppose the planning agendas of the municipal, state or national governments (Weinstein 2013). However, invoking political patronage at the local and municipal levels has certain limitations, as larger planning discourses can overturn existing political arrangements and (often tacit or unsaid) agreements between slum residents and politicians.

In his work on Bangalore, Benjamin (2008) uses the concept of 'occupancy urbanism' to connote how poor groups access public services and enhance land tenure security by forming complex alliances with governance stakeholders such as politicians. Benjamin notes that such 'vote bank politics' enable citizenship claims beyond the 'rule of law' and that it 'structures civil representation' (2008, 720). Following Massey (2005), Benjamin argues that an ethnographic exploration of land (rather than economy) shows how the politics of marginalized groups can counter macro-narratives of developmentalism promoted by the metropolitan elite.

Studies from other Indian cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Calcutta show that urban planning and legal regimes often engage in quotidian negotiations with informal settlements and practices, revealing the significant gap between institutional agendas and urban realities (Anjaria 2011; Doshi and Ranganathan 2016; Gandhi 2012). People living in informal settlements constantly interact with the state and the legal apparatus, given that informality 'is inscribed in the ever-shifting relationship between what is legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorized and unauthorized' (Roy 2009, 80; also see Benjamin and Raman 2011; Bunnell and Harris 2012; McFarlane 2008). Bayat (2000) uses the concept of 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' to describe the practices of the urban poor to create spaces for themselves. While 'encroachment' can be an individual affair, Bayat shows that threats of eviction may lead to collective action of resistance and negotiation.

Chatterjee (2004, 38), in analyzing the politics of the urban poor in Calcutta, formulated his well-known differentiation between 'civil society' (as the domain of 'proper citizens') and 'political society' (the domain of 'only tenuously rights-bearing citizens'), viewed as a 'population' for the state to govern. However, Holston (2009) contends that governmentality and citizenship are not opposed, as suggested by Chatterjee, but are overlapping conditions. He notes that in Brazilian cities, both the poor and the rich depend on the 'misrule of law' to occupy land, while the urban poor also engage with the law to legitimize their land claims (Holston 2008, 228).

Multiple examples from different cities across the global south show that 'informality' and 'illegalities' in claiming land and space are not confined to slums – both

the rich and poor may bypass the law in pursuit of their interests, often involving corruption, negotiation, and calibrated deregulation (Roy 2009, 2011; Doshi and Ranganathan 2016). However, the informality of the poor is frequently targeted and criminalized, whereas unauthorized constructions or violations of building codes by the urban elite go unpunished or are celebrated as acts of necessary development that will graduate the city into the category of 'world class' (Ghertner 2008, 2013; Harms 2014).

Such exclusionary governance and planning strategies often generate spatial segregation and inequalities targeting marginalized groups such as Muslims, lower castes and Adivasis[22] (Vithyathil and Singh 2012). Across the world, less developed or well serviced areas of the city are occupied mainly by people from historically marginalized groups, such as Blacks in the US and Dalits in India (Ranganathan 2018; Ranganthan and Bratman 2019). These groups have often been relegated to informal settlements, sometimes through deliberate policies, as noted above. These exclusions have significant parallels with the marginalization of tribal and indigenous groups in India (discussed in the following section). Cháirez-Garza *et al.* (2022) contend that racial difference underlines the preservation of the 'Hindu nationalist, casteist and colonial' projects, which thrive on the subjugation and deprivation of the racialized others, including Adivasis and other tribals, Dalits and minority groups. This discrimination is also reflected in the ecological and spatial configuration of cities (Blomley 2004; Ranganathan 2021). Scholars have examined how opposition to extractive and discriminatory development projects have been organized along the lines of intersectional and ethnic identities (Coffey and Spears 2017; Kikon 2019). In this context, Doshi (2012, 2) questions the notion of a singular subaltern subjectivity, arguing that different groups negotiate in different ways to claim or affirm settlement rights through 'dynamic articulations of class, ethno-religious, and gender inequalities and differences' (also see Gidwani 2006; Roy 2011). In this thesis, I show how demands for land on the hills of Guwahati are articulated as legitimate claims of the indigenous people of Assam which flow from their tribal identity (discussed further below).

The protests and insurgencies that have arisen from urban inequalities may reflect a radical urban politicization, but at times also depoliticization marked by the rise of nativist politics (Swyngedouw 2018). This means that demands of rights and entitlements in cities are differentiated according to social categories and hierarchies (e.g., religious identity, economic class, citizenship). Where demands for housing by some groups are met by

[22] Adivasi is the currently accepted term for tribal groups in India, apart from the Northeast.

excluding others, alliances formed to make collective demands may break down (Anand and Rademacher 2011, 1768). While it is possible for people living in informal settlements to formulate strategies to maintain and consolidate their tenurial and settlement rights (Bhan 2016; Krishna, Rains, and Wibbels 2020), where residents lack social and political leverage, they are likely to lose their claims to urban land (Mahadevia, Bhatia and Bhatt 2018; Upadhya and Rao 2022).

In the following chapters, I show how demands for land and settlement rights and anti-eviction protests in Guwahati have become fractured along ethnic and other identity divisions, generating differential claims and politics over the 'right to the city' (Harvey 2008). I examine how people living in informal settlements move beyond demanding secure land tenure as electoral subjects, instead deploying their national citizenship in alignment with regional and national politics to make claims to urban space. Such claims then leave out those other groups (religious and linguistic minorities) that are the targets of such politics. To help contextualize the politics of these struggles, in the following section I briefly review literature on the historical displacement and assertions of tribal groups in India and in the Northeast.

Displacement and Marginalization of Tribal Communities in India

Following India's independence, development projects that were undertaken across the country in the pursuit of economic progress and modernization often led to the displacement and dispossession of tribal communities that inhabit resource-rich geographies. Tribal lands were extensively acquired by the government to set up industries, mines, dams and other such projects (Balagopal 2007; Fernandes 2008; Kothari 1996). Between 1947 and 2000, an estimated 60 million people were displaced or otherwise affected by development projects, out of which 40 per cent belonged to the Scheduled Tribes (listed in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution) while 20 per cent each belonged to Dalit (Scheduled Caste) and OBC (Other Backward Classes) groups (Fernandes 2007, 203). According to Fernandes (2007), India's poor record of rehabilitation of evictees is stems from the fact that 80 per cent of project-affected people come from marginalized backgrounds and so are relatively voiceless. The 29th Report of the Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Tribes notes that although tribal people constitute roughly 7.5 per cent of the population, over 40 per cent of those displaced up

to 1990 belonged to these communities (Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Tribes 1990).

At the same time, concern for the welfare of the tribal population was inscribed in the Indian Constitution, which enjoins the state to 'promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and [to] protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation (GOI 1978, 4, cited in Baviskar 1995, 80). The Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution were created to address the welfare and development of these groups, including preventing the alienation of their land. The Fifth Schedule applies to tribal groups across most of India, while tribal groups in the Northeast are listed in the Sixth Schedule.

Since the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950, several provisions have been added to promote self-governance by tribal groups to protect their interests. In the Northeast, the Autonomous District Council (ADC) system functions in the Sixth Schedule areas (Misra 2012), while since 2014 rural areas coming under the Fifth Schedule are included under the Provision of Panchayat Extension in Scheduled Areas (P-PESA) Act through a constitutional amendment (Manish 2014). Laws to prevent the alienation of tribal lands to non-tribals have long existed in several regions, but such protective mechanisms have had little impact (Xaxa 2021). Under British colonial rule, several tribal regions formed the Non-Regulated Tract, signifying that laws enacted at the central and provincial levels would not be applicable in such areas. Special laws, such as the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, were also promulgated to provide protections and relative autonomy to tribal-dominated regions.

As a legacy of colonial governance practices and anthropology, 'tribes' in India have historically been considered inferior to Hindu caste groups (Bates 1995, 234), positioning them at the bottom of the social hierarchy as 'backward' and requiring state patronage to progress to the level of other groups (Kikon 2021; Xaxa 2005). As a result, the views and interests of the tribes were barely acknowledged when decisions were made about developmental activities in tribal geographies. This neglect and subjugation have led some tribal groups to develop 'disruptions', in multiple ways, against the state – at times in the form of insurgent movements or in alliance with class-based radical Left groups. Tribal people have responded to forces of development that are detrimental to their livelihoods in different ways, ranging from violent insurgencies (e.g., the Maoist movement in central

and eastern India) to social movements against displacement (such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan in western India).

Rather than constitutional provisions and laws, protests and political action have been more successful in countering the dispossession of tribal people in India. Chandra's (2013) study of how Adivasis in Jharkhand have resisted modern state power illustrates how 'everyday shrewdness and canny use of customary arrangements' can be efficient strategies to ward off threats of displacement. Exploitative activities of the state and private capital have also provoked violent Maoist insurgency in eastern and central India, challenging the authority of the Indian state (Kennedy and Purushottam 2012; Mahadevan 2012; Mukherjee 2018). Chandra (2013) argues that Adivasi subjects can feign marginal status to make claims on the state and civil society while also fitting the colonial stereotype of being blood-thirsty savages (Bates and Shah 2012). Such tropes have formed crucial elements in the negotiation between the tribes and the state in India. However, the scale of tribal land alienation varies across regions. Compared to other parts of India, tribals in Northeast India have relatively more autonomy and control over the governance of their territory and land, and questions of autonomy, self-rule and neglect by the central government have been more central to the tribal political discourse in Northeast India. Xaxa (2021) points out that legal protections have had less impact in Ranchi (in eastern India) compared to Shillong (in the Northeast).

Most of the literature on tribal displacement and land alienation concerns groups living in rural and forested areas, whereas the issue of tribal marginalization and dispossession is not generally associated with urban spaces. However, the emergence of urban settlements and cities in tribal geographies (Kumar and Barik 2021) means that urbanization may also lead to displacement. Several recent studies have explored implications for these communities as tribal lands have been incorporated into urban spaces in India. Examining the growth of Naya Raipur and Belgaria, Spacek (2019, 86) argues that historically produced peripheral spaces are being integrated into the global political economy through state mediation which often involves violent displacement and dispossession. Kumar and Barik (2021) contend that although 'urban indigenous geographies'[23] exist in the city of Ranchi, the pattern of socio-spatial clustering has left the indigenous tribals in a disadvantageous position, creating a pattern of spatial exclusion

[23] 'Urban indigenous geographies' refers to the emergence of urban centres in areas inhabited mainly by indigenous people. In such cases, urban space and tribal identity cannot be dissociated since the inhabitants are not immigrant settlers but native to the place (Kumar and Barik 2021).

through segregation. Such socioeconomic inequalities result in concentrations of deprivation and weak integration into the economy (Nijman and Wei 2020, cited in Kumar and Baraik 2021, 146). In such urban spaces that have emerged in tribal geographies, tribals -- who were primarily engaged in agrarian and land-based livelihoods – find it difficult to sustain themselves due to their relegation to the lowest levels of the urban informal economy. The intrusion of the urban economy into tribal spaces, and the in-migration of other groups as cities expand, set in motion processes wherein tribal lands are alienated (often illegally) to non-tribals and agricultural lands are converted to non-agricultural purposes (Sharan 2005). As I discuss in the following chapter, Guwahati similarly expanded at the expense of tribal lands.

In Guwahati, we see many of the issues discussed in this chapter operating across time and spatial scales, where the tribal inhabitants were largely ignored as the city expanded in their territories. The presence of a 'tribal belt' within the proposed Master Plan of Guwahati evoked opposition from middle-class upper-caste Hindus, revealing how racialization is integral to governance practices and maintaining, exacerbating social hierarchies (Goldberg 2002).

Struggles over land and resources have been a key component of the social and political discourse in Northeast India, one that has been often tied with questions of identity, ethnicity and citizenship. I briefly discuss some of these issues in the next section, with a focus on Assam, to provide some background to the discussion of land conflicts in Guwahati in subsequent chapters.

Politics of Land, Identity and Indigeneity in Northeast India

Following independence, most parts of Northeast India were administered under the state of Assam, and the tribal majority regions were governed as Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). As mentioned above, the Sixth Schedule was implemented in the Northeastern states to protect the interests of the tribals. However, the functioning of the ADCs in Assam frequently faced roadblocks as the Governor did not approve many of the bills passed by the ADC of Assam. Electorally, the tribal areas were not very significant in the Assam State Assembly, and the state government often ignored the concerns of the tribal majority areas. For example, the appeals by the people of Lushai Hill District (present-day Mizoram) to take measures against the *mautam* (famine caused by bamboo flowering) were dismissed by the officials of the Assam Government as mere superstitions of the ignorant

tribals. This condescending attitude of the Assam government led to the Mizo Nationalist Uprising, demanding autonomy in varying degrees over and resulting in the formation of the state of Mizoram (Nag 1999). Leaders from mainland India, including caste Hindu leaders from Assam, were also dismissive of calls for tribal autonomy and self-governance during the Constituent Assembly debates (Sundar 1997, 185).

The re-organization of Northeast India in 1971 created the new states of Manipur and Tripura (earlier Union Territories) and carved the state of Meghalaya and Union Territories of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh out of Assam. However, the creation of tribal-majority states was not driven by a genuine concern for tribal interests, but more by geopolitical concerns in a borderland region. As a result, tribal people were allowed political control although it benefited a group of elites rather than the majority of the tribal people. As a result, development indicators of Northeast Indian states, such as those related to education and health, are mostly below the national average with a few exceptions (Samaddar and Mitra 2019). It could be argued that because political power was held by tribal groups, relatively less land alienation took place in the Northeast compared to eastern and central India. However, even within Northeast India, tribals in Assam (a non-tribal-dominated state) have faced challenges around access to land and livelihoods due to development projects (Fernandes and Bharali 2011; Hussain and Phanjoubham 2007; Rajkhowa *et al*. 2018). The pattern of displacement and dispossession in Guwahati, discussed in the following chapter, illustrates how a process of de-tribalization accompanied urban expansion. To contextualize the land issues of Guwahati, a closer understanding of how land and identity form two key political tropes in Northeast India will be helpful.

In Northeast India, the demographic transition during the colonial and postcolonial periods has made ethnicity and identity very sensitive issues, particularly regarding the Bengali (both Muslim and Hindu) population that arrived from erstwhile East Bengal (later East Pakistan until 1971) after Partition and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Moreover, the reluctance of several ethnic groups (such as Naga and Mizo) to accept Indian sovereignty has created uneven and fraught relations between the central government and different communities in Northeast India. The Indian state has largely relied on heavily militarized interventions to put down such aspirations of self-rule. The militarized regime has severely curtailed the civilian space in the region, which has also exacerbated the low level of development (Barbora 2002). In addition to the conflicts between the Indian state and different ethno-nationalist groups, several ethnic groups have

engaged in violent encounters both physical and structural in nature (Kimura 2005; Roy 2016). In a multi-ethnic region, one group's relationship with another is mediated by a range of factors, including narratives and histories of migration, colonial constructions of spatial order, creation of administrative areas based on the demands of particular groups (state, district, autonomous council), and the recognition of ethnic groups as tribe (inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes list) (Baruah 2008). In several cases, the concession of some degree of autonomy to a particular ethnic group generates exclusionary policies and practices towards the minority ethnic groups in the region, or a form of majoritarianism.

Apart from conflicts based on ethnic differences, alternative sovereignty and identity, conflicts over resources – particularly land – have been a central feature of the socio-political discourse of Northeast India (Fernandes and Barbora 2008). Tribal land alienation in the region is a contentious issue, as tribal people have faced displacement due to multiple factors such as development projects, refugee rehabilitation, and reservation of forests (Chowdhury and Kipgen 2013; DebBarma 2009; Hussain 2008; Sangma 2008). Thus, preserving the control by tribes over the land and landscape of Northeast India has been a central issue for several political parties, student bodies and ethnonational groups, which have adopted a range of strategies to protect tribal interests by demanding limits to the entry of outsiders to curtailing the property rights of women if they marry someone outside their tribe (Lalmalsawmi 2019; Wahlang and Karlsson 2022). In addition, since tribals areas coming under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules restricts non-tribals from buying land, demands for the designation of new groups (such as Ahom, Moran, Muttock, Mech) as Scheduled Tribes are intrinsically tied to the land question.

Although contemporary land politics in Northeast India is closely tied to ethnic political discourses, it must be noted that Left and Communist groups mobilized around land-based issues during the colonial and the early postcolonial period around the category of class. Redistribution of land amongst the landless peasants was a major demand of the Left-led peasant politics in Assam, which also called for the occupation of forest lands and the granting of cultivation rights (Saikia 2016, 332). During the early 1950s, when a food crisis affected large parts of Western Assam, left organizations like the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) mobilized peasants to raid the granaries of landlords (Saikia 2014, 251). The Assam Agitation of the late 1970s marked the beginning of the dominance of identity politics in the region, shrinking the space for left-oriented politics.

As I show in the thesis, the identity-oriented politics in contemporary Northeast India often leads groups to highlight their indigeneity to validate their claim. In her work

on indigenous politics in the south Indian state of Kerala, Steur shows how disenchantment with the ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its policies of benevolent paternalism led to the assertion around a politics of indigeneity the Adivasis (Steur 2011). Across different geographies and periods, both Steur (2011, 2017) and Saikia (2014) argue that the political Left failed to recognize the changing dynamics of peoples' aspirations, the changing response of the government to the peasants' issues, and the structural power relations that generated marginality for specific groups.

Tribal groups of Northeast India have widely invoked the category of indigeneity to claim political power and agency as well as in contestations around land. Fuzzy policies over the years toward migrants from today's Bangladesh has lent a sharp edge to the social category of 'indigenous' in Assam, leading to exclusionary practices towards those who are categorized as outsiders and non-indigenous. and exposing the 'dark side' of indigenism (Shah 2007). The promulgation of new citizenship policies in Northeast India since 2014 has further consolidated the political leverage of being indigenous in Northeast India. As I show in the thesis, this politics has become deeply enmeshed in struggles around land and claims to urban space.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have reviewed literature that illustrates the diverse ways in which contestations around informal settlements have taken shape in cities of the global south and especially in India. I have provided some background on tribal struggles around land and the politics of indigeneity in India, and then elaborated on how identity and ethnic issues get enmeshed in the politics of land struggles in Northeast India. These studies highlight how the urban has been an exclusionary spatial terrain, perpetuated by processes of capital accumulation and middle-class aesthetic sensibilities. While postcolonial cities have long been socially segregated, recent environmental politics have exacerbated the exclusion and precarity of poor groups and informal settlements.

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, the displacement and marginalization of the urban poor in Indian cities broadly reflects and reproduces existing social divisions, stemming from historically rooted exclusionary practices. Similarly, in the following chapters I show how the logic of urban planning and environmental rationality has targeted the tribal groups in Guwahati across different time periods. But the story is not simply one of exclusion or displacement. As the literature discussed above demonstrate, urban poor

groups may contest threats to their settlements in different and often unanticipated ways (such as by invoking identity, citizenship, or socio-cultural idioms), disrupting the planned trajectory of urban development.

In what follows, I show that in the case of the hill settlements of Guwahati, what may be viewed as a position of marginality may be leveraged into a strong bargaining position, given the regional context of ethnic politics. In contrast to much of the critical urban studies literature on India (which has focused mainly on metro cities such as Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru), I argue that the politics of informal settlements and urban environment in Guwahati are shaped by the wider politics of citizenship and identity in Northeast India, which provides an ideological and political ground for the assertion of rights to land and space.

Chapter 3

Exclusionary Urbanization in Post-IndependenceGuwahati

> *The water springs originating in the hills used to be very clean and free-flowing, and we used the water for drinking and cultivation purposes. I cultivated 1 bigha of land, which would sustain us for six months. The land belonged to my relative who lived elsewhere, and he owned orange orchards here. He said I could cultivate some of his land without paying any rent until he chooses to do something else with the land. Among us, a verbal contract is sacred and binding, and such arrangements do not involve paperwork. I maintained an orange orchard and supply oranges to the wholesale market. I would also work in the cow sheds owned by the Nepalis. Many Nepali grazers would set up their* khutis *(cattle sheds) on the hills because they offered good quality grass and water which resulted in good yield of milk. Like me, other Karbi cultivators would borrow cows from Nepalis to plough their agricultural fields. I can speak Nepali language fluently as I spent a lot of time with Nepali graziers. After the new capital Dispur came up, more people started coming and settling in Janasimalu. Gradually the orange orchards and paddy fields were converted into settlement plots. So, most of my community members had to go elsewhere in search of cultivable lands. Now I earn my living driving an auto van on local routes.*
>
> - Rongin Teron, resident of Guwahati

This quote comes from an interview with Rongin Teron in September 2018,[24] when he was explaining to me how the landscape had changed over time in Jonosimalu,[25] a settlement of Guwahati. Rongin is a member of the Karbi community, a Scheduled Tribe of Assam. I recount Rongin's experiences here to highlight the impact of rapid urbanization in Guwahati during the early post-independence period.

[24] I have anonymized the names of my respondents to protect their identities, except those who are public figures, such as activists and political workers.

[25] I have retained the original name of the hill settlements in the thesis because they are already discussed frequently in the public domain.

Janasimalu is now a bustling locality of the city due to its proximity to a national highway and to the State Secretariat located in Dispur, the capital of Assam. Janasimalu, like other parts of Guwahati, is mostly inhabited by caste Hindu communities such as Assamese, Bengalis and Biharis. This social landscape contrasts with the period prior to the 1970s, when large parts of today's Guwahati were still under cultivation and inhabited by tribal communities such as Karbi, Bodo, Garo and Rabha. Rongin's narrative is indicative of this change from tribal-agrarian to non-tribal-urban, brought about by the spatial expansion of the city. This in turn was an outcome of Guwahati's transformation into an important administrative centre of Northeast India after 1947. Urbanization also led to multiple contestations around land and occupation rights during the post-independence period.

In this chapter, I describe how economic, infrastructural, logistical and urban developments in post-independence Guwahati led to the marginalization and displacement of tribal inhabitants of the area. Several non-tribal groups also faced land insecurity due to land acquisition and new governance policies. I present accounts of evictions and other processes of displacement as examples of the marginalization of tribal groups by urbanization.

My initial ethnographic fieldwork aimed to document the ongoing land contestation on the hills of Guwahati, which I understood as a conflict between environmental concerns and settlement rights. This led me to delve into Guwahati's history of urbanization and governance by exploring materials in the Assam State Archive. The archival materials revealed several dimensions of Guwahati's post-independence development, especially the impact on tribal communities of the area – discussed in the first section below. Similarly, in the 1990s tribals who have settled on the hills of Guwahati face eviction threats, but for other reasons – mainly environmental concerns. Thus, Guwahati has shown an exclusionary pattern of urbanization over several decades (1950s to the present), although the logic of such exclusion has changed, from development to environmental protection.

In the first section below, I discuss several developments of the early post-independence period that led to the displacement of tribal communities from Guwahati. First, I discuss the dispossession of tribal lands by development projects. Next, I describe how the establishment of Assam's capital at Dispur, adjoining south Guwahati, further accelerated the displacement and dispossession of the tribal communities. Finally, I examine the demand to de-notify the South Kamrup Tribal Belt in the 1960s, which

illustrates the pressures exerted by middle-class residents of Guwahati to push tribal communities from their protected lands.

In the second section, I take the discussion forward through the case of the displacement and dispossession of the Karbis, one of the major tribal communities of the area. Section 3 examines the politics of land categorization in Guwahati in the 1960s, which led to the issuance of eviction notices to settlements (including hill settlements) on 'government lands', unsettling the land rights of the settlers and placing them in a precarious position. Finally, in the fourth section I chronicle the anti-eviction movement led by Left organizations which blocked these evictions.

The accounts and analysis presented in this chapter are based on archival materials, Census reports, and in-depth interviews with key actors concerning the governance of Guwahati in the 1950-1970s, along with relevant secondary literature. The objective is to show how Guwahati's post-independence pattern of urbanization was exclusionary in nature, leading to the erasure of tribal geographies up to the 1980s. While this exclusionary pattern of urbanization has been reproduced and amplified in the contemporary period (post-1990s) on the grounds of environmental protection, the response of the tribal inhabitants has also shifted – from silence in the 1950-60s to an assertive ethnic politics aimed at legitimizing housing and settlement rights in the 2000s – themes that are taken up in the following chapters.

Post-Independence Displacement of Tribal Communities in Guwahati

The post-independence development of Guwahati led to the spatial expansion of the city. The communities were living in the areas surrounding the colonial town of Guwahati were mainly tribal, and the post-independence expansion of the city resulted in the displacement of these communities – especially from areas that were incorporated into the municipality. In this section I outline the different ways in which the displacement and dispossession of tribal people took place in Guwahati due to urbanization and state-led economic development.

Displacement by development projects

In the post-independence period, Guwahati became a focal point for several development and infrastructural initiatives, in addition to establishment of new government offices. In

1971, the establishment of the new capital complex in Dispur (adjoining Guwahati) further accelerated the expansion of Guwahati. In this section I outline these developments to explain how they led to displacement of tribals.

In the 1950s, the expansion of railways was undertaken in and around Guwahati to consolidate the connection between the Northeast and other parts of India. Construction of new tracks and acquisition of lands for railway operation led to displacement, including members of the Karbi community who were cultivators in the Satgaon area (adjoining Guwahati, presently part of Guwahati city). In a letter dated 9 March 1960, the displaced Karbis,[26] numbering around 100 families, appealed to the Chief Minister of Assam, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, to be resettled in then undivided Karbi Anglong district.[27] Karbi Anglong district is a Karbi-dominated district in eastern Assam which is governed by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council.[28] Several displaced Karbis from Satgaon had gone to Karbi Anglong and identified some areas in a Reserve Forest, where they sought to resettle after being displaced for development projects.[29] The letter was written in the Assamese language and signed by 50 male Karbi community members. The letter was forwarded by the Chief Minister's office to the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC),[30] requesting them to accommodate the displaced Karbis within their jurisdiction, i.e., Karbi Anglong district. The Secretary of KAAC responded to the Assam government, stating that wet-rice cultivable land is not available even for the landless indigenous tribal people living in the district.[31] As a result, the Council did not sanction any move to accommodate the Karbi applicants, despite the shared ethnicity.

[26] In the 1960s, the Karbi were known as Mikir; therefore, the government correspondence and the letter used the term 'Mikir'. The term 'Mikir' was used pejoratively to refer to Karbis, and Karbis struggled for several decades to rid themselves of the tag 'Mikir'. Dharamsing Teron, a Karbi intellectual and activist, writes on this issue in: https://karbi.wordpress.com/2007/10/07/mikir-tracing-the-genesis-of-the-term/ (last accessed on 25 February 2022).

[27] Letter/memo from Deputy Commissioner (DC), Kamrup to the Secretary, Tribal Autonomous District (TAD), Government of Assam, no. 646, date 1 January 1972. File no. TAD/REV/79/60/, 1972, TAD, Assam State Archives, Guwahati (henceforth ASA); Karbi Anglong district is a Karbi-dominated district in Assam which is governed by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council.

[28] In 2016, the Government of Assam divided Karbi Anglong into two districts, Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong.

[29] Letter/memo from Deputy Commissioner (DC), Kamrup to the Secretary File no. TAD/REV/79/60/, 1972, TAD, ASA.

[30] Till 1976, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council was known as Mikir Hill Autonomous Council.

[31] Letter/memo from Deputy Commissioner (DC), File no. TAD/REV/79/60/, 1972, TAD, ASA. This bureaucratic correspondence was filed under the Tribal Area Development (TAD) section of the Assam State Archive.

In the Assam State Archives, I found several bureaucratic notes related to tribal issues in Guwahati up to the 1970s catalogued under the Tribal Area Development (TAD) section, indicating the significant presence of tribal people in Guwahati at that time. The correspondence file regarding the displacement of Karbis also included a petition by one Bhuban Bhuyan, a caste Hindu Assamese, demanding financial compensation for being displaced by the railway and oil refinery projects. The contrasting demands of the tribal evictee (for cultivable land elsewhere) and the caste Hindu evictee (for financial compensation) is notable here, possibly signifying a difference in the aspirations of these groups. The tribals' demand for cultivable land as compensation suggests their weak integration with the urban economy and society, which has also been observed in other urban areas in tribal areas (Kumar and Baraik 2021).

New capital complex at Dispur

A Census report (Goswami 1967) on Dispur (located south of Guwahati town in the 1950s) published in the early 1960s gives a detailed description of the receding tribal spaces in and around Guwahati. The Report, based on a survey of Dispur village carried out in 1961-62, discusses the changes that had occurred since an earlier survey in 1955. It notes that Dispur village was situated adjacent to Guwahati, and that increasing urban and industrial activities in and around the city had led to several transformations. The report states that till 1955, Dispur was inhabited by people of the Bodo and Koche communities, two indigenous groups of Assam. After 1955, other communities, including caste Hindus and Nepalis, started settling in Dispur, attracted by the increasing economic opportunities in Guwahati. Agriculture declined as land was sold for industrial units and housing settlements, and some villagers found non-agricultural employment opportunities in Guwahati. The report observes that a section of the indigenous settlers had sold off their land and moved to interior places due to the 'problem of adjustment to the socio-economic condition of an urbanized village' (Goswami 1967, 128). Some residents prospered by selling land, creating economic inequality within the village which had not been seen before. Land prices in Dispur village witnessed a significant increase, prior to independence land was priced at Rs 1500 per acre, but by 1960 the rate had increased to Rs 40,000 per acre. Some of the incoming migrants settled on the hillocks within the village area. The hillocks were a source of firewood for the villagers, which they would also sell in the market. The report concludes on an apprehensive note, suggesting that Dispur might

become devoid of any rural features in the following ten years (between 1961 to 1971), resulting in further out-migration of the indigenous inhabitants.

The establishment of the new state capital of Assam at Dispur in 1972, after Shillong (the capital of Assam until then) became part of the newly created state of Meghalaya, provided additional impetus for displacement. According to a report, nearly 100,000 tribal settlers were displaced by the development of the new capital (Hussain 2007).[32] For the construction of the new government buildings at Dispur, 48,000 acres of land was earmarked, out of which 43,067.33 acres was within the South Kamrup Tribal Belt.[33] The state acquired agricultural lands cultivated by Bodo, Kachari and Karbi farmers. Compensation was only given to landowners and not to sharecroppers who cultivated the land.

Apart from displacement and dispossession due to economic development, the official categorization of lands around Guwahati played an essential role in determining the settlement patterns of tribals. The following section elaborates on the de-notification of the protected lands of the South Kamrup (Guwahati) Tribal Belt.

De-notification of tribal lands

Beltola is one of Guwahati's poshest localities, which was developed after the capital of Assam was shifted to Dispur in 1972 (see map in Figure 5). Upscale residential complexes, luxury hotels, cafes, and vibrant markets are the significant markers of Beltola. One of Guwahati's oldest weekly markets is also situated in Beltola, where people from the numerous tribal communities of the region, including from the neighbouring state of Meghalaya, come to sell their products. The National Highway, constructed in the 1990s along Beltola to bypass the main city of Guwahati, was a significant driver of development in Beltola. Apart from the marketplaces and the informal labour market, Beltola is primarily inhabited and controlled by elite and upper-caste Hindu communities.

Standing at the Beltola *tiniali* near the highway, it is almost impossible to comprehend the early history of this locality, when it was inhabited by tribal communities such as the Bodo, Garo and Kachari. In fact, Beltola *mouza* (an administrative district in

[32] See: http://www.mcrg.ac.in/pp12.pdf (last accessed on 25 October 2020).

[33] See: M.S. Chutia, *Chunsalir pora doyan tenganiloi: sarkare susthat bhuminiti grohon korok* (From Chunsali to Doyang (The government must adopt a practical land policy). Pratidin, June 20, 2005. The category 'tribal belt' refers to a protected area with significant restrictions on land and property transactions put in place to prevent the marginalization of tribal communities through land transfer to non-tribals. We find such protective measures in varying degrees across India.

South Asia with one or more settlements) was one of the constituents of the South Kamrup (Guwahati) Tribal Belt. Several alleys and streets of Beltola bear names that refer to this history, such as 'Garo Basti' and 'Karbi Path', which provides a stark contrast to the overwhelmingly non-tribal demography of the area. In addition to processes of urbanization in Guwahati, the de-notification of the tribal belt in 1959 can be attributed to this demographic shift.

The de-notification of the South Kamrup Tribal Belt was a result of lobbying by non-tribal residents of Guwahati, who wanted access to the land.[34] Their justification was that a tribal belt close to Guwahati would impede the city's progress and growth due to restrictions on land transactions, as I detail further below.

Figure 5. Map showing Dispur and approximate area of the now de-notified South Kamrup (Guwahati)Tribal Belt in Guwahati
Source: Google Maps

Large parts of today's southern Guwahati were earlier part of the South Kamrup (Guwahati) Tribal Belt, a predominantly tribal area where the inhabitants engaged in shifting and paddy cultivation, along with other agricultural and rural practices. The area was declared as a tribal belt on 27 February 1950.[35] South Kamrup (Guwahati) Tribal Belt was notified under the Assam Land and Revenue (Amendment) Act (Assam Act XV of

[34] Here, de-notification refers to withdrawal/repeal of an existing governance category of rule. 'Tribal belt' refers to a protected area with significant restrictions on the land transfer to non-tribals to prevent the marginalization of tribal communities. Thus, denotification of the tribal belt refers to the withdrawal of the special status accorded to the area allowing land transactions to take place freely.

[35] Assam Gazette, No. RD.74/46/172; 27 February 1950, Shillong.

1947). It was constituted by combining areas within the Guwahati Circle of then undivided Kamrup District.[36] The tribal belt was denotified on 30 July 1969 for reasons that I explain below.[37]

With Guwahati's growth in the 1960s and the increasing demand for land, the city pushed outwards to encompass the surrounding areas, including the tribal belt where the sale of land to non-tribal people was legally restricted. In 1965, a petition was submitted by several citizens of Guwahati to the Chief Minister of Assam, requesting him to lift the restrictions on land transactions and ownership in the tribal belt area. The petition argued that continuing to have a tribal belt (where land ownership is restricted to tribal communities) close to the city would be an obstacle to the implementation of the proposed Master Plan of Guwahati, 1965.[38] The petitioners, while agreeing that 'reasonable protection ought to be granted to the tribal population against exploitation by the unscrupulous non-tribals', strongly argued that the regulations in the tribal belt are contrary to 'national interests of integration and solidarity.' The petitioners argued that the restrictions of the tribal belt area within the Master Plan will impede the 'natural growth and development of the city of Guwahati,' because ownership and land transaction rights would be restricted to tribal citizens. The petition cites the Census of 1961, which shows that the non-tribal population in Beltola *mauza* (part of the South Kamrup tribal belt) was now in the majority (constituting two-thirds of the total population), and states that some non-tribals have been holding land in the area for over 80 years. The petition further argues that a city ought to be 'cosmopolitan', where equal rights are available to all people, and therefore appeals that the geographical boundaries in the Master Plan should not be constrained by limitations posed by the tribal belt regulations. Significantly, the petition's signatories overwhelmingly belonged to caste Hindu groups, primarily from the Bengali and Assamese communities.

The petition to denotify tribal belt areas encompassed within the Guwahati Master Plan was forwarded to the Town Planner In-charge, Town and Country Planning (TCP)

[36] The undivided Kamrup district included present-day Kamrup (Rural), Kamrup (Metropolitan), and Nalbari and Baksa districts of Assam.

[37] Letter No. RD/74/46/161.

[38] Letter/memo from residents of Guwahati to the Secretary, Town and Country Planning (TCP), Government of Assam, dated 20 January 1965. File no. TCP 144/65, ASA.

Department, seeking his comments.[39] In line with the contention of the petition, the town planner responded that if the town is not allowed to expand into the tribal areas, then it

> … would not be possible to accommodate the anticipated population at reasonably short distance from the core of the Guwahati town … Uniform distribution of community facilities will have to be increased, which will ultimately increase the cost of expansion of the town.[40]

The response reproduced the petitioners' argument in stating that if only a 'particular community' gets the privilege of purchasing and selling land, 'a composite metropolitan characteristic, which is the aim of all the planners', will not be achieved. The town planner concludes by recommending that the restrictions on transactions in land in the tribal belt within the Master Plan of Guwahati 'may be lifted'. In addition to such petitions, certain MLAs of the Assam State Assembly also argued that the tribal belt restrictions were a major impediment to the development and planning programmes of Guwahati.[41]

This incident suggests that some of Guwahati's elite residents as well as state officials aggressively pursued the rolling back of regulations limiting land transactions in the tribal belt areas. A discordant voice was raised through a petition submitted by Advocate Ratneswar Barua, who argued for the 'maintenance of the Tribal Belt Guwahati in a proper way for which the tribal belt was constituted'.[42] The memo, dated 14 October 1965, in response to the petition notes that instruction had already been issued to the local officer 'to strictly follow the rules under chapter X as amended not to register any sale of land within tribal belt/blocks to prevent illegal transfer of land within tribal belt'. A tribal MLA, Maneshwar Boro, had asked the Revenue Minister, Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, about the proposal to denotify the South Kamrup (Tribal) Belt, arguing that denotification would cause 'displeasure' among the tribal people. There was no response from the Revenue Minister.[43]

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[39] Letter/memo from town Planner in Charge, Town and Country Planning (TCP), Government of Assam, dated 20 January 1965. File no. TCP 60/65/21, ASA.

[40] Ibid., p.15.

[41] Ibid., p.15.

[42] Letter/memo from a resident of Guwahati to the Secretary, Town and Country Planning (TCP), Government of Assam, date 20 January 1965. File no. Sls. 16-17/c in TCP 144/65, ASA.

[43] MLA Maneshwar Boro's questions in the Assam Legislative Assembly, *Assam Legislative Assembly Debates*, 26 August 1968, p. 16.

In 1969, large areas of Guwahati and a few villages within the Palashbari and Sonapur Revenue Circles were removed from the South Kamrup (Guwahati) Tribal Belt.[44] Such bureaucratic manoeuvres to 'de-tribalize' Guwahati were central to the broader erasure of tribal groups from the area. Over time, this trend continued and was extended to other areas on the outskirts of Guwahati as well. For example, on 23 May 2014, the *Assam Tribune* (an English daily published from Guwahati) reported that 'about 10 non-tribal villages in a tribal belt with less than five per cent tribal people under the Azara Revenue Circle in Kamrup (Metropolitan)' had demanded to 'free their villages from the jurisdiction of the tribal belt'.[45] In fact, each of the concerned villages had a tribal population of less than 5 per cent. Such minimal presence of tribals in the tribal belt in and around Guwahati suggests that the process of dispossession and displacement had already been occurring over time.

In addition to the spatial and demographic changes in the region around Guwahati discussed above, several other processes exacerbated the alienation of the tribal inhabitants from their land in Guwahati. With the decline of agriculture, many ended up losing their land or selling it at a nominal price.[46] Most tribal people had to migrate elsewhere in Assam in search of cultivable lands, while a few managed to stay in Guwahati. Today, only a handful of Karbis remain in Guwahati, mostly living in informal settlements. Through my network of informants, I got in touch with some Karbi families who are descendant of those tribal people who remained in Guwahati after these post-independence developments.

In the following section I detail the experiences of the Karbi community and their relationship with land in Guwahati, based on my in-depth interviews with Karbi respondents and with an Assamese political activist who had observed the land alienation among the Karbis very closely. My interaction with my Karbi respondents provided insights into the lived experiences of them and their forefathers in Guwahati before began growing into a large city.

[44] http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/mdetails.asp?id=may2314/state06 (last accessed on 20 October 2020).7

[45] http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/mdetails.asp?id=may2314/state06 (last accessed on 20 September 2021).

[46] Because most tribal settlers did not have *pattas*, they could not bargain for a higher price.

Displacement of Karbis in Hengrabari

A walk-through Guwahati's Hengrabari locality offers a similar landscape to other parts of the city. One sees residential houses, cycle rickshaws and totos (a battery-driven version of rickshaw) crisscrossing the road ferrying passengers, informal shops by the roadside, people gathering in front of tea shops sipping tea, chewing *tamul* (betel nuts) and spitting, pathways leading up to the nearby hills. These typical images of Guwahati shift when one encounters a Karbi *deohaal* (site of worship), called Upper Hengrabari Karbi *Deohaal,* located within 100 metres of VIP Road (a major road). In the gateway of the *deohaal,* an inscription states that it was established in 1822 (see Figure 6). Notably, 1822 signifies a time before the British occupation of Assam, which was formalized in 1826 through the Treaty of Yandabo.

Figure 6. Karbi *deohal,* Hengrabari Road, Guwahati. The sign reads: 'Upper Hengrabari, Karbi Deohal, established 1822. Welcome greetings'. Photograph by the author

Across Guwahati, one finds such old shrines, burial places, and other religious or customary sites of the Karbi, Bodo, Garo and Kachari communities, now situated within

largely non-tribal areas – speaking to the dramatic social changes seen in Guwahati since independence. Several respondents shared their knowledge about such sites, which have largely become obscure because they are not much used. In some *deohaals* and other religious sites, members of tribal communities would congregate during festivals, most of them related to the agricultural cycle. The demographic shift in such areas from tribal to non-tribal majority is an outcome of the processes of land alienation that have taken place since the 1950s.

In the following sections I present the narratives of two Karbi individuals whose forefathers lived in Guwahati. They describe how they witnessed the alienation of land within their families and by other community members. A common thread in their stories is that their intimidating encounters with the land bureaucracy and the difficulty of obtaining documentation for their land holdings. It appears that Karbi and other tribal people in Guwahati avoided dealing with the Revenue Department and its bureaucratic procedures, which led to the loss of land. This is in sharp contrast with how the hill settlers of Guwahati engage with law and bureaucracy in the contemporary period (discussed in chapter 4).

Scholarship on the 'everyday state' in India has shown how people engage and negotiate with the state in different forms in pursuit of their interests (Fuller and Harris 2000; Ghertner 2017). Paperwork attesting one's ownership and rights over property illustrates the 'everydayness of bureaucratic life', as people aim overcome the illegibility of the state (Mathur 2015, 167). In contrast to this body of work, the experience of Karbis living in proximity to an expanding city shows how lack of knowledge of, or engagement with the bureaucracy through paperwork curtailed their control over land. Their lack of paperwork adversely affected their access to compensation when land was acquired for projects in Guwahati in the 1950s and 1960s. Although now there is a much greater awareness about the need for documents, earlier many tribal cultivators had only informal documents or some tax receipts as proof of land rights.

Ranjit Teron

In Hengrabari I met Ranjit Teron, a Karbi who grew up in Sonapur on the outskirts of Guwahati. He came to Guwahati in search of livelihood and settled in Hengrabari. Ranjit recounted that his father was born in Satgaon, a part of Guwahati where there is now an army camp:

During those days, the army personnel would come and say that an army camp would be made there. They would come in their army cars. This intimidated the people, as they were scared based on what they heard about the army from other places, especially their conduct towards women was a matter of concern. When notice of land acquisition was served in Satgaon, there was no thought of protest or demand for compensation. Somehow people packed up whatever they could and ran away from the place.

Ranjit said that his ancestors had cleared the forest and cultivated the lands around Guwahati. However, they did not know anything about government offices, courts, or the roles of different officials such as the *mandal* – a position created during colonial rule. *Mandals,* handle land-related procedures such as surveys and tax collection. Like many of his counterparts, Ranjit's father would hide from the *mandal* when he came to survey the land or issue tax receipts, as it was difficult to pay the tax. When pressed for tax by the state, they would prefer to go elsewhere, clear the land for cultivation, and settle there. Ranjit lamented that he and other Karbis had erred in the past by not making efforts to hold on to their land, which forced them to migrate elsewhere. While most Karbis who faced displacement in Satgaon due to the establishment of the army camp moved away, some settled in Janasimalu -- a settlement close to Satgaon.

Rongin Teron

This chapter begins with a narrative from Rongin recounting how he worked in an orange orchard and dairy farm in Janasimalu. Rongin's family is one of the few Karbi households in Janasimalu today, which is why I wanted to elicit an oral history about the community's experiences from him. Rongin told me that when the army camp was established in Satgaon in 1962, most Karbi households did not receive compensation for the land they lost. The few Karbi families that had paperwork attesting to their land ownership received compensation, and some used the money to buy land in other villages near Guwahati, where they migrated. The compensation offered was very meagre, just was Rs 20/*bigha*,[47] and Rongin's family received Rs 60 for their three *bigha* of land which was registered with the Revenue Department. Rongin said that Rs 60 was insufficient to buy land elsewhere in Guwahati, whereas those few who received Rs 200 as compensation could afford to buy

[47] In Assam, one *bigha* is equivalent to 14,400 square feet (1,340 sq.m).

land. According to Rongin, his mother used to chide his father for not registering most of the land under their control by paying taxes.

Rongin's family could continue cultivating their land in Satgaon for another 15 years after they had moved out, by negotiating with the army authorities for permission. Eventually, his family settled in Janasimalu by occupying land they secured through one of their relatives. There they practised *jhum* (shifting) cultivation (*jhum* is known as *ara* in the Karbi language).

Rongin observed that after the establishment of the new capital of Assam at Dispur, there was increased demand for land from middle-class professionals and businesspeople who moved to Guwahati, especially in the hills of Janasimalu. In addition, the roads around the settlement started developing, which made the lands there attractive. As a result, cultivators began selling their lands to people belonging to the service and business classes, leading to a gradual decrease in the tribal population in Janasimalu.

Next, I present the reflections of a non-tribal activist on the tribal land alienation in Guwahati.

Bhupen Sharma

Bhupen Sharma is a caste Hindu Assamese who came to Guwahati in the 1980s. Bhupen was a communist worker who faced opposition from ethno-nationalist groups in his home district of Nalbari in western Assam. Attacks on communist workers were common across Assam in the 1980s when the Assam Agitation[48] was at its peak. Bhupen is currently a leader of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), Assam's most influential peasant organization (see chapter 5). In our discussion about the decline in the tribal population in post-independence Guwahati, Bhupen mused that eventually the *deohaal* might remain the only Karbi symbol in Hengrabari. He spoke about the sale of lands by the Karbis in his neighbourhood over the last four decades:

> *I have seen this happening several times. An Axamiya[49] man would invite a Karbi man for drinks, which would continue regularly. After a few days, the Axamiya would start complaining that he had no land in Guwahati and must pay rent to stay. Upon hearing*

[48] The Assam Agitation (*Asom Andolon*) was a six-year long movement (1979-1985) organized by several socio-political and student organization of Assam, demanding the identification and deportation of illegal foreigners/immigrants. The agitation concluded after the Assam Accord was signed between the Government of India and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) in 1985.

[49] A person from Assam whose mother-tongue is Assamese is referred to as *Axamiya.*

this, the Karbi man, subsumed by a benevolent attitude towards his sponsor of drinks, would direct the Axamiya man to set up his house on a piece of his land. After the Axamiya set up his house, he would eventually stop keeping company with the Karbi man over drinks. Then, the Karbi man would find another person to hang out with, and the process of land alienation would continue. In the 1980s, one bigha of land would cost around Rs 6000, and the Karbi men would often use that money to buy a scooter/bike.[50]

Bhupen was apprehensive that eventually the only remnant of Karbi land in Hengrabari would be the field where they congregate during festivals. Even the control of this field is no longer with the Karbis, since the governing committee is largely comprised of caste Hindus, with two Karbis holding ornamental positions. Moreover, local government offices barely have any Karbi employees. Bhupen argued that Karbis should have demanded government jobs and that the state should take steps to ensure they can reap benefits of urbanization.

Over the years, the Karbis of Hengrabari have started small-scale businesses or entered the local labour force, but distress sales of land occurred. During my fieldwork in Hengrabari, I learned about a Karbi family who used to own 11 *bigha* but now owns only two *bigha*. The family had attempted to sell the land a few days earlier and received an offer of 2.2 million rupees, whereas the market value of the land now stands at 10 million rupees. When some local people made the family understand the situation, they stalled the sale of the land. However, the family had already started selling assets such as cars due to economic distress, and my respondents anticipated that sooner and later they would also sell their land.

* * *

These three narratives give a detailed picture of land alienation amongst the Karbi community in Guwahati. In the 1960s, another land issue emerged in Guwahati – the notification of some of the hill lands as 'forest areas', leading to the issuance of eviction notices to some settlements (of both tribal and non-tribal communities). The notification of forests was already a significant source of contention in Assam and elsewhere in India

[50] Such narratives about the dispossession of tribals due to their lack of education, simplicity or addiction to alcohol are found across India. Although Bhupen here seems to be retailing this popular understanding, of the shift, these narratives – by pointing to the trickery or greed of caste Hindus – also subtly acknowledge the broader structural changes that have led to the alienation of tribal land in Guwahati.

during the colonial period because the creation of reserve forests curtailed the rights of local people to access those spaces. Saikia's (2011) work on the forest ecology of Assam examines how forests of Assam were categorized by the state so as to integrate them into the capitalist commercial economy, which resulted in significant changes in people's engagement with the forests. The colonial tradition of forest governance was reproduced by the postcolonial state, despite several changes made over the years since independence (Guha 2001; Sivaramakrishnan 1999). In the next section, I discuss the case of Kalapani Hill to illustrate how this struggle unfolded.

Evictions in 1960s Guwahati: Kalapani Hill

The preceding sections focus on the experience of displacement of the tribal population due to the spatial expansion and economic development of Guwahati. Another dimension of tribal displacement was the notification of forest land on the hills and the efforts of the state to remove 'encroachments' on government lands. These processes led to the alienation of land and insecurity of tenure across different social classes and groups – in Guwahati and elsewhere in Assam. Multiple eviction drives were conducted by the Forest Department between 1960 and 1970s (Saikia 2011, 332-33). In Guwahati, some of the hill settlements, such as Kalapani, were served eviction notices. Kalapani Hill was a settlement whose name emerged frequently in the archival materials related to the eviction drive in Guwahati in the 1960s. Kalapani Hill has remained at the centre of debates around eviction in Guwahati, as anti-eviction politics has been shaped by involvement of several organizations over the years (see chapter 5). Residents of Kalapani were deeply involved with anti-eviction mobilizations, demonstrating how the hill settlers have dealt with threats of eviction.

Kalapani[51] Hill is situated adjacent to National Highway 27 in Guwahati and south of Maligaon, the railway headquarters of Northeast India. The 5-kilometre road from Maligaon to NH 27 passes through hilly terrain, with hills on both sides. The names of the settlements along the road, such as Devkota Nagar (Devkota a Nepali surname), indicate that Nepalis predominate in the area. Halfway down the road, at the foot of Kalapani Hill, an upward trek of 3 kilometres leads us to the Kalapani settlement. This settlement has

[51] The name Kalapani is formed by conjoining two words, *kala* (black) and *pani* (water). An interlocutor told me that in earlier days, a wide stream of water used to flow down from the hills, and the shades and shadows of the trees across the stream generated the visual of black water – Kalapani – which became the name of the area.

been inhabited by members of the Nepali and Garo communities for the last 200 years, while since the 1970s other communities also started to settle here. While Assamese is the lingua franca of Guwahati, in Kalapani Nepali is the common language spoken by people of different ethnic groups.

Nepalis have been involved in cattle herding across Northeast India. Many settled in Kalapani during the British period as the natural resources on the hilly terrain were conducive to maintaining cattle sheds. The Garo population of Kalapani is mainly involved in paddy cultivation, while on some of the land, shifting cultivation, floriculture and horticulture are also practised. Kalapani is probably the only settlement in Guwahati, on hills as well as plains, where paddy cultivation is still carried out. Standing on the paddy fields, one can see the highway far down the hills where vehicles ply at high speed. The binary notion of urban-rural suddenly seems blurred.

Figure 7. Paddy cultivation, Kalapani Hill, Guwahati
Photograph by the author

Members of Garo households simultaneously pursue farming activities on the hills and work as labourers in Guwahati. The Garo community, which is listed under the Sixth Schedule of Scheduled Tribes, is primarily concentrated in Meghalaya and parts of Southern Assam and northern Bangladesh. Like the Karbi, Garo have lived in parts of Guwahati prior to the colonial period. Garo women used to sell produce from their shifting cultivation, such as pumpkin, yam, and bamboo shoots in the marketplaces of the foothills.

However, shifting cultivation was forcibly stopped in the 1980s by the Forest Department on the grounds of forest protection.[52] At present, the Garo harvest paddy once a year mainly as a subsistence crop.

Kalapani hill settlement has faced the threat of eviction as the government claims that they are situated on Forest Department land. However, the settlers have resisted evictions and held on to their land. The threat of eviction first emerged in the 1960s, and the communities were mobilized to resist by Left organizations. A three-day protest march to Shillong (then capital of Assam) was the highlight of this struggle.

In the next section, I outline how people responded to the threat of eviction in the 1960s in Guwahati by mobilizing under the leadership of Left political organizations. This discussion provides a genealogy of land contestations in and around Guwahati, which in subsequent chapters I contrast with more recent strategies of mobilization by hill settlements.

'March to Shillong': Left-led Movements against Eviction

Since the 1940s, Assam witnessed multiple uprisings by peasants on the issue of land rights and the reduction of taxes – struggles that have continued until the present (Saikia 2008). These movements were primarily led by Left and Communist organizations. Guwahati was and remains an epicentre of protest movements as it is the most important city in Assam and the region. In the 1960s, eviction notices were served to communities across Assam on the grounds that they were illegally occupying government lands. Such notices were served by the Revenue and Forest Departments[53] as well as other departments. Over the years, people have responded to the challenges in different ways, especially by organizing themselves under the banner of political parties and social organizations.

The eviction threat began in Kalapani in 1968 when eviction notices were served to several houses. These eviction notices, which also implied cancellation of existing land

[52] Shifting cultivation is a technique of cultivation in which a piece of forest is cut and burned and the cleared land is cultivated. Every few years, the cultivators make new fields and leave the old ones to regenerate. Usually, this technique is adopted in mountainous terrains. It is still practiced in several parts of Northeast India and Southeast Asia (Fujisaka 1991). According to Scott (1998, 282), shifting cultivation is an 'exceptionally complex and hence quite illegible form of agriculture from the perspective of a sovereign state and its extension agents'.

[53] The Revenue Department issued eviction notices to people who allegedly did not own the land legally and so were 'encroachers'. The Forest Department issued eviction notices in areas which notified as forest area, which also made households 'encroachers'.

tenure rights (*pattas*) in some places, were also served across Guwahati and other parts of Assam. Many people who were engaged in the process of securing their land rights, or applying for *pattas* through official procedures, also received eviction notices. The question that was raised here is how the government could cancel legal *pattas* or take punitive measures against people who are engaged in the process of securing *pattas*. Indeed, this is not an uncommon practice in Assam, as I show in chapter 4.

The issuance of eviction notices led to mass mobilizations across the state under the leadership of Left political parties in 1968. On 3 July 1968, the *Bhumi Rokkha Committee* (Save the Land Committee) organized a massive gathering at the Church Field of Guwahati. The gathering was chaired by Dhireshwar Kalita, Member of Parliament (MP) from Guwahati, who was a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI). The main agenda of the gathering was to protest the cancellation of land *pattas* of people in Assam. The Assamese newspaper *Dainik Asom* reported that a cadastral survey had been carried out (in the early 1960s) across Assam and people were given *patta* based on that survey.

The issue of eviction was raised in the Assam Assembly debates in August 1968 by MLA Gavinda Kalita, who stated that the *pattas* of some people had been cancelled due to allegations of irregularities in the land settlement procedures against some Revenue Officers, who were then suspended by the government.[54] Kalita alleged that the new Revenue Officers were also involved in corrupt practices while settling land allocation, which has led to the cancellation of *pattas* of tribal people. He submitted details of land held by four tribal people whose *pattas* got cancelled. The Revenue Minister, Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, responded that the Settlement Officer of Kamrup district (in which Guwahati in located) had detected numerous irregularities regarding land settlement and conversion of annual leases into periodic leases.[55] Therefore, review proceedings were initiated against such orders in Greater Guwahati,[56] and notices were issued to the concerned persons. Following the hearing, 238 settlement orders were cancelled in Ramcharani and Beltola *mouza* in Greater Guwahati.

[54] MLA Gavinda Kalita's questions in the Assam Legislative Assembly, *Assam Legislative Assembly Debates*, 26 August 1968, pp. 54-55.

[55] Annual leases (*ek-saniya pattas*) are renewable leases in which the beneficiary has to pay an annual fee to the revenue department, whereas periodic lease (*miyadi patta*) is long term tenurial rights in which the beneficiary has to pay a one-time amount (known as premium) against the issuance of the lease. One cannot sell the annual lease, whereas the periodic lease can be sold in the open market.

[56] Here Greater Guwahati refers to the area encompasses my Guwahati municipality and some of the surrounding areas.

The objections raised by the affected people were not considered by the government, due to which the land allotments were cancelled. Affected people were mobilized by the *Bhumi Rokkha Committee* in Guwahati, a resolution was passed stating that cancellation of *pattas* of land is unjustified and therefore should be opposed.[57] The resolution also alleged that there was a conspiracy to take away land from the local people and allot it to a group of 'capitalists' from outside the state. The resolution observed that the land ceiling rules in Assam's land policy, which specify a maximum land holding of 10 *bighas* and the allocation of surplus land to landless peasants, were not being followed. The resolution concluded with the demand that people should be issued *pattas* against their landholdings.

In some areas in Guwahati, eviction notices were served on the grounds that residents were encroaching on government land. The eviction notice served in Kalapani, issued on 15 May 1968, has been retained by Naba Sapkota, a Nepali resident of Kalapani. The notice stated that people had been illegally occupying the Reserved Forest area and directed them to leave their settlements within 15 days, failing which they would be forcefully evicted. Naba Sapkota had joined the Left students' group in his college to participate in the movement against evictions. Naba was present at the gathering in the Church Field organized by *Bhumi Rokkha Committee*. He recalled:

> *The gathering was so huge in Church Field that the planned March to Shillong* [then capital of Assam] *was done on foot, and it took three days to cover the 100 km distance from Guwahati to Shillong. The entire town came to a standstill, and the sit-in started in front of the State Assembly. When Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha came out of the Assembly, he said he did not anticipate that so many of people would be affected by the eviction drive. He gave the people a verbal assurance that no further evictions would be carried out. He requested them to take care of the greenery and plant trees around their houses, and also not allow any more settlements to come up in the future.*

The issue of outsider businessman being allotted land in Assam while local people were unable to secure their landholdings became a major flashpoint in the Assembly debates. Revenue Minister Mohendra Mohan Chaudhury's response to a question on land

[57] *Matir patta rodh korar protibaad* ('Protests against cancellation of land titles'). Dainik Asom, 3 July 1964, p. 5.

settlement included the details of land allocation to three members of the Jain community in Patasil N.C. (non-cadastral)[58] area. As Patasil at that time was located with the South Kamrup (Guwahati) Tribal Belt, opposition MLA Gaurishankar Bhattacharya alleged that non-cadastral tribal land was being allocated to traders from outside Assam. Chowdhury refuted the allegations that such businesspeople were being given preferential treatment in land allocation and stated that irregularities were being investigated by the administration. The preferential treatment of business groups from outside land allocation is still an important issue in Assam, which became prominent during the eviction in Amchang in 2017 (discussed in chapter four).

Following protests, eviction drives are usually stalled, but the bureaucratic issues that often lead to evictions remain, such as incomplete land survey and settlement procedures and notification of 'forest' land where human settlements exist. In Kalapani, some of the existing settlements are still notified as forest areas. Thus, whenever there is a court-mandated eviction drive in forest areas, Kalapani also receives notices. Conflicting claims around settlement rights and departmental jurisdictions in Kalapani and other hill settlements have Guwahati have been longstanding issues, which becomes most visible during periodic eviction drives.

Ambiguities in the demarcation of forest areas have been a longstanding source of debate, conflict and contestation over land in Guwahati and other parts of Assam. In line with recent environmental concerns around the preservation of nature and the 'greening' of cities, since the 1990s the courts have regularly directed evictions on the hill areas of Guwahati to remove human settlements deemed as 'encroachments'. People have organized and protested against these eviction drives, often at the cost of human lives. The tribal inhabitants of such contested settlements have organized under various ethnic socio-political organizations, lending a new character to popular movements stemming from these conflicts around the hills of Guwahati – as I discuss in later chapters.

Conclusion

In the post-independence period, Guwahati became the most important city in Northeast India for logistical, industrial and infrastructure development. In this chapter, I show how various development projects led to the displacement of tribal communities in the 1950s

[58] Currently Patasil is spelled as Fatashil.

and 1960s. This marginalization was exacerbated by the in-migration of people from different parts of India to Guwahati, and villages dependent on agrarian livelihoods in the peripheries of colonial Guwahati town started to acquire urban character as people sold their land. This urban expansion was accompanied by a demographic shift as the share of non-tribals increased compared to tribals. One consequence of this was that the South Kamrup (Guwahati) Tribal Belt, which included some parts of Guwahati city, was de-notified due to sustained pressure from non-tribal and affluent groups of Guwahati, supported by some elected representatives. In response to these pressures, the tribal communities at times petitioned the state government for rehabilitation elsewhere, explicitly asking for cultivable land. The case study of the Karbis also demonstrates how the process of displacement and dispossession unfolded and how administrative requirements for land-related papers played a role in this process. However, there was no organized protest and resistance by tribal groups against their displacement and dispossession during this period.

Other state-wide developments also contributed to the displacement of tribal people in Guwahati, especially the forest notifications of the 1960s. The case study of the Kalapani hill settlements shows how Left organizations mobilized people to protest against eviction. Though eviction was forestalled in Kalapani and other hill settlements of Guwahati in the 1960s, settlements in areas where land is claimed by the Forest Department have continued to face eviction threats, as I show in the next chapter. The presence of 'forest' areas in a growing city like Guwahati has exacerbated and complicated conflicts between environmental protection and the land rights of people.

In the next chapter, I examine how environmental concerns raised by civic groups emerged as a significant factor in Guwahati's land question. I also discuss how the hill inhabitants have countered allegations that they are the cause of ecological degradation, drawing on their 'indigenous' identity to make counterclaims within the same environmental political discourse.

Chapter 4
Environmental Politics and Land Struggles on Guwahati's Hills

We have had the Forest and Revenue departments since independence. So, over time, when people had come and settled here one by one, what were these departments doing if these are forest or government lands? Now people have lived here for 35-40 years, you can confirm the length of time by looking at the betel and coconut trees around their houses which they had planted. The allegation that we cause deforestation is misplaced. The seguns [a tree valued for its wood] *which you see around this area were planted by the Forest Department during the early 1980s, when there was a drive for social forestry across Assam. They had said that this drive had nothing to do with land categorization, all they needed was to plant trees and they handed over saplings to people. I also had planted them in my courtyard. But now the Forest Department has disrupted the lives of the people by claiming that these green areas are forest land!*

- Ibrahim Hazarika, resident of a hill settlement

A relative of mine works in the Forest Department. He alerted me that an eviction team might be coming to our neighbourhood. I asked my husband to leave as I feared that security forces might take him away. He suggested that I should be feeding my son inside the house when they come, so that the elephant [used for evictions] *would not demolish my house. And that's exactly what happened. Ganesh baba came and saw that I am feeding my child inside the house and went away leaving the house untouched. The opposite house was empty, and the elephant demolished it from top to bottom.*

– Kanon Das, resident of a hill settlement

These narratives from two inhabitants of hill settlements illustrate the contestations, vulnerabilities and uncertainties to which they are often subjected. In the previous chapter, I described how processes of urbanization in the post-independence period led to the marginalization of tribal communities and to contestations around evictions and land rights. In this chapter, I focus on the struggles around the hill settlements, from 1990

onwards, when eviction notices began to be issued regularly on the grounds that they are encroaching on forest land.

As discussed in chapter 2, across India and elsewhere in the global South, major conflicts have emerged over land and other resources between the state and local communities. Environmental concerns have been, and remain, a major argument for changing settlement patterns and cultivation or other livelihood practices. In the urban landscape, environmental aesthetics – notions of creating 'clean and green cities' – have led to court-mandated evictions of informal settlements in cities such as New Delhi. Baviskar's (2003) use of the term 'bourgeoisie environmentalism' for this trend poignantly captures urban India's exclusionary spatial politics. As Anguelovski *et al.* (2020) point out, the claim that greening will inevitably lead to more just and prosperous cities is a naïve and apolitical assumption. The ongoing debate over the environment, wherein the urban elite privilege their own surroundings over other people's rights to land or housing, is reflected in processes of exclusionary urbanization through green gentrification and displacement (Pearsall 2012). However, in the case of Guwahati the debate around protecting the urban environment has distinct features, stemming from the unique topography of the city which includes hills and 'forest' lands. Policies and programmes to protect forest and wildlife lead to new kinds of contestations, especially where urban informal settlements are located in hilly, forested terrain where the status of land rights and jurisdictional authority are often tangled or 'fuzzy' (Pati 2019).

In Assam conservation has had a contested history, especially around the conservation of rhinoceros in Kaziranga Wildlife Sanctuary. In that case, the Assamese sub-nationalist demand was to conserve the rhinoceros by curtailing agrarian rights and dispossessing graziers and fishers (Smadja 2013). The militarized protection of rhinos emerged as a contentious issue due to reports of alleged poachers being killed in violent encounters, leading to complaints of human rights violations (Barbora 2017). If Kaziranga National Park represents a conflict between the goals of wildlife conservation and the agrarian or land rights of local people, the hills of Guwahati have emerged as another major terrain of contention between conservation and settlement rights.

This chapter examines how the state (in its many avatars) and urban environmental groups have employed legal and environmental logics to label the hill settlements of Guwahati as 'encroachments' that ought to be evicted. I draw on my fieldwork as well as bureaucratic records and government notifications to analyze how the contested bureaucratic framework governing land leads to evictions, but also opens space for settlers

to stay in place. The chapter focuses particularly on the conflicts that emerge due to the notification of hills areas as forest lands and the creation of a wildlife sanctuary. It examines how these interventions have been interpreted and acted upon by different government departments, and how the affected communities have responded to efforts to dislodge them. I describe the efforts of hill settlers to have their settlements and land regularized or to challenge eviction through bureaucratic or legal procedures. In the Indian context, the illegibility of the developmental state, and divergent interpretations of law and policy by government staff and local people, shape the real-life outcomes of such conflicts (Mathur 2016). In this chapter I demonstrate how people threatened with eviction invoke the language of law and indigenous rights to lay claim to land, as they attempt to make the legal and policy framework work for themselves.

To frame the discussion in this chapter, in the first section below I review literature on nature conservation issues in the urban context. Next, I detail the issues of human-animal conflict in Guwahati and discuss how the environmental discourse around the hill settlements has been framed by various actors. Section 2 outlines the pattern of evictions since the 1990s and how different political parties and other groups have responded to the conflict. The third section presents a case study of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary, which illustrates the complex political terrain produced by the demarcation of forest land in areas of human settlement. Section 4 uses the case of Kangkannagar hill settlement to depict how migrant tribals established a new settlement and dealt with eviction threats. The fifth section discusses the case of Kailashnagar, which provides deeper insights into the longstanding process of land settlement and demands for regularization of land rights that were initiated by some settlers.

Nature Conservation in the City

The continual expansion of urban settlements across the world has brought cities into close proximity with urban and forest areas, leading to conflicts between the goals of wildlife conservation and environmental protection measures and development agendas. In addition, conservation agendas are facilitating the creation or designation of protected forest lands or wildlife reserves close to human settlements. This section discusses several key issues that have emerged in this context.

Cities have been recognized as natural sites with potentially original and innovative ecosystems; however, the coordination and reconciliation between ‘conservation and

urban public action are still fragile' (Landy 2018: 2; cf. Nagendra 2016). Scholars and activists have pointed out that involving people in conservation practices holds a better chance of resolving the assumed opposition between the goals of conservation and development (Berkes 2007; Brosius *et al.* 2005, 2007; Ghimire and Pimbert 1997; Gogoi 2011). However, the protection of forest areas has largely been equated with the exclusion of human populations. In Guwahati, the overlapping of the urban and the 'forest' in the hills has generated sharp contestations between settlement rights and ecological concerns (Mahadevia, Mishra and Joseph 2017). This conflict has become more pronounced since the 1990s, but the notification of some areas on the hills as forest land, threatening the hill settlements with eviction, began decades ago – in the 1950s.

Forest governance in India has largely reproduced the policies and practices of the British colonial state. The categorization of certain areas as forest areas has led to the alienation of people, especially forest-dwelling communities, from their homes and livelihoods. During the colonial period, the primary focus of forest governance was on the extraction of natural resources from the forest, which was crucial to maintain and extend the project of colonization by the British in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere (Gadgil and Guha, 1992; Rangarajan, 1994). While the exclusionary approach to forest governance was continued following independence, there was also a significant shift in policy goals toward wildlife conservation. The Indian Wildlife Board was constituted in 1952 to address the growing concern about dwindling reducing wildlife populations. In 1972 the Wildlife (Protection) Act (WLPA) was enacted, and 'Project Tiger' was launched with a focus on conservation (Damodaran, 2007; Saberwal, Rangarajan and Kothari 2001, p. 41). State-driven conservation measures largely precluded human presence within wildlife areas and advocated barring access to the forest for local communities that depended on the forests for their livelihoods (Guha, 1997, p. 14; Rangarajan 1996). However, countering the exclusionary stance of the wildlife protection lobby, a sustained people's movement led to the passage of the Forest Rights Act in 2006, which provides for the recognition of the cultivation and settlement rights for forest dependent communities (Saikia 2008).

As cities such as Mumbai and Guwahati have expanded spatially, they have had to engage with growing conflicts between conservation agendas and urban development pressures. This issue is best illustrated by the increasing incidents of human- wildlife conflict in cities, as protected non-human animal species increasingly move into urban spaces due to the shrinking of their natural habitats.

Human-animal conflicts in Guwahati

According to a report on urban land governance in Guwahati prepared by Action Aid, the forest cover of Guwahati reduced from 27.17% in 1977 to 17.19% in 2015, while the built-up area increased from 22.59% to 63.24% in the same period.[59] The forest areas on the hills in Guwahati have retained much of their wildlife, but their habitats and migration corridors have been reduced by urbanization. Consequently, in several areas of Guwahati (both peripheral and central areas), species such as leopards, macaque and elephants often enter human habitations. Leopards are often sighted or trapped in the central areas of Guwahati such as Chandmari, Maligaon and Kahilipara (see Figure 8).[60] In peri-urban areas of the city such as Bagharbari, elephants have been entering human settlements.[61] The following narrative about human-animal conflict in a locality on the southern urban periphery of Guwahati illustrates this issue.

Figure 8. Leopard trapped in a well
Source: Mongabay.[62] In the public domain

[59] Survey of India Toposheet, Satellite data, cited in Bhuyan and Hazarika (2019, 35).

[60] https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/Stray-Leopard-Caught-In-Guwahati-One-Injured-13473.html (last accessed on 18 September 2021).

[61] https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/wild-elephant-spotted-on-guwahati-streets-as-people-offer-food-to-tusker-1722548-2020-09-17 (last accessed on 20 September 2021).

[62] 'Leopards in Guwahati's hills jostle for space'. https://india.mongabay.com/2020/08/leopards-in-guwahatis-hills-jostle-for-space/ (last accessed on 2 September 2020).

Santi Sadhna Ashram is located in southern Guwahati, on the foothills of Basistha hills. Established. The Ashram was established by social worker Hembhai, who was inspired by the Gandhian leader Vinoba Bhave.[63] The Ashram is involved in various social work initiatives related to education and health amongst marginalized groups in Assam. It has an open campus which encompasses trees and cultivated patches of land. When I met Hembhai to discuss my work, he immediately pointed toward the hills in front of us, saying:

> *Elephants come down from the hills at night and enter our premises. We used to have over 100 coconut trees and around 70 betelnut trees. Now barely a few remain; the banana trees are gone as well. Our nights are spent preventing the elephants from entering from our campus. Our morning prayers used to begin at 4 am, but now they have shifted to late morning due to the lack of sleep at night. The elephants can come and go quietly, and you will not even know they are nearby. They have excellent memories, and once they find food in one place they will return. Different herds keep coming back after a certain period. One of the elephants is even blind, but still it manages to come due to its strong memory. They need around five quintals of food to eat, which is no longer available in the forests. The Forest Department plants teak trees in the forests, which might generate revenue but is detrimental to the ecology; it causes malaria also as the leaves will not decompose and so rainwater accumulates on them, allowing mosquitos to breed. So, if the department had planted banana trees instead, that could have taken care of the elephant's hunger. The elephant is also perceptive of how you approach them; they will remember and react accordingly if they are insulted. So, we have to say to them, 'dangoriya jaok'* [respectfully, please leave] *when they come into our Ashram.*

After we had a cup of tea, Hembhai took me for a stroll around the campus and stopped in front of a built structure with a signboard reading 'Primary School'. Children from low-income households, including from the hill settlements, are provided free education here. Yet Hembhai expressed his frustration with the settlements on the hills and blamed the Forest Department for neglecting their duty to manage the areas under their jurisdiction, thereby allowing these 'illegal' settlements to come up. According to him, if evictions are carried out after the settlements have already come up, there will be

[63] On Vinoba Bhave, see: https://www.culturalindia.net/reformers/acharya-vinoba-bhave.html (last accessed on 5 September 2020).

resistance. Therefore, they should not be allowed in the first place. Hembhai criticized the government for not focusing on land reforms and development of the villages, which could stem excessive migration to Guwahati and prevent people from settling in precarious and vulnerable conditions such as on the hills.

As we walked outside the Ashram, I noticed that the offices of the Forest Department are located on the foothills and that the paths leading to the hill settlements lead right by these offices. This proximity between a state agency responsible for protecting forests, and human settlements which are believed to be detrimental to these forest lands, raised troubling questions in my mind. Several of my respondents alleged that Forest Department officials sometimes take bribes to allow settlements to be established on forest lands, which however does not offer any protection in case of eviction notification.

Environmental politics around the Guwahati hills

Environmental groups and NGOs hold significant leverage over forest-related state policies and legal discourses in Assam. For example, Aranyak – a leading NGO working in the field of environmental conservation in Assam – was part of the group that helped draft the Assam Forest Policy 2004. Such involvement has placed ecological concerns at the centre of management strategies for forest lands in Assam. Environmental groups have strongly opposed demands by peasants to de-reserve notified forest areas to grant them land rights for settlement and cultivation (Saikia 2008). Since the mid-1990s, Guwahati began witnessing flash floods and water logging, heightening public concern about environmental issues.

In Guwahati, there are two wildlife sanctuaries, Deepor Beel and Amchang. These two sites get significant attention from environmental NGOs, which regularly demand eviction of human settlements in these areas, which they deem to be encroachments. For example, the organization Early Birds has regularly demanded eviction of the hill dwellers and filed petitions in the court (discuss further below).[64] They have had alleged that the hill settlements are causing soil erosion due to deforestation and thereby creating flash floods.[65] Environmental NGOs also claim that the settlements encroach on the habitats of wild species such as elephant and leopard. Such popularly circulated narratives give legitimacy to claims of encroachments on the hills.

[64] https://assamtribune.com/early-birds-forms-new-committee (last accessed on 20 September 2020).

[65] https://assamtribune.com/know-your-day-12/?infinitescroll=1 (last accessed on 15 August 2022).

In the name of removing encroachments, eviction drives target informal settlements housing the poor, but the NGOs rarely protest against high-end development projects which have been constructed on filled-up wetlands of Guwahati.[66] The media, in addition to lobbying for the eviction of informal settlements, at times also urges the government to take steps against such properties that have encroached on environmentally sensitive areas. Opponents of eviction often point to the alliance between politicians, developers and businesspeople that allows the open flouting of development rules and regulations.

Although some NGOs like Early Bird and World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) oppose any kind of human settlement in forest areas, others – such as World View, Naba Prayash and Youth Unity for Volunteer Action (YUVA) – are more sympathetic to the situation of the poor settlers and support welfare interventions in the hills. During eviction drives, political parties generally taken a stance for or against displacement, depending on whether they are in or out of power (with the opposition parties generally opposing evictions as 'anti-people'). For example, before the state Assembly elections in 2011, the ruling Indian National Congress (INC) party promised land rights to settlers on the hills and in wetland areas. However, after winning the election, the INC-led state government conducted an eviction drive in the name of environmental protection.[67]

According to a study on the ecology of the Guwahati hills, 14.33% of the hill areas in Guwahati had urban settlements in 2011, which is predicted to increase to 25.45% in 2025 (Patowary and Sharma 2019). This suggests that we can expect to witness more debates and conflicts over the hills of Guwahati in the future.

The following section discusses the post-1990s conflicts around the hill settlements of Guwahati, focusing on interactions between settlers and the state bureaucracy around land rights.

Post-1990s Evictions of Hill Settlements

The impact of the hill settlements in Guwahati, apart from being a major issue of the city, became part of the national and state discourse on environment versus people's rights because of the designated forest areas on some of the hills. Evictions have been ordered

[66] https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/who-messed-it-up-33915 (last accessed on 20 August 2022).

[67] https://counterview.org/2017/07/29/guwahatis-residents-of-informal-hill-settlements-are-more-vulnerable-to-natural-calamities/ (last accessed on 20 September 2020).

periodically by the courts, directing the removal of alleged encroachments on forest land, especially in Reserve Forest (RF) areas. Two major court-mandated eviction drives took place in Guwahati in 2002 and 2017 (ordered by the Supreme Court and the High Court of Assam, respectively). The state government has also undertaken evictions from time to time with the objective of removing encroachers and protecting the hills.

In 2002, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests ordered the eviction of people from 150,000 hectares of forest land in India, based on a Supreme Court order.[68] The Ministry claimed that the evictions were aimed at rooting out 'powerful lobbies' engaged in illegal tree felling, but several cases were reported where the homes of poor people were demolished.[69] In 2011, the Assam government carried out an eviction drive that led to major protests led by the peasant organization Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), in which two protesters were killed by police forces (see chapter 5). After a public outcry the evictions were stopped, and the Assam Government formed a committee chaired by the Revenue Minister Bhumidhar Barman to look into the demands for land rights in Guwahati. However, the KMSS alleged that the committee did not meet with members of their organization (Gogoi 2014, 157) and that there were no tangible outcomes from the committee regarding land rights on the hills.[70]

In addition to large-scale evictions on the hills of Guwahati, different departments of the state government, such as the Forest Department and the district administration, have conducted smaller eviction drives on particular hills, such as Sarania Hill and Kharghuli Hill, with the objective of removing illegal encroachments in forest areas and preventing land grabs.[71] Since the 1990s such evictions have been taking place regularly in Guwahati. This development coincides with a period when there was a significant increase in Guwahati's population due to the 'collapse of the rural and agricultural economy post-1990s and the boom in construction and service sector'.[72] In response, various political parties and social organizations got involved in the land issues of Guwahati.

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[68] https://frontline.thehindu.com/other/article30245515.ece (last accessed on 20 January 2021).

[69] https://www.indiaspend.com/as-sc-hearing-nears-adivasis-recall-evictions-that-led-to-forest-law/ (last accessed on 20 September 2020).

[70] https://counterview.org/2017/07/29/guwahatis-residents-of-informal-hill-settlements-are-more-vulnerable-to-natural-calamities/ (last accessed on 20 September 2020).

[71] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/government-evicts-encroachers-from-sarania-hills-forest-area/articleshow/18941632.cms (last accessed on 20 September 2020).

[72] https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/who-messed-it-up-33915 (last accessed on 20 September 2020).

In chapter 3, I discussed the involvement of Left groups in mobilizing anti-eviction movements and raising the issue in the State Assembly during the 1960s. During the spate of eviction drives in Guwahati in the 1990s as well, political parties such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] and the National Congress Party (NCP) got involved in anti-eviction protests and movements. Biren Sharma has been associated with the CPI(M) since the 1980s, when he was a high school student. He has also been active in the labour movement in Assam. Biren described how evictions of the hill settlements have been carried out since the 1990s:

> *The first eviction took place in the Narakasura hills near Christian Basti. The settlement was on government land and was inhabited by people working in the Police Department. The CPI(M) mobilized the victims to resist the eviction, and it was stalled. Now they are well settled with no threats of eviction. The hills of Guwahati have now turned into* janaranya *(a forest of people). After 1991, the second major eviction drive took place in 2002. On May 7th, an eviction took place in Lalmati and on May 9th in Panjabari. We went there immediately and contacted the local MLA, Robin Bordoloi, who eventually came in the evening. A person named Manohar Kalita had died in a police firing when people mobilized to stop the eviction. Another tragic incident happened wherein a young boy Diganta Das died. Diganta was suffering from a high fever, and it was a rainy winter season. When the eviction team reached Diganta's house, his mother pleaded with them that once Diganta recuperated, they would break the house by themselves and leave. However, the eviction team pulled down their house; as a result, Diganta had to bear the winter and the rain under the open sky, and he expired the following day. From CPI(M) we mobilized people against these evictions, in alliance with the NCP (Nationalist Congress Party). Together with the* unnoyon samitis [development committees functioning in the hill settlements], *we formed* 'Ucched Birodhi Moncho' [Anti-Eviction Platform]. *Our movement went on for about two years, and in 2004 after the issue had received nationwide attention, the eviction process halted.*

Kalapani Hill was one of the prominent sites targeted for eviction. Suren Barua, an employee of the Assam State Government, who lives nearby, was involved in mobilizing an anti-eviction movement in the 2000s. When I met him at his house, I could see Kalapani Hill from the window of the living room. Suren has been living in the area since the mid-

1990s, when stone quarries operated in the hills. After much effort by Suren and a few others, the stone quarry at Kalapani Hill was closed by the Forest Department in Shillong. Following the closure of the stone quarries, the hills once again surfaced as sites on contention when it was targeted for eviction by the government.

Suren told me that the evictions of 2002 and 2011 affected many people in the area. Suren had led several delegations of the hill settlers to the NCP leaders, including settlers of the Garo community living in Kalapani. Since Purno Sangma, one of the founding members of NCP, was also from the Garo community, Suren expected that he would support their demand for land rights. However, the representation to Purno Sangma did not yield any result. Suren said that in the aftermath of an eviction and following public uproar, representatives of most political parties would come to the foothills and organize rallies, but they would then leave without going into the hill settlements or interacting directly with the settlers.

In 2008, a public consultation on the Draft Master Plan for Guwahati was held in the Machkhowa Auditorium in Guwahati. According to Suren, the programme was more and less an assembly of the elites of Guwahati:

> *There were around ten agendas for the development of Guwahati. The issue of* patta [land right documents][73] *for the urban poor and the hill settlers was agenda item number 5. I raised my hand to speak, but I was put down by the Chair saying that the agenda items would be discussed sequentially. However, I sensed that I might not be given an opportunity. When the fifth point came up, two gentlemen sitting beside me were allowed to speak, who listed several reasons why* pattas *should not be given on the hills. I was not given a chance to speak during the proceedings. In Guwahati, 70 percent of the houses have no* patta.

[73] *Patta* refers to a document issued by the government recognizing property rights in land. In Assam, under the original colonial land settlement there are mainly two types of *patta; Ekchania* (annual) *patta* – land settled with the cultivator for a year, and *Miyadi patta* – land settled for a long period of time, usually 10–30 years. See: https://counterview.org/2017/07/29/guwahatis-residents-of-informal-hill-settlements-are-more-vulnerable-to-natural-calamities/ (last accessed on 2 September 2022). Although *miyadi pattas* are supposedly time-bound, they have turned into permanent land rights as land resettlement has not taken place since 1965 in Assam. To address these issues, in 2021 the Government of Assam launched 'Mission Basundhara' with the objective of surveying all the lands of Assam using digital technology.

See: https://www.eastmojo.com/assam/2021/12/14/re-survey-of-assam-villages-to-be-completed-by-dec-31-2023-official/ (last accessed on 6 September 2022).

Suren was involved with a civil society group, Mahanagar Unnayan Samitee (MUS), which has mobilized around civic issues in Guwahati such as access to water and sanitation. MUS was led primarily by urban intellectuals and members of left-leaning organizations. For example, Biren Sharma of CPI(M) was the Secretary of MUS. This organization was also involved in the debates around the hill settlements and was at the forefront of several anti-eviction protest and movements (see chapter 5). A prominent contribution of MUS was to push the Government of Assam to order a survey of the hill settlements of Guwahati based on which policies could be formulated. According to the results of the survey, which was carried out by AC Nielsen and published in 2009, there were 65,000 households out of which around 71 per cent households were living on government land (including revenue and non-cadastral land), 18 per cent households were living on lands that formed part of reserve forest; around 7.3 per cent households were located on *patta* land owned by others, while 3.6 percent households were living on *patta* land under their ownership.[74] However, it is not clear how the findings of this survey were utilized by state agencies regarding the question of land rights of the hill settlements. In the following chapter, I explore in more detail the role of MUS and other socio-political organizations involved in the land issue on the hills.

Below, I examine the case of an eviction that was carried out in 2017 to remove alleged encroachments from the newly formed Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. This case opened up multiple debates about land surveys, the demarcation of protected forest land, and the land rights of tribal people. But first, to provide a deeper understanding of how the hill settlements came about and the background to residents' demands for land rights, in the next section I describe the Kangkannagar settlement and how it was set up by members of the Mising community in the Amchang area.

Settling on the Hills: Kangkannagar

Kangkannagar, a settlement in Amchang, is mainly inhabited by members of the Mising community. Kangkannagar came into prominence during the eviction drive in 2017 against 'encroachments' in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary (see next section). Unlike the Bodo, Karbi

[74] https://counterview.org/2017/07/29/guwahatis-residents-of-informal-hill-settlements-are-more-vulnerable-to-natural-calamities/ (last accessed on 13 September 2022).

and Garo who inhabited this area before the emergence of Guwahati city, the presence of Mising in Guwahati is relatively recent.

Mising are a notified tribe of Assam, included in Sixth Schedule. They are native to the Upper Assam districts of Dhemaji and North Lakhimpur, and they identify as a riparian community that lives close to the river. They depend on rivers for irrigating their agricultural fields and catching fish, which is an integral part of their diet. Fish also figure in their cosmology as *poythoprodorshok* (guide of the path). I learned about this from my Mising respondents in Kangkannagar, when they pointed out the fish paintings on the wooden frame of the *changghar,* an open structure that serves as a communal gathering space for Mising communities (see Figure 9). The *changghar* is mainly used for social gatherings and during festivals. However, people also sleep in the *changghar* on a hot day. Notably, the *changghar* is elevated from the ground with bamboo supports, in view of the flood-prone nature of the native lands of the Mising in Upper Assam.

Unpredictable floods in recent decades have had a devastating impact on the land- and water-based livelihoods of the Mising, leading to out-migration. Activists and academicians from the Mising community have been demanding recognition of Mising as climate refugees because they have been displaced by floods (Pegu and Pegu 2018). The Misings started migrating to Guwahati in the early 2000s where they engaged in factory work, small businesses and informal sector low-paying jobs. Many Mising migrants send money to support their families in Upper Assam. This motivated them to look for rent-free settlement options. Migrants from tribal communities in Guwahati do not consider the slums of the city (which are largely inhabited by non-tribal groups, such as Dalits and Bengali Muslim) as attractive options, because they are averse to the poor and congested living situation in urban slums. The hill settlements, on the other hand, provide larger spaces for habitation where some of the dwelling practices of their rural homes can be reproduced. As this thesis shows, tribal settlers collaborate with other community members to make and sustain these settlements. As is discussed further below, they also invoke their status as tribal and indigenous people of Assam to make claims to land and settlements rights, despite the fact that some of the hill settlements are situated on forest or other government land, as I show in this chapter.

The status of land in Kangkannagar itself is a matter of contention. The Forest Department claims that the area is part of the Wildlife Sanctuary, while the tribal settlers say that they should be given land rights because they have made efforts to make the

settlement habitable. In this section I detail how the Mising established settlements in the Amchang area and the challenges they had to overcome.

Figure 9. Mising *changghar* in Kangkannagar
Photograph by the author

It was not easy for me to get access to Kangkannagar. Students from local universities had conducted studies there, and some surveys had been carried out by government agencies and environmental groups in the area (as discussed below in the section on Amchang). Such surveys had been instrumental in creating the popular view that human settlements on the hills and forests around Amchang are harmful to Guwahati's environment, leading to court-ordered evictions. So, when I made attempts to contact people living in the contested settlements, my identity as a researcher interested in studying eviction evoked a lukewarm or apprehensive response. I understood that I would not be able to gain entry to such settlements without establishing contact through trusted individuals to convince the inhabitants to allow me to conduct fieldwork. After a few unsuccessful attempts, I made some progress by drawing on the networks of a former faculty member of Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Samhita Baruah. Through her, I connected to Janki Pegu, a human rights activist from the Mising community, who asked me to come to his office to discuss my project.

After exchanging greetings, Janki asked me what I thought about the hill settlements. I responded that I do not support the evictions of poor people without any

rehabilitation. I meant what I said, but I was aware that any other response would have diminished my prospects of gaining entry to Mising settlements that have faced evictions. After Janki seemed satisfied with my response, he called Subhas Doley, a resident of Kangkannagar, telling him that I would visit the settlement for fieldwork. Then, Janki gave the phone to me and asked me to have a few words with Subhas. I exchanged greetings in Assamese, and we arranged my visit to Kangkannagar in the coming days.

On a humid summer morning in July, I set out for Kangkannagar. I walked about half a kilometre from the bus stop to reach the foothill from where different paths lead to different hill settlements. Subhas was waiting for me on his motorbike. While riding towards Kangkannagar, Subhas told me that earlier, when outsiders would come to Kangkannagar no one would bother, but following the eviction in 2017 the residents had become vigilant about who is allowed to enter. As we drove up the hill, Subhas pointed to the road, saying that the people of Kangkannagar had made the road with their own hands during their free time on the weekends (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Road in Kangkannagar built by the hill settlers
Photograph by the author

Subhas explained that in the Mising language 'Kangkan' means beautiful and 'nagar' means a settlement; hence Kangkannagar means 'beautiful settlement'. Locally, Kangkannagar, along with other Mising hill settlements, are referred to as 'Mising-

Bosti.[75] We sat in the *changghar* where some other residents were sitting and talking among themselves. When I started interacting with Subhas, the other people came close to us and started listening to our conversation, also participating at times. I knew that Subhas was one of the first people to settle in Kangkannagar, so I asked him to share his experience of settling in Kangkannagar. I also asked him to explain why he had to migrate to Guwahati. This is his story:

> *My family had land in the district of Dhemaji. During a flood our land went underwater. After finishing school, I went outside Assam to study further. After completion of my course, my family lost their land due to erosion. Then I migrated to Guwahati in search of work. This was around 2002. My brother also accompanied me. We did several jobs, ranging from working in companies and as daily wage labourers across the city. However, paying rent was a significant liability for us, so we started searching for land in Guwahati. Adjusting to the new labour cycle, which was vastly different from agriculture, was a difficult task.*
>
> *While doing agriculture back in our village, we would work in our fields for a maximum of four hours a day. After working for 3-4 months, we could sit idle and sustain ourselves for the rest of the year. We could procure almost every item we needed locally, including salt and oil. Fish would be omnipresent in all three meals; the fish would be procured from local water bodies, which were found in abundance.*
>
> *In private jobs in the city, such as in business establishments, factories, or some low-ranking jobs in offices, we have to work up to 12 hours almost every day except on Sunday. On top of that, we must buy most of the things we consume and pay rent. In the early 2000s we could still get a room for rent for around 300 rupees per month, but now it costs not less than 2000-3000 rupees. Such considerations led us to look for empty land to settle on. Now, government land is our land only. We are legitimate inhabitants of the same. A senior Mising person from a nearby settlement had shown us this land, on which we decided to settle.*

Making a strong claim for a right to space and land in the city beyond the existing residential areas required the strength of numbers. When Subhas decided to settle in Kangkannagar, he realized that he needed other people to settle with him to make it a

[75] Here, *bosti* means settlement, unlike other Indian cities where *bosti* primarily refers to urban informal settlements.

liveable settlement. His brother Binoy also settled on the hill. Binoy joined us in the *changghar*. He said:

> *Once we decided on the land, we mobilized other community members and made them understand that it was not wise to keep paying rent, given our limited income. Instead, we should own land and live there. After making a collective agreement, we would come each Sunday and prepare the area for human settlement. On the other days, we had to work in our jobs. People slowly started getting interested in the idea and joined us. In the nearby Khanapara area, several factories manufacture cement, construction materials, and so on. Many Mising people work in those factories, so this location was convenient. In the early 2000s, we started the settlement with just three households. There were no amenities. It was like living in the jungle even though we were within the city limits. It was scary to live like that, and we thought about how we could make more people shift here. Therefore, one day we announced that plots of land (of equal measure) would be distributed among the members who helped in clearing the place. This proposition interested people and they came on the announced date. There were three land categories –A, B, and C, with A located at the lowest slope and C at the highest slope location. As a result, a quarrel ensued among people regarding who should get which plot, as most wanted the A category for logistical convenience. As the situation was getting out of hand, we decided we would use a lottery system to allot the plots. The people agreed now as they understood this to be a matter of fate. We made small paper pieces, wrote the plot numbers on them, like A1 B2 C3 A10, put them in a polythene bag and carried out the lottery. Accordingly, people got their plots allotted and set up their houses on them.*

The settlement started taking shape, with new houses coming up around 2003. However, once the settlers started living there, people from a nearby locality named Satgaon disputed the right of the Mising to occupy the land. They argued that the lands were already under their occupation, leading to a physical confrontation between the two groups. The Mising had the upper hand in a physical standoff as they were located further up the hills, from where they could launch arrows against those who had to approach from below. Eventually, the Satgaon people gave up their claim and the Mising consolidated their hold on Kangkannagar. Notably, other settlements surrounding Kangkannagar, such as Donyi Polo and Ruwatanagar, are also Mising-dominated settlements. Thus, the

collective effort of the Mising allowed them to fend off challenges to their control over land in Kangkannagar and nearby areas.

Once their control over the land was secured, the next challenge was to create a liveable infrastructure in the settlement. This was not easy since the area was claimed by the Forest Department as part of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. However, since there was no clear demarcation of the claimed 'forest area' and there were other human settlements nearby, the settlers went ahead with dealing the challenges of getting identity documents issued (such as voter cards and ration cards) and arranging for infrastructure such as electricity and a road.

The Kangkannagar settlers had to approach the local councillor (municipal elected representative) and MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) to request their help in acquiring documents to access welfare schemes (such as ration cards) and to secure voting rights (Voter ID cards). Presenting themselves as a potential vote bank to local political leaders allowed the settlers of Kangkannagar to earn some leverage regarding their claim to the area. They particularly sought ration cards since they would allow them to buy kerosene oil at subsidized rates – this was crucial since there was no electricity in the locality. The settlers made several representations to the local Congress MLA Akon Bora to sanction an electricity connection. Finally, in 2008 the connection was granted by Bijuli Bhavan (head office of the Assam Electricity Board), and Rs 12,00,000 was sanctioned for the electricity infrastructure in Kangkannagar. People had to contribute their labour in setting up the electric poles since there was no concrete road that could bear the weight of the vehicles coming from the main road to this uphill settlement.

However, since Kangkannagar was claimed to be within Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary, officials of the Forest Department stalled the work, asking for a bribe to allow the work to continue. Forest Department officials got into an altercation with the Electricity Department because they claimed that a 'No Objection Certificate' is required from the Forest Department before any work can be undertaken. This delayed the work, and the Electricity Department officials backtracked as they did not want to encounter any trouble in their office. People then had to look for another option. Subhas explained:

> *The objections by the Forest Department to getting an electricity connection was a major issue. We required electricity for our daily work and, most importantly, for the children to study. We collected money among ourselves and asked the engineer and contractor to use it to start the electrification work by taking connection from Donyi-Polo village*

*[*another hill settlement], *which had taken connection from Kailashnagar, an old settlement nearby. Since the installation of electricity was funded privately, the Forest Department could not stop our work since they could not point their finger at another government department. People did a large part of the work themselves. Now meters have been installed in every house and the residents pay their monthly bills to the electricity office. Getting the payment accepted by the office also required lobbying by us. They were reluctant due to the ambiguous status of our settlement. However, as the office would get revenue from providing the electric connection, our request was accepted.*

This oral history of Kangkannagar illustrates the strategies, ingenuity and labour required to create the hill settlements.

The lack of infrastructure on the hills is balanced by the availability of other resources that have been utilized by the hill settlers. For example, Kangkannagar hill has several streams (*nizra* in the local dialect), and families living on the upper reaches of the streams have created reservoirs where the water accumulates and is supplied to the houses through a pipeline. Other households on the lower slope have dug wells. In some of the hill settlements, upstream families have utilized their locational advantage to earn money by creating a pipeline network to supply water to downstream houses. In addition, the green landscape allows for small-scale vegetable cultivation and rearing of pigs and chickens.

In a Mising household where I was invited for a meal, I saw that the kitchen had been constructed in the same manner as one finds in a Mising village, where there is an arrangement to brew rice liquor and smoke meat and vegetables. These quotidian practices of the hill inhabitants, which replicate their way of life in their native villages, marks them off from the urban middle-class population who live in the plains areas of Guwahati, as well as from the residents of urban informal settlements (chapter 5).

Aware of the allegations that they are damaging the environment, residents of various hill settlements offered similar narratives to refute these claims. In Kangkannagar, the people assembled in the *changghar* said:

Here we bury our organic wastes under the ground. We live in sync with nature much more than those city babus. Flood does not happen because of us, but because wetlands around Guwahati are being filled up for construction. Do we take a bucket of water and throw it towards the city? Look around, see how we have preserved the local trees and

ensured that none of them got cut while making roads. How many trees has Moloy[76] *planted? Even animals in Pobitora and Kaziranga forests search for higher ground. We are no different, our land went underwater, so we also came to Guwahati to find land under our feet. See how many doves and pigeons are around here. Almost every house has chickens, and some of us also rear pigs. We are more conscious about the environment than the city experts.*

My interlocutors stressed that their lifestyle on the hills is aligned with eco-friendly practices to rebut the allegations of environmental damage forwarded by the environmental groups, the government and a section of the media. The settlers represented themselves as the stewards of the green cover around their settlements. They argued that they take care of the environment better than the officials of the Forest Department. In tribal settlements such as Kangkannagar, they also draw on their historical association with forests and presumed peaceful co-existence with nature to lay a moral claim as rightful inhabitants of the forested hills. They also make claims to proper urban citizenship in Guwahati by foregrounding their tribal identity – and hence rightful claims to land – when faced with allegations of encroaching on forest land. This in turn undergirds their claims to land as legitimate settlers. In the following sections I outline in more detail some of these strategies of claim-making.

After expending considerable effort to make their settlements habitable, as we have seen here, the hill settlers have had to counter various efforts to dislodge them. In the following section I return to the issue of evictions through the case of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary.

Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary: Eviction and Resistance

'Jalukbari, Maligaon, Tiniali, Ganeshguri, Khanapara!' The bus conductor shouts the names of bus stops vigorously as he tries to woo passengers into one of the many city buses that ply across Guwahati. Jalukbari and Khanapara are the two extreme points of Guwahati, located in the north-western and southern parts of the city respectively. Khanapara, situated on the National Highway, is the place where vehicles begin their journey to Shillong and other parts of Upper Assam and Northeast India. As one proceeds

[76] Referring to a member of an environmental group.

from Khanapara eastwards toward Shillong, the road enters a hilly terrain that continues till Jorabat. Here, the road splits into two directions, one toward Shillong and the other going to Upper Assam. The stretch from Khanapara to Jorabat has hills on both sides; the northern side is supposed to be part of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary was created in 2004 by the Government of Assam by combining three Reserve Forests: Amchang, South Amchang and Khanapara. But a cursory glance from a moving vehicle easily reveals the presence of human settlements, along with some industrial units (especially small cement factories), on those hills. As shown in the map in Figure 11, the sanctuary is located very close to the city of Guwahati.

Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary was formed out of three non-contiguous reserve forests where human settlements had long been established (see Figure 12).[77] Situated on the eastern fringes of Guwahati, the sanctuary is spread over an area of 78.64 square kilometres. It is home to 250 species of birds and 44 species of mammals, besides numerous reptiles and amphibians.[78]

Amchang made headlines in 2017 when the government started evicting human settlements from the sanctuary. Two rounds of eviction took place in the months of August and November (2017). It is understood that the evictions were directed towards the settlements in the eco-sensitive zone of the sanctuary where 37 human settlements (including villages) are located. In the eviction in August, 283 houses were demolished. In the November eviction, the houses of around 700 families were demolished.[79]Some of the prominent settlements that were impacted by eviction were Panikhaiti, Janasimalu, Yousufnagar, Kangkannagar and Kailashnagar. I discuss how eviction unfolded in some of these settlements and peoples' response thereafter. The affected settlers alleged that the map of the sanctuary was faulty, which resulted in eviction drives in non-forest (revenue) villages.[80] They argued that incorrect government surveys had turned legitimate villages

[77] Affidavit in opposition PIL (Suo Moto) No. 27/2013 (Civil extraordinary jurisdiction) in the Gauhati High Court, p. 3.

[78] https://thewire.in/environment/700-families-left-homeless-assam-governments-eviction-drive-amchang-wildlife-sanctuary (last accessed on 2 September 2022).

[79] https://thewire.in/environment/700-families-left-homeless-assam-governments-eviction-drive-amchang-wildlife-sanctuary (last accessed on 8 September 2022).

[80] Revenue villages refer to villages situated in rural areas where (mainly agricultural) land is under the jurisdiction of the Revenue Department and recorded in their records. The Revenue Department records provide proof of land rights in the form of *pattas* or record-of-rights. The system of land revenue administration was established by the British colonial state to generate revenue through the taxation of cultivable lands. Under this regime, *patta* holders would pay taxes to the state. On paper such taxes are still owed, but the amount is negligible.

into 'encroachments' in the sanctuary (Richa 2018). The eviction was stopped after massive protests against the eviction.

The redesignation of a reserve forest as a wildlife sanctuary entails increased restrictions on human activities such as grazing animals and gathering forest products. To create a wildlife sanctuary, the Environment and Forest Department of the state government first makes a proposal, following which the Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of India issues a notification either in favour or against the proposition. After the Assam Government's order in 2004 declaring Amchang as a Wildlife Sanctuary,[81] the central Ministry of Environment and Forest issued a notification in 2016 to affirm this status. The order stated:

> … a major portion of the sanctuary is undulating and covered by the hillocks which form a unique geomorphologic feature with unique wildlife habitat. The Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary represents one of the rich and ecologically diverse habitats for a wide variety of animals and plant species. Chinese pangolin, flying squirrel, Assamese macaque, capped languor, slow loris, leopard, elephant etc., are the principal animals found in the wildlife sanctuary. In addition to these a wide variety of avian fauna, reptiles, amphibians and insects are found in the wildlife sanctuary. And whereas the sanctuary is located on the eastern limit of Guwahati city and the increase in the biotic pressure in the fringe areas can affect the habitat of the sanctuary.

In a subsequent notification issued on May 7, 2017, the Ministry stated that no objections or suggestions had been received 'from persons and stakeholders in response to the draft notification', and so it proceeded to notify the area as Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary.

However, local people claim that they had not information about the notification declaring Amchang as a wildlife sanctuary, hence they could not submit their objections. They also alleged that the eviction notices were not served to them directly before the eviction started in 2017. They believed that the notices had been posted in nearby government buildings, but they were unaware of this.

[81] The Assam Gazette Annexure 11, Registered no. 768/97 19 June 2004.

Subhas (who we met in a previous section) argued that the notification of Amchang as a Wildlife Sanctuary was undemocratic, since the government did not consult the people living within the proposed sanctuary. He also alleged that the map of the wildlife sanctuary was incorrect, hence evictions were carried out wrongfully in several places. Although the High Court had directed the state to evict the settlements, Subhas believed that the notices were put up in the night since no one saw them being posed. As a result, the people of the settlements could not register official objections to eviction.

Figure 11. Approximate boundary of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary in relation to Guwahati and Dispur
Source: Google Earth

The eviction drive in 2017 was preceded by a public interest litigation (PIL) filed by the environmental NGO Early Birds in 2013, which alleged that the settlers in Amchang are encroachers and causing impediments to conservation initiatives. An affidavit related to the PIL, filed by the Divisional Forest Officer of Guwahati Wildlife Division (within which Amchang is situated), cited 1104 households as encroachers in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary.[82] Subsequently, in March 2017 a joint survey was carried out by the Forest Department (Government of Assam) and the University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya (USTM, a private university) in the Amchang area. The outcome of the survey was published in a study titled 'Encroachment in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary: A Study on

[82] Affidavit in opposition PIL (Suo Moto) No. 27/2013 (Civil extraordinary jurisdiction) in the Gauhati High Court, p. 5.

Education, Economic and Socio-Psychological Aspects'. The report, which was based on just five days of field survey in 18 settlements, simply notes that there are encroachments within the Sanctuary. The report gives the GPS coordinates of the alleged encroachments, a map pinpointing the locations of the settlements, and recommends steps to 'evict the unauthorized occupants and remove unauthorized structures, unauthorized buildings or constructions erected inside the Wildlife Sanctuary under the provision of Sec 34(A), Wildlife Protection Act 1972'. My interlocutors in Amchang felt that such reports, compiled by researchers or students from Guwahati city, failed to grasp the reality or history of the people living in Amchang, and that their only aim was to provide justification for eviction. Given the timing of the evictions, which took place a few months after the final notification in May 2017, it appears that the PIL filed by Early Birds and the survey report by the Forest Department were meant to provide the grounds for displacing the settlements in Amchang.

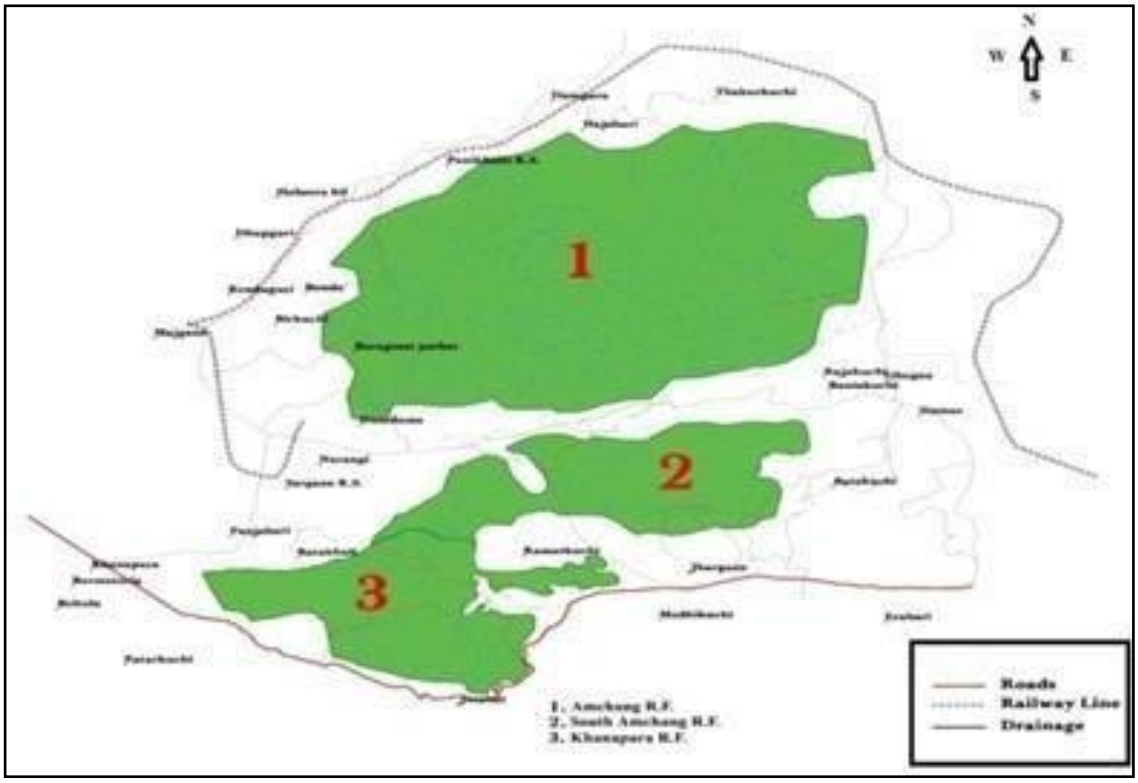

Figure 12. Map showing the three non-contiguous reserved forests which were combined to form Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary
Source: Sarma *et al.* (2019, 327).

It should be noted here that the notification declaring Amchang as a Wildlife Sanctuary calls for compliance with Article 244 of the Indian Constitution (related to control and administration of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes according to the provisions of the Sixth Schedule) and the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest

Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (2 of 2007) (henceforth Forest Right Act or FRA). These legal provisions are meant to ensure that the settlement rights and interests of the tribal communities in forest areas are protected. Since the eviction drive in Amchang affected tribal inhabitants, organizations opposing evictions demanded that the Forest Rights Act (FRA) be implemented to ensure the tenurial rights of the tribal communities. One provision of the Act recognizes the 'rights of settlement and conversion of all forest villages, old habitation unsurveyed villages and other villages in forest, whether recorded, notified or not, into revenue villages.'[83] However, the environmental groups and Forest Department were not keen on any arrangements that would allow for settlements to continue to exist in areas that were supposedly part of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. The Forest Rights Act was briefly invoked as a mechanism to ensure land rights, but in the end had little impact in the politics of eviction. Instead, following the eviction drive (discussed below), the affected tribal hill settlers, and other communities who claim themselves to be indigenous people of Assam, began to make claims to settlement rights based on the plank of indigeneity.

Evictions of 2017

The eviction started on November 27, 2018 (Figure 13). Namita, Subhas' wife, said that one of the biggest casualties of the eviction drive were children, as their exams were scheduled to take place the following month. Students from the settlements which faced eviction fared poorly in their examinations. The eviction drive destroyed books and other study materials. Some activists then prepared a plan for volunteers to train the students in different subjects.

During the eviction, JCB[84] machines and elephants were utilized by the authorities. Namita said that the elephant seemed to be unwilling to break down houses, particularly the Namghar[85]: 'Even they have a sense of our concerns; we could see tears rolling down the eyes of the elephant. Only after much insistence from the *mahut,* the elephant demolished the structures. Several other interlocutors in the hill settlements shared similar insights.

[83] Section 3(h) of FRA 2006.

[84] JCB is the colloquial name for earth-moving equipment made by JCB company often used in construction and demolition activities.

[85] Prayer rooms introduced by Vaishnavite saints in Assam.

This discussion took place in the *changghar* at Kangkannagar, during the visit described above. At this point, everyone present began talking about the eviction -- a marked departure from the earlier pattern where only one individual would respond to each question. From this interaction, I understood that the eviction had left a deep imprint on peoples' minds, and in me they found an outlet to share their stories beyond their usual circle of acquaintances. The following narrative combines the stories of several people who spoke about the eviction, creating a collective narrative because their statements were quite similar:

> *We were protesting before the eviction party; the police force used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowd. The eviction reached the outer periphery of Kangkannagar, after which it retreated under collective political pressure from numerous political and tribal groups. Mising politicians from Upper Assam had given strong statements against the eviction. All Assam Tribal Sangha registered their protest, and KMSS stood by our cause. The issue got national coverage, many journalists visited the locality, and relief poured in from across the nation, which sustained the entire locality for 4-5 months.*
>
> *We are aware that Early Bird's lobbying had facilitated the eviction drive. After learning about Early Bird's involvement, we became highly sceptical about outsiders. Earlier, people would come to this locality for a morning walk and collecting water from the* nizra [water stream]. *Several women from the locality work in hospitals, and they often come late at night; there is no security issue. After the eviction, several students from the nearby university had come to do research, but they were shooed away by people. Only after looking at their id card, we would consider allowing them in our area. We have become highly sceptical about outsiders now.*

The Amchang story illustrates several dimensions of the debates around the hills of Guwahati – environmental issues, the legal incongruities, and identity politics. The experiences of the Mising settlers in Amchang, discussed above, demonstrate the conditions which prompt migrants in Guwahati to settle on the hills, the challenges of forming a settlement, and how they must make sustained efforts to claim urban citizenship by resisting displacement.

Figure 13. Signs of eviction in Kangkannagar
Photograph by the author

After the first phase of evictions in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary in 2017, there was a massive outcry by the affected settlers and human rights organizations. However, as most media portrayals suggest, the affected people were not a homogenous group. A closer reading of their petitions throws up diverse arguments against eviction. In the following sections, I present the cases of two settlements which deployed different strategies in resisting eviction. These examples reveal how residents of informal settlements can invoke legal provisions or rights under government policies to make claims to land, or alternatively, how they can exploit the bureaucratic ambiguities in the governance of land and forest in Guwahati to assert settlement rights. The petition filed by residents of Panikhaiti village, located in the 'eco-sensitive zone' around Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary, highlights how residents of a settlement close to the sanctuary have countered the arguments for eviction by pointing to the provisions for the governance of eco-sensitive zones. The case of Jonsimalu settlement, located within the city limits, illustrates the debates that unfolded around the demarcation of land between the Revenue and Forest Departments as Janasimalu was incorporated into the Guwahati Municipal Corporation and so transitioned from *panchayat* (rural) governance to the municipal (urban) authority.

Panikhaiti: A village in the eco-sensitive zone

The boundary of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary extends beyond Guwahati city and includes rural areas of Kamrup (Metropolitan) district. Some of these areas fall in the declared 'eco-

sensitive zone' of the wildlife sanctuary. Eco-sensitive zones are buffer zones outside the boundary of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. These zones must extend up to minimum one kilometre from the demarcated boundary of the protected forest area.[86]

In the notification of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary, 37 villages were identified within the declared eco-sensitive zone which varies from 170 m to 8.1 km. Within declared eco-sensitive zones, human activities are subject to regulation but not outright prohibited. In the notification of Amchang, the permitted activities include agriculture, cottage industries, rainwater harvesting, amongst others. However, there was no mention of settlement rights of existing houses or settlements within the area.[87]

Panikhaiti village is one of the 37 villages in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary's eco-sensitive zone. The village, which is predominantly inhabited by the members of the Garo community, faced eviction in 2017. To forestall eviction, the affected people of Panikhaiti joined a *suo moto* public interest litigation filed by Early Bird NGO, which had demanded the eviction of human settlements from Amchang.[88] The petition stated:

> …nowhere in the above-mentioned order dtd. 02/08/2017 it was mentioned that the people residing outside the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary is required to be evicted. This Honourable Court had given the order for the eviction of encroachers from the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary and not from the Amchang Wildlife Eco-Sensitive Zone, which is outside the boundaries of the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. But the respondent authorities acted in haste manner, and without any application of mind has gone ahead with blanket eviction of people who are residing outside of the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. Moreover, the applicants were not a party to the said proceedings as they were not aware about the pendency of the case.

In fact, the Guidelines for Declaration of Eco-Sensitive Zones around National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries, issued by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India in 2002, states that several state governments of India had raised

[86] https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1842610 (last accessed on 20 September 2020).

[87] Affidavit in opposition PIL (Suo Moto) No. 27/2013 (Civil extraordinary jurisdiction) in the Gauhati High Court, p. 3.

[88] PIL (Suo Moto) No. 27/2013. Interlocutory application no. 3005/2017, in the Gauhati High Court, Kamrup (M).

concerns about the regulations governing eco-sensitive zones around National Parks and Sanctuaries. These reservations were premised on the fact that this rule would place human habitations and cities within the eco-sensitive zones. Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai and Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary in Guwahati are prime examples of this difficulty, since in both cases there are human settlements very close to their boundaries.

The petitioners of Panikhaiti made their case against eviction by highlighting the government rules and regulations related to the eco-sensitive zones. The petition also alleged that the Forest and Revenue Departments had made 'no demarcation and joint verification regarding the land under their occupation'. Broadly, the petitioners argued that their settlement cannot be treated on par with other settlements which are alleged to be encroaching on the wildlife sanctuary (see map in Figure 14).

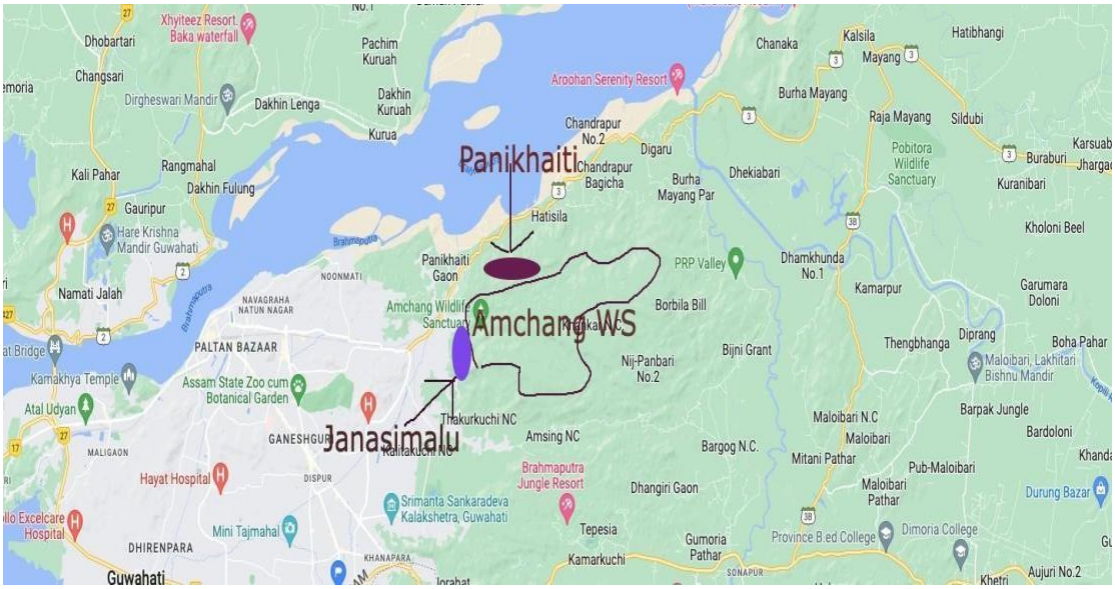

Figure 14. Map showing approximate area of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary (WS) and location of Panikhaiti and Janasimalu settlements.
Source: Google Maps.

The case of Panikhaiti shows how settlers can invoke official rules and laws in their own interest, by pointing out that state agencies have not followed the existing guidelines and have conducted evictions in areas where they should not have taken place. It shows how affected settlers, despite belonging to marginalized and poor communities, can closely engage with land-related laws and regulations to defend themselves from eviction. The case of Panikhaiti also illustrates the issues that may arise when a wildlife sanctuary is declared in an area with existing human settlements nearby which then come under the eco-sensitive zone. In the next section, through the case study of Janasimalu, I discuss

some of the other issues that emerged from the notification of wildlife sanctuary and in the aftermath of the eviction.

Jonosimalu: Competing claims of Revenue and Forest Departments

Janasimalu settlement is located within 5 kilometres of the State Secretariat in Dispur. It is inhabited by people from different communities such as Assamese, Bengalis and Nepalis. Even though Janasimalu is closely connected to Guwahati city, until 2011 it was part of the Amsing Panchayat. In 2011, Janasimalu got incorporated within the Guwahati Municipal Corporation after the city limits were extended. However, even though Janasimalu has been a part of a panchayat and is now within the municipality, it faced eviction in 2017 as it was considered a part of Amchang Wildife Sanctuary.

The people of Janasimalu accused the government of tampering with the map of the Sanctuary to ensure that business establishments were not threatened with eviction. One of the most sustained movements against eviction in Amchang took place in Janasimalu, including a long-standing legal case. The issue was covered by national media.[89] The people of Jansimalu came out on the streets to protest the eviction while aggressively pursuing the issue in court. The petition filed by the people of Janasimalu stated:

> Janasimalu NC (non-cadastral) village is a revenue village inhabited by indigenous people of the state. Some of the villagers were originally displaced in the process of acquiring land for an Army Camp at nearby Narangi. The rest of the people came from different parts of the state in search of livelihood.

Like the petition submitted by the settlers of Panikhaiti, the Janasimalu petition alleged that the cadastral survey of the area was yet to be completed, despite being initiated in the mid-2000s. Therefore, without any survey the status of the land as Revenue or Forest land could not be determined.

Prior to these events, over the years multiple letters requesting completion of the survey had been submitted by the head of Amsing Panchayat, with endorsements by the Chief Minister of Assam, to the Director of Land Records and Surveys, Assam and Circle

[89] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/forest-dept-serves-eviction-notice-on-amchang-residents/articleshow/75672567.cms (last accessed on 20 May 2021).

Officer, Dispur Revenue Circle. The process to allocate land to the residents of Janasimalu by the government, i.e., land settlement,[90] continued till 2010. A government notification also indicated that non-surveyed areas of Janasimalu would be surveyed.

Based on these long-standing attempts to get the land surveyed and categorized as Revenue land (the first step towards granting land ownership to settlers), the petition sought clarification from the government on how they can proceed with eviction in Janasimalu after the land settlement procedure had begun. The petition also noted that some residents had received land titles years earlier (copies of these documents were included in the annexure to the petition). The petition asserts the need to complete the survey of Janasimalu by engaging 'independent experts from Indian Institute of Technology, Gauhati University among other reputed institutions for fair and just outcome'. The emphasis on involving educational institutes rather than government agencies in the survey points to the settlers' lack of trust in the government. Overall, the land settlement procedures in Janasimalu, as presented in the petition, clearly indicate that from an administrative point of view, the settlement was already on the path to changing its status from a Non Cadastral area to a Cadastral Revenue area – paving the way for residents to apply for land titles.

The eviction issue in Janasimalu shows how the affected settlers could deflect turn the allegation that they are 'illegal encroachers' by showing that it is the government itself that is engaging in irregular and illegal activities. The petition charged that the threatened eviction is illegal because the land settlement procedures were initiated but not completed. This case shows that the settlers of Janasimalu have a deep understanding of land-related issues and procedures, based on which they strongly rejected the claim that their settlement is in a forest area. In this way, unlike many other settlements, Janasimalu was able to mount a legal challenge to eviction which forced the government to review its policy on the settlements around Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary (discussed in the next section). More broadly, the case studies of Panikhaiti and Janasimalu illustrate the issues faced by human settlements close to protected forest areas, which may arise from divergent or inaccurate

[90] In Assam, 'settlement' refers to leasing of land that is under the disposal of the government. Here, settlement can have two meanings (i) the allotment of unoccupied land at a revenue assessment calculated at fixed rates, and (ii) the modification of the rates at which occupied land has been assessed, and at which unoccupied land will be assessed. The later process is distinctly known as re-settlement. See- https://landrevenue.assam.gov.in/portlets/allotment-and-settlement-of-land (last accessed on 6 September 2022). In Janasimalu, some parts of the settlement had been surveyed and some parts had not been. As the process of land regularization was ongoing to become a revenue area, it was tagged as Non-Cadastral (NC) Revenue in government documents and notifications.

interpretations of government regulations and laws by state agencies or jurisdictional ambiguities.

Government response and people's reaction

Following the protests which forced the government to stop the evictions in Amchang, a meeting was held in January 2018 of a government-appointed committee headed by Pramila Rani Brahma, Forest Minister of Assam. The meeting was attended by the Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of Dispur Assembly Constituency (within which Amchang is situated). Significantly, the MLA of Dhemaji Assembly Constituency, the home district of the Mising community, was also present. In the meeting it was decided that a joint survey would be carried out to identify the boundary of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary and to demarcate Forest and Revenue land, and that the Divisional Forest Officer would be included as a member of the Committee for this purpose. The members discussed the possibility of de-reserving land under the wildlife sanctuary so that the human settlements are not impacted. Such proposals need to be placed before the Government of India.

The minutes of this meeting raise the question, given these disputes about the demarcation of the land and the boundaries of the sanctuary, why was it decided to undertake evictions? A point made by the petition filed from Panikhaiti provides an insight into this question. The petition states that petitioners:

> … have come to learn that under the Smart City Project of Govt. of India, a land area of around 30% of the total area of the smart city is required to be kept for green area, and to create such a green area for Guwahati Smart City Project, the respondent authority is in a hurry to include more area within the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary by evicting the applicants in gross violation of the Wildlife Protection (Act), 1972 and rules framed there under.

Although Amchang currently is situated very close to the municipal boundary of Guwahati, the proposed State Capital Region – encompassing Guwahati and its peripheral areas – would place Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary with these wider capital region boundaries.'[91]

[91] https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/assam-forms-state-capital-region-around-guwahati-117091500864_1.html (last accessed on September 3, 2022).

Navigating through various legal documents, bureaucratic transcripts, and the voices of hill inhabitants, a common theme that emerged was the need for a proper cadastral survey of the area declared as Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. People who faced eviction came out on the streets multiple times to protest against the bureaucratic delay in carrying out the survey. The case of Amchang shows the complexities that emerge when a notified forest area is close to an urban area. These examples illustrate people's discontent with the notification of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary and how they counter the logics of eviction in legal route.

Some hill settlers have tried to secure land rights through years of dealing with bureaucratic hurdles with the help of lawyers. However, many cannot bear the cost of pursuing their cases, although they hold out hope that the government will eventually declare the land as Revenue land and distribute land titles. I discuss these efforts to secure settlement rights in the next section.

Kailashnagar: Claiming Land Rights through Regularization

As the discussion in the preceding sections shows, the demarcation of Forest and Revenue lands on the hills of Guwahati is quite fuzzy. Without clear boundaries, some hill inhabitants have taken the initiative to determine the exact status of their land. Once a settlement manages to secure evidence that their land is not notified forest land and instead falls under the category of Revenue land, the documents they procure constitute strong evidence of the legitimacy of their settlement. In several hill settlements I visited, people brought out files a secure place in the house, containing paperwork such as maps of the Wildlife Sanctuary and Right to Information (RTI) responses about the status of their land. They would explain to me in detail why their house and settlement are not on forest land, hence they should not be facing any threat of eviction.

However, securing relevant documents for such contested land is not a straightforward matter. Applicants must manoeuvre their way through numerous government departments and over several bureaucratic hurdles to determine the status of the land where their settlement is situated. A key point here is that many of my migrant tribal interlocutors never felt the need to maintain such paperwork in their home villages. But once in the city, they are subjected to a new regime of rules and regulations governing land, for which they need to acquire and maintain the required papers and documents. If they are unable to understand or follow these procedures, their settlements or homes may

be deemed illegal and therefore vulnerable to eviction. Most of the settlers in and around Amchang have directed their efforts to be recognized as settlers on revenue land and not on forest land. What is significant here, in contrast to other urban informal settlements in India where the municipality is an important arbitrator in land contestation, is the involvement of the Revenue Department for land issues. What is common though between Guwahati and other cities, is that settlers in contested settlements must accumulate paperworks (including voter id, ration cards) to stake their claim to the city and secure urban citizenship.

Settlements such as Kailashnagar have pursued a lengthy process of trying to get their land regularized, which is a first step toward obtaining land titles. The process of getting the land enrolled in the records of the Revenue Department has taken up to a decade in some cases. However, even after a settlement has secured paperwork confirming that their land is not under the Forest Department, the threat of eviction remains. Jarbom Kutum from Ruwatnagar said:

> *We secured the status of our land after several rounds of Right to Information (RTI) applications. When evictions were taking place in 2017, we were standing at the border of our village and showing the documents specifying the status of Ruwatnagar's land as not under Forest Department. When an official came near, we clearly told him that if the eviction team dares to enter Ruwatnagar, we will file a case against them in court. The eviction team did not create any issue in our settlement.*

However, possession of such papers does not guarantee protection from eviction drives. The case of Kailashnagar illustrates this point.

Kailashnagar is a hill settlement close to Ruwatnagar that also faced eviction in 2017. Ibrahim is a resident of Kailashnagar and my contact in the settlement. When I visited hij, he came down to the foothills of Kailashnagar to receive me, and we drove up the hill on his scooter. We went to the house of Gayatri Doley, an elderly Mising lady who has been at the forefront of attempts to regularize landholdings in Kailashnagar. We were joined by Chittaranjan Bhuyan, the head of the local development council (*unnoyon samiti*)[92] and a caste Hindu Assamese. (Kailashnagar is a mixed settlement.)

[92] Informal local governing body formed by the settlers.

People of Kailashnagar have visited government and non-governmental agencies multiple times to find out how their land is classified; finally in 2001, they learned that it is 'government revenue land' but also 'non-cadastral'. In 2003-04, a survey was carried out by the Assam Survey Office. The Revenue Department had proposed to the Forest Department that a joint survey be conducted because there are forest areas nearby. Since there was no response from the Forest Department, the Revenue Department went ahead with the survey, following which the area was designated as 'cadastral'. The survey found that the falls under Bagharbari No. 2 Plot. Gayatri pointed out that the Kalashetra, a cultural complex in the nearby foothill area, also falls under the Bagharbari No. 2 Plot. Knowing that an eviction drive was conducted in parts of Kailashnagar but there appeared to be no threat to the Kalashetra, I enquired how two sites under the same survey number could be treated differently. In response, Ibrahim alleged that the Forest Department and Assam State Government conspired to harass the people by manipulating the area demarcated as Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary.

Gayatri brought out a file of papers and laid it in front of me, explaining that they were '*kobula'* petitions. *Kobula*[93] is a colloquial Assamese term that means 'self-declaration'. A *kobula* form contains a declaration by the applicant about their occupation of a piece of land (including details such as plot number, time of occupation) and other relevant information such as landholdings elsewhere, economic status, citizenship, and so on. Submitting the *kobula* form to the Revenue Department is the first step toward applying for regularization. The *kobula* submission is evaluated by the Revenue Department, and if the outcome is favourable, a report is made by the survey officers of the Department known as *mandal*. Following this, the process of granting land title is initiated, which has to be sanctioned by the District Collectorate (DC) office. However, this is a time-consuming process. Several households of Kailashnagar had submitted *kobula* way back in 2005, and the survey report arrived a few days before my field visit in September 2019.

It requires consistent lobbying to get such applications approved. Gayatri spoke about how she had been making the rounds of government offices. She eloquently laid out the procedures for land regularization and how she had kept the process in motion over the years She explained that if the Ministry Board, comprising the District Commissioner,

[93] *Kobula* is preceded by occupation of land by people for a certain period. In Assam this long-standing practice of land occupation known as *dakhal*, which can also be interpreted as encroachment that is accepted in the society (Desai and Mahadevia 2014: 287). From time to time, Assam Government has regularized such occupations of land.

Revenue Minister and other officials, approves the survey report then *miyadi* status will be given to the land in question. The records of the respective Revenue Circles are also considered in such decisions.

Overwhelmed by listening to the intricate details of these procedures for securing land rights, I realized that if I were in a similar position, I would require a lawyer. So, I asked them whether they had employed a lawyer to handle these applications. Gayatri responded that initially, when most people in the locality had gotten together to apply for regularization, they were able to engage a lawyer for a while. However, since the process is time-consuming and entails regular expenses, several members gradually withdrew from the endeavour. Some were also expecting that the government would eventually have to grant land titles to the residents due to ongoing protests and land movements. Fewer members in the cohort meant less financial support. Now Gayatri has taken it upon herself to work on behalf of the residents of Kailashnagar to carry the process forward. She shared some more details about the survey process:

> *We know they get government salaries, but they are doing our work, so we felt we should offer whatever we can. And they were impressed; they said they were not even offered a glass of water in many localities. They assured us that they would submit the polygon*[94] *from the survey so that it would help our case. Later, we learned that the surveyors submitted the polygons in September 2004 to the Revenue Department but granting pattas has been stopped since the mid-1990s.*
>
> *An officer confided in me that though they have done their job, they could not help any further as the earlier practice of occupying land, filing* tauzi khazna,[95] *and then getting allotted* miyadi patta *is not in practice now. So, I asked him if I should file another petition inquiring about the status of our land. He suggested going ahead. Luckily, based on the petition, within ten days the Joint Secretary of the Revenue Department issued an order that in our case, the proposal needs to be considered in light of Assam's land policy of 1989*[96]*. I showed the order to that officer, who suggested I*

[94] Polygon is a plane figure with at least three straight sides and angles. It is used to measure the area and perimeter of a geographic feature.

[95] *Tauzi khazna* (Tauzi tax) is not actually relevant here. *Tauzi* is collected as a fine for illegal encroachment on land for which one does not have a title.

[96] According to Assam Land Policy 1989, the state government can lease out land to people for various uses, including habitation, through a 30-year lease known as *miyadi pattta*. A second type of 'lease', *ek soniya patta*, is an annual *patta* which is renewable after paying the stipulated fee to the Revenue Department. The beneficiary of the *miyadi patta* needs to pay a one-time fee known as 'premium' to the Revenue Department of the state government. The policy includes the following clauses pertaining to Greater Guwahati (which

submit the kobulas. *I then submitted 50* kobulas. *Out of 50, 13* kobulas *got official sanctions for land allotment along with two other applications from nearby places. So, a total of 15 applications were forwarded to the DC office, and over time these applications were uploaded to the computer and processed.*

Due to movement protests and court orders, the allotment got delayed. We pursued our case with persistence. Then, in August 2017 an eviction took place in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary (AWS). The eviction party entered our locality but did not carry out any eviction except in a small area. We were sure that we would not be affected since we inhabited government [Revenue] *land.*

Regarding Amchang, we used to think that its boundary was near Jorabat, but we had no idea that the boundary included areas around us. All we knew was that we were living on Revenue land. If there has been any mistake in marking forest land as revenue land, that is understandable, and we would accept it. However, the area that got evicted, we do not consider it as forest. For example, we cannot say Nabajyotinagar is a forest area, going by government documents, so we do not know on what basis eviction was carried out there.

Gayatri's narrative shows how government departments may function unpredictably, which means that people must be vigilant and deploy practical strategies to establish land rights. But continuous engagement in the land regularization process does not guarantee protection from eviction. Ibrahim alleged that when officials come for eviction, they do not check the documents possessed by the inhabitants. Even so, securing the documents attesting peoples' tenurial rights is the most effective way of claiming land in the city.

Though the residential houses of Kailashnagar were not demolished during the eviction in 2017, local religious sites such as the *naamghar*[97] and *masjid* faced demolition, which had upset people. On my way to Gayatri's house, Ibrahim showed me the partially demolished *naamghar*. I asked how the people of Kailashnagar responded to the threat of eviction. Ibrahim said that they had been involved in anti-eviction protests since 2011.

includes Guwahati city and adjoining areas): an indigenous landless family is entitled to 1 *katha* 10 *lechha* (about 400 sq. m.) of land under certain conditions, such as (i) no member of the family owns land elsewhere in an urban area; and (ii) occupancy of government land or duration of stay in the city for at least 15 years. https://dlrar.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/porlets/Land%20Policy%201989.pdf ((last accessed on 14 September 2022).

[97] Prayer site of the Assamese Hindu community.

Members of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) had organized people in Kailashnagar and taken them to other hill settlements of Guwahati to protest against eviction drives. These anti-eviction movements are discussed in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined several issues related to the governance of the hill settlements of Guwahati, highlighting how the contested status of land makes them vulnerable to eviction. The existence of protected forest areas and the creation of a wildlife sanctuary close to the city has compounded these conflicts around land. Environmental NGOs, advocating for forest and wildlife conservation, have supported the eviction of the hill settlements by labelling them as encroachments that are detrimental to Guwahati's environment and safety. Hill settlers have refuted these allegations, arguing that they are protecting the forest and that the government has overlooked the real encroachers – big business establishments illegally set up in forest areas while targeting informal settlements through eviction drives. This disparity illustrates the unequal power relations that favour the urban elite and marginalize poor migrants living in informal settlements. The conflicts around the hill settlements are in part due to the unclear demarcation of land (forest and revenue), ambiguities in the drawing of boundaries, and lack of clarity in bureaucratic rules and procedures.

The frequency of evictions in Guwahati gathered pace in the 1990s. City-based civil society groups made efforts to find solutions to the housing problem and land issues of the urban migrants by advocating the implementation of relevant government schemes. However, the lack of initiatives to make affordable housing for the urban poor has generated no impetus for the hill settlers to consider alternative housing options, especially given the high land prices in Guwahati. To consolidate their claims, hill settlers have employed a range of legal and bureaucratic mechanisms, challenging eviction orders by highlighting the government's failure to follow its own laws and regulations and the manipulation of maps, by filing court cases challenging eviction, or by pursuing legal regularization of their land.

The case study of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary depicts how the rules governing such protected areas affect human settlements in different ways, depending on their location (close to wildlife sanctuary or in the eco-sensitive zone). The settlements in the eco-sensitive zones stressed on the regulations of the eco-sensitive zones and claimed that

long-standing settlements are not supposed to be considered as encroachments and therefore should not be evicted. Other settlements, like Janasimalu, contested that their settlement is within the sanctuary by highlighting the land regularization process in their settlement.

The chapter highlights the discursive, quotidian and legal strategies deployed by the hill settlers to combat the threat of eviction, from pointing out ambiguities in the demarcation of land (reflecting conflicts between the Forest and Revenue Departments over jurisdiction), to claims that the boundary of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary is unclear or was illicitly manipulated, to claims that the state does not follow its own rules, to allegations of corruption. These discursive moves open up a terrain of land claims and moral arguments against eviction which have yielded some measure of protection.

The section on Kangkannagar highlights how members of the Mising community came to Guwahati and settled in the Amchang area. These settlers have leveraged their identity as tribal and indigenous people of Assam in mobilizing against eviction. Another route through which settlers have tried to concretize their hold over land is through regularization procedures, as the section on Kailashnagar illustrates. The details of how residents of Kailashnagar have persisted with their efforts to secure land tenure rights highlights how hill settlers have engaged with complex and lengthy bureaucratic procedures of the Revenue Department. These variations in anti-eviction strategies show the hill settlements of Guwahati have adopted measures to claim tenurial rights in alignment with their social positions and understanding of land related laws which determines their claim to tenurial security.

Overall, this chapter chronicles the diverse ways in which the hill settlers of Guwahati have countered eviction drives through legal and bureaucratic routes, such as seeking clarity on the administrative status of their land and applying for land titles. The chapter also highlights how the structures of environmental and land governance have had an exclusionary effect on communities living on the city's margins. Despite these pressures to displace them, the hill settlers have found ways to 'stay put' (Weinstein 2014), capitalizing on contradictions and aporia of state institutions and procedures such as the fuzzy jurisdictional demarcation of control over land across different departments and authorities. In the next chapter, I turn to a discussion of more organized and direct modes of mobilization against eviction.

Chapter 5

Anti-eviction Mobilizations: Confrontations between Settlers and the State

One afternoon in June 2013, I heard gunshots from my hostel room. We came to know that police firing had taken place somewhere nearby, and some of the hostel residents were afraid. I switched on the television and tuned into a local Assamese news channel, which reported that police had fired shots to disperse protesters who had gathered in front of the Assam Secretariat in Dispur (2 kilometres from our hostel). The protest was against the eviction of hill settlements and to demand *pattas* (land rights) for the settlers. I learnt that a peasant organization called Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), led by Akhil Gogoi, was leading the movement to secure settlement rights on the hills of Guwahati.

Over the next few days, the local media was abuzz with debates over the issue. As discussed in the previous chapter, the hill settlements of Guwahati have been subjected to periodic court-ordered eviction notices, on the grounds that they are occupying government or forest t lands. From the news coverage, I gathered that a similar agitation demanding land titles had taken place earlier, in 2011. On that occasion, police firing on the gathering had led to the deaths of four protestors.[98] Later, in early 2014, a protestor named Promod Boro immolated himself during one of these agitations, after which Akhil Gogoi was arrested for allegedly provoking the incident.[99] These events illustrate the gravity of the conflicts around land in Guwahati.

Several urban civil society groups and NGOs have lobbied for the provision of adequate and secure housing for the urban poor, both in city slums and hill settlements. Through petitions, demonstrations, and demands for the implementation of existing policies, these organizations have given some voice to the vulnerable hill settlements and other informal settlements. In this chapter I focus on two organizations that have

[98] See: https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/kmss-raises-land-pitch/cid/1528732 (last accessed on 2 November 2020).

[99] See: https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/akhil-gogoi-arrested-protests-erupt-across-assam/ (last accessed on 20 September 2021).

intervened in this struggle – a civil society organization, Mahanagar Unnayan Samity (MUS); and Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), a peasant organization of Assam. These two organizations have employed different strategies of engaging with Guwahati's land question which can be partly attributed to the differences in the social profile of their members. MUS is mostly rooted in Guwahati's urban middle class, while KMSS draws it membership primarily from rural and agrarian groups. MUS has adopted an approach of engagement with the government and policy to address civic issues in Guwahati, while KMSS takes a more confrontational and aggressive posture to oppose eviction drives. KMSS at times links the question of land rights to the interests of the 'indigenous' people of Assam whereas MUS is concerned more broadly with urban issues (such as adequate housing and environmental sustainability) from a human rights perspective. By focusing on these two organizations, I highlight how land politics has taken shape in different forms in Guwahati since the 1990s.

However, not all groups facing eviction can make the kinds of demands that we have seen in the case of the hill settlements (chapter 4). In the third section below, I take up the case of a Dalit slum, detailing how their anti-eviction strategy is based on formal requests to the government and carefully worded petitions rather than confrontation or a vigorous assertion of rights. Although NGOs have also intervened in that case, the different strategies and outcomes of these struggles point to the variable leverage that different groups in Assam enjoy based largely on their social identity. The identity of residents of informal settlements (as tribal, 'indigenous', or 'outsiders') also inflects how state agencies responds to demands for land titles or the suspension of eviction drives.

This contrast in the approach to eviction threats, between tribal hill settlements and the Dalit slum, points to the variable leverage that different ethnic and social groups hold in Assam. In particular, the social category of '*khilonjiya',* which may be glossed as 'indigenous', plays a critical role in determining the legitimacy of a group's claim to land, resources and different kinds of rights. In Assam, *khilonjiya* includes all the tribal groups (except tribals settled on tea estates, who were brought from central India to provide labour during the colonial period), as well as Assamese-speaking Hindus and Muslims. As discussed in chapter 1, over the last few decades politics in Assam has centred around questions of ethnicity, rightful belonging and citizenship, with the rise of social movements and political parties dedicated to protecting the interests of the *khilonjiya* people of Assam. As a result, in cases such as the land conflicts in Guwahati, tribal and Assamese-speaking people can make claims as legitimate 'indigenous' state subjects and citizens (rather than

illegal immigrants) who are legally entitled to land rights. The politics of indigeneity leaves out those groups not considered as *khilonjiya*, which therefore are forced to negotiate with the state to claim land or other rights from a much weaker position. In this chapter I illustrate this contrast by comparing the anti-eviction movement in the hill settlements with the case of a Dalit slum in Guwahati.

Civil Society Groups' Engagement with Evictions: Case of MUS

In the preceding chapters, I have mentioned the engagement of different political parties and social organizations in Guwahati's land politics over the years. Until the early 1970s, the Left and Communist groups were the most influential in mobilizing people against eviction and demanding land rights. In the 1990s, opposition parties like the National Congress Party (NCP) and CPI(M) and Congress would sometimes speak on behalf of the hill residents and stage protests against eviction drives. More recently, several civil society groups, comprised of local citizens, former bureaucrats, lawyers, activists and other people from various backgrounds have engaged in Guwahati's governance issues. They have focused on problems such as water supply, electricity, regularization of slums, and land rights.

Mahanagar Unnayan Samity (MUS), formed in 2005, is one of the most prominent civil society groups to engage with the land question. MUS was formed by several individuals affiliated with Left-leaning organizations such as trade unions and worker associations, as well as middle-class residents of Guwahati. From the mid-2000s, MUS organized several protests in different parts of Guwahati to articulate their demands, such as adequate provision of drinking water in the informal settlements, solving Guwahati's flood problem, and stopping privatization of the electricity sector. MUS' persistence with these issues through petitions, press conferences, and letters to government officials rendered them a formidable force in the city. Several ex-bureaucrats are active members of MUS. Because they are aware of the complex laws and regulations surrounding land, they could formulate demands in correct bureaucratic language.

Subodh Sharma, former president of MUS, told me that a major issue in Guwahati was that of land 'settlement', referring to the inadequate or incomplete surveys that had been carried out in areas where informal settlements are located, especially on the hills. One of their primary goals was to ensure that residents of informal settlements (in urban slums as well as on the hills) could get enrolled in government schemes, such as the

JNNURM,[100] which would enable them to access secure housing. To this end, the MUS requested the Additional Commissioner of Guwahati to undertake a proper survey of slums and the hill settlements, since some had never been surveyed. On several occasions, members of MUS themselves undertook surveys of informal settlements in Guwahati. Subodh argued: 'If surveys are not done, then people will not be listed as beneficiaries. Then if they are evicted from their current settlement, they will be forced to make a slum elsewhere. Guwahati therefore would not be 'slum-free'.[101]

An examination of MUS leaflets and letters to the government from the early 2000s reveals that they had put forward multiple suggestions to address the 'problem' of informal settlements, such as places where residents could be relocated, and which government policies could be employed to facilitate rehabilitation. On the issue of eviction of hill settlements, the MUS position was that while there should be no eviction without rehabilitation, people should not be living on the hills. They argued that the hill settlements lack basic infrastructure and have poor access to basic services. Therefore, they advocated for relocation of the settlers from the top of the hills to vertical rehabilitation housing in the foothills. They argued that government schemes such as JNNURM, in which the beneficiary pays 10% of the cost for housing and the remaining cost is born by the government, could be used for this purpose. This strategy, they believed, would curtail the spread of hill settlements and would also make it easier to provide amenities to the settlers, while ensuring that the hill settlements are not targeted for the declining green cover in Guwahati. Biren Sharma, Secretary of MUS, told me:

> *We knew that people live in the hills, but it was only after visiting the hills that we got to know many people who have settled there. We realized we must engage with them as stakeholders of Guwahati's urban future. We made specific demands to the Guwahati Municipal Corporation. We asked for a survey of the hill settlements. AC Nielsen from Bengaluru was assigned the task of doing the survey. This was indeed a good step taken by the Corporation. We helped the survey team access the settlements, as several settlements are apprehensive of giving information to outsiders, fearing repercussions.*

[100] Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, an urban redevelopment programme launched by the Government of India under the Ministry of Urban Development, in operation from 2005 to 2014.

[101] Creating 'slum-free cities' has been a slogan of Government of India's housing policies.

MUS campaigned to spread awareness amongst citizens of Guwahati about their housing and other rights and how they can become beneficiaries of government schemes. Among several demands raised by MUS, land reforms and redistribution of surplus land to marginalized people were prominent. During an interview, MUS members were critical of the sum (popularly referred to as 'land premium') applicants are required to spend to secure tenurial rights (land *pattas*). They felt that this high cost deterred people from applying for regularization or rights and so kept the land officially in the hands of the state government and agencies (such as Forest Department, Railway Department).

Broadly, the *modus operandus* of MUS was to organize campaigns around specific demands and to pressure officials to comply with existing government policies and laws, while urging them to consider various options to resolve issues faced by the people of Guwahati. While MUS organized several sit-ins and demonstrations, it never engaged in significant open conflict with the government. The organization limited its advocacy to dialogue and applying pressure through various official channels. In contrast to urban-based MUS, rural-based KMSS used very different strategies. They have relied more on aggressive and confrontational approaches to press their demands and engage with the government. I detail the involvement of KMSS' in Guwahati's land issues in the following section.

Peasant Organization in the City: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti

As outlined in previous chapters, the hill settlements of Guwahati came up and expanded over several decades, as people from rural areas of Assam and other parts of Northeast India migrated to the city. Consequently, many hill inhabitants retain strong connections with their native villages. This social profile allowed Assam's formidable peasant organization, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (loosely meaning Farmers' Liberation and Struggle Committee, hereafter KMSS) – which has made aggressive demands for land titles for peasants across the state – to become a leader of the anti-eviction struggle of Guwahati. KMSS has engaged in several physical confrontations with eviction teams, and several KMSS members lost their lives due to police firing.

KMSS was formed in 2005 by Right to Information (RTI) activist Akhil Gogoi. As the name suggests, KMSS is mainly involved in organizing peasants in rural Assam around demands for land rights and other agrarian issues (Saikia 2008). KMSS' political agenda

largely centres around the 'issues of land reform, abolition of moneylending and land settlement for the landless peasants' (Saikia 2011, 352). Distribution of land titles to forest dwellers was one of the earliest issues that KMSS took on.[102] KMSS also played a major role in the protest movements against the construction of big dams on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border (Baruah 2012). Around 2010, KMSS also got involved in land struggles in Guwahati. Members of KMSS told me that a significant number of residents of Guwahati's informal settlements, including those on the hills, have migrated from rural areas where KMSS was actively pursuing peasant issues. Therefore, when faced with the threat of eviction, many had reached out to KMSS for support and redress.

The rise of KMSS in the late 2000s marks a significant turn in Assam's social and political discourse. While it was Left groups that effectively mobilized support for claiming land rights in the 1960s and 1970s (chapter 3), the KMSS represents a significant push towards a politics of asserting the land rights of landless peasants and tenant farmers, and for other marginalized groups, based on similar but distinct ideological grounds. Throughout its history, KMSS has stressed that it stands for peoples' causes by opposing the failings of the ruling classes. According to KMSS founder Akhil Gogoi, its ideological framework is modern Marxism with an emphasis on nationalism. KMSS stands for anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist positions, pitting it against the corporate-based economy which, they argue, is detrimental to the interests of the poor working classes, including peasant-workers. Although the politics of KMSS has a leftist and socialist mould, it strongly distances itself from the parliamentary Left parties in Assam. In an interview, Akhil Gogoi accused the Left leadership of being immersed in middle-class interests which do not challenges the existing oppressive power structures.[103]

KMSS organized several anti-eviction mobilizations and protests in front of the Assam State Assembly, some of which took a violent turn leading to casualties (as mentioned above). KMSS shot into prominence in Guwahati in 2011 by blocking the National Highway to protest the eviction of informal settlements in the city, including those on the hills. One of the most tragic incidents took place in 2013, when a KMSS activist, Pranab Boro, immolated himself during an agitation demanding land titles for the hill settlers. This confrontational approach of KMSS had endeared it to the people struggling for secure land tenure in Guwahati and elsewhere, while the urban middle class

[102] http://sanhati.com/excerpted/2274/ (last accessed on 6 September 2022).

[103] http://sanhati.com/excerpted/2274/#comments (last accessed on 2 September 2022).

and some civil society organizations (including MUS) expressed strong displeasure about KMSS' radical stance and strategy.

In 2011, the government carried out an eviction drive at Kalapani hill settlement of south Guwahati. In chapter 3 I discussed the evictions and in anti-eviction mobilizations in Kalapani in the 1960s. More recently, it has been activists of MUS and political parties that have been active in the land issue in Kalapani. Kalapani had faced evictions because the Forest Department claimed that some of the land where the settlement stood was under its jurisdiction. However, people continued to live there after rebuilding their homes subsequent to the earlier eviction. In 2011 Kalapani again captured headlines after KMSS organized people against the eviction drive by blocking the highway, which ultimately halted the eviction. A few days later, KMSS organized a protest of around 10,000 people in front of the Assam State Secretariat to demand land rights for the hill settlers, resulting in a scuffle with the police. Following this incident, KMSS leader Akhil Gogoi was arrested for instigating violence, following which KMSS announced a state-wide shutdown (*bandh*).

From this point onwards, KMSS became the main force behind the anti-eviction movement in Guwahati. Other organizations, such as Brihattar Guwahati Mati Patta Dabi Samiti (loosely translated as Committee for Demand for Settlement of Land Titles in Greater Guwahati, hereafter BGMPDS), were also part of the movement. However, most members of BGMPDS are lawyers, and they focus on the legal aspects of land claims and engage in court battles when members of KMSS are prosecuted, rather than direct action or protest. How did KMSS, a rural-based organization, manage to organize people on a large scale in Guwahati? In the following section, I delve into this question based on my interactions with KMSS members and residents of hill settlements.

Rise of KMSS in Guwahati's land politics

Until the 1970s, popular movements around land rights in Assam were primarily led by the Left and Communist organizations such as the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) and Communist Party of India (CPI). In chapter 3, I described how in the 1960s, the CPI had organized a three-day march to the Shillong to protest against evictions of settlements on government lands. From the late 1970s, the Assam Agitation, based on protecting the interests of the ethnic Assamese, pushed leftist politics to the fringes. In some places, leftist grassroots workers were attacked for opposing the Assam Agitation. KMSS seems to have filled the void created by this political shift by focusing on issues of peasants and landless people of Assam. Over time, KMSS expanded its geographical reach

beyond the villages and started getting involved in issues that appealed to the wider public. It also spearheaded a strong movement against the Citizenship Amendment Bill in 2018-2020, which led to the arrests of KMSS leaders including Akhil Gogoi. Incidentally, several communist workers who had gone into political hibernation during the height of the Assamese sub-nationalist movement became members and functionaries of KMSS.

From 2010, KMSS became a formidable force in Guwahati as it aggressively articulated demands for land rights for the hill settlers. One of the primary complaints of settlers impacted by evictions was that the maps delineating forest areas had been drawn or altered to benefit business establishments. Because the peasant mobilization led by KMSS had pitted them against the interests of big landlords and corporates, the hill settlers found resonance between their concerns and KMSS allegations that government policies are biased in favour of business and corporate interests. It has been well documented how Guwahati's environmental issues are partly connected with the construction of high-end real estate projects by encroaching on wetlands and forest land on the city's periphery.[104] Several elite housing societies and business establishments have also come up on hilly areas such as Kharghuli Hill. During demonstrations and media briefings, KMSS activists would regularly point out the double standard in environmental activists and the government in accusing hill settlements of destroying the forests while allowing other developments to come up undisturbed.

Jatin Sharma is an activist of KMSS. Originally hailing from Nalbari district in Western Assam, where he was a member of the CPI(M), he migrated to Guwahati in the early 1980s after coming under attack from supporters of Assam Agitation. Jatin lives in the Hengrabari area of Guwahati, which has several hills. I met Jatin during a meeting about governance issues in Guwahati organized by an NGO. Jatin forcefully pointed out that land in Guwahati is one of the most ambiguous 'commodities' because the government has not conducted surveys regularly. Jatin's viewpoint resonated with what I had gathered in my fieldwork, where people complained about inaccurate surveys, unclear demarcation of land, and therefore incomplete and long-drawn land settlement process, rendering them vulnerable to eviction (chapter 4). After the meeting, I reached out to Jatin and requested time to discuss my research with him. Jatin asked me to visit his house in Hengrabari. When I visited him, he related his journey as a migrant to Guwahati in the early 1980s and how he got involved with KMSS:

[104] https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/who-messed-it-up-33915 (last accessed on 2 September 2022).

Why did I come to Guwahati in the first place? To avoid being targeted politically. In Nalbari, I was a member of CPI(M). When the Assam Agitation began, my comrades and I were targeted. So, I have steered away from any political activities in Guwahati. However, when eviction drives would occur in the nearby hilly areas, I would go with others to protest against the eviction, because most people who would be affected by eviction are poor people. In the mid-2000s, when KMSS was formed, I noted that they raised such issues in different parts of Assam, which I appreciated. When they got involved in the land struggle in Guwahati, I saw that they started mobilizing in the hill settlements. I was keen but sceptical, as I have seen political parties in the past use the people for their own goals and then discard them when they attain power. I had no intention of being part of such an agenda. Some KMSS members contacted me and urged me to talk with Akhil Gogoi. So, I went to their office. I thought there was no harm in having a dialogue, right? After talking to Akhil, I realized why he has been able to inspire and mobilize so many people across Assam. He seemed to be a dedicated cadre rather than a leader of KMSS, and I felt I could work with him. A few days later, when we were marching to the Dispur Secretariat from Hengrabari, thousands of people were marching. After a long time, I felt that there was a force in Assam to speak on issues of land and livelihood, not shy to go into confrontation with the government.

According to Jatin, KMSS can stand up to the government because of their inside knowledge of how evictions are planned and strategized. Jatin shared several examples of the tactics he and his comrades would use to get inside information, which helped them to formulate their political strategies. But Jatin expressed his apprehension that the right-wing BJP government in Assam might go ahead with eviction drives using a different strategy – instead of organizing mass evictions, there would be selective evictions of few households in a settlement. Indeed, they had already started using this approach in some places. Jatin explained:

A water tank is supposed to come up on top of the hill in this area where people are already living. Municipal authorities and some party members would convince other people in the settlement not to protest against the eviction by assuring them that if the eviction goes ahead peacefully, their houses will not be impacted in the future. Now, people might think that at the cost of a few families getting evicted, their houses will remain safe,

and so they buy into the proposition. Why such a strategy? In this area, there are 5000 votes, so if they come here for eviction, they would not be able to do it in one go.

Further explaining this strategy, Jatin continued:

On top of the hill is a water tank, beside which a few families live on government land. Now, as the government wants this land to construct government quarters, they will initially evict few households. This would reduce their capacity to resist eviction since others are not being targeted. For example, houses on four bighas of land are evicted, 20 houses get evicted, so 20 houses are subtracted from the anti-eviction movement. In such selective evictions, I fear that families of non-tribal and non-indigenous communities, such as the Bengali Muslims, would be targeted first. In case tribals are affected, there might be a provision for resettlement.

This selective eviction strategy was adopted in the eviction at Rail Colony, discussed below. Jatin's apprehension about the targeting of Muslims echoes the observation of Sapna Doshi (2013) in the case of Mumbai, where slum evictions have targeted Muslims and North Indians, who are vilified by ethnopolitical parties such as the Shiv Sena as 'outsiders'. The significance of ethnicity in the politics of claiming and defending urban citizenship by residents of urban informal settlements is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

'Mati lage? Mati lage?' Scars of anti-eviction street battles

Several interlocutors told me that Jatin had visited their settlements to organize them against eviction, which had earned him goodwill. For example, Rokeya Azad from the Shantinagar hill settlement recounted that when she moved to Guwahati from Barpeta district, Jatin guided her and other migrants about how to get enrolled in the voters list, obtain ration cards, secure electricity connections, and access other such facilities needed to settle down. Rokeya and her neighbours from Shantinagar had been at the forefront of the anti-eviction mobilization organized by KMSS on the streets of Guwahati. Shantinagar was one of the disputed settlements which was claimed by the Forest Department as a part of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary, which was contested by Shantinagar residents. Below and the following section, I detail the involvement of these settlers in the anti-eviction movement led by KMSS.

One day, I was walking towards Shantinagar after completing an interview in a nearby hill settlement. It was an uphill *kaccha* road with trees on both sides. It was the winter season, and the hill settlements offered a bit more coolness than the plains of Guwahati. As I walked, I saw some people ahead who had gathered together and were discussing something. Although I have been visiting the hill settlements for a few months, I felt awkward anticipating that I would have to walk past the gathering, because researchers like me were objects of suspicion. However, when I tried to pass by the gathering without any interaction, a known voice hailed me: 'Feeling tired or what?' To my surprise and relief, it was Aurobindo Patir, a Mising with whom I had interacted earlier. I responded, smiling, telling him that I was on my way to Rokeya Azad's house. I then politely asked what they were discussing. Aurobindo said they gather like this every Sunday to talk about what work needed to be done in the settlement. That day they were discussing the prospect of cementing the pathway on which we were standing, which would make walking easier for people. I nodded, agreeing that it might be a good idea. Aurobindo replied that there are many such projects they would like to implement in the settlement to make it a better place to live, but the threat of eviction lends uncertainty to their plans. Aurobindo then explained how to reach Rokeya's home and wished me well. I headed off to Rokeya's house.

In the past, I had visited Shantinagar settlement with my activist friends, who later requested Rokeya to meet with me. When she met me at the entrance to her courtyard, I had to refresh her memory about my identity. Rokeya then offered me a chair in an extension of her house, while sat on a stool. I noticed that Rokeya's house, like the other houses in the settlement, are *kaccha* (un-cemented). Rokeya echoed Aurobindo's concern that the prospect of eviction has deterred her and others from investing in the construction of *pakka* (brick or cement) houses.

In 2013, some of the largest demonstrations demanding land rights for the hill settlers were organized by KMSS. Jiten had visited the hill settlements and mobilized people to join the demonstration. Rokeya was one of the lead people from Shantinagar. When I asked Rokeya to tell me about her participation in the anti-eviction movement, she pulled up the woollen sleeve on her left arm and showed me her scars that came from a police *'lathi* charge'[105] during a demonstration in front of the Dispur Secretariat. Rokeya said that she understood the obligations of the police and the forest officials to discharge

[105] *Lathi* charge refers to the use of long batons by the police to disperse or control crowds.

their duties as ordered by the government, but if that duty conflicts with peoples' right to settle in Guwahati, confrontation would be inevitable. Pulling down her sleeve, Rokeya shared her story about demonstration:

> *Mati lage? Mati lage?* [you want land? you want land?], *the police were shouting as they were lathi charging the protesters in front of the Secretariat. I was hit as I was in the front. When our procession from the numerous hill settlements around us reached Khanapara, the police tried to stop us there from proceeding. However, several fearless youths of KMSS were in charge and would march on by any means. People were energized seeing them and followed with resolve. The leaders forced their way through the barricades, after which street battle began. Police began to lathi charge and throw tear gas.*
>
> *When I was injured, people from the nearby Ruwatnagar settlement took me to Dispur Hospital. I was unconscious. When I opened my eyes, I saw Jatin Da, and he asked me how I felt. I was shifted to Guwahati Medical College, along with six more injured people, where I gave some bites to a television channel. Even now, after several years news channels would re-run those clips whenever there is a case of eviction. And then people would call to check on me. Hasina lives nearby. Like me, she was at the forefront of the procession. Six members of the Black Commandos beat her up; women commandos heckled her by pulling her saree and hair. Hasina is tough, she hit one of them on the face with her fist, and the nose ring of the commando was pushed through her nose out the other side. Police slapped a case against Hasina for this. After that demonstration, I took two months to recover.*

This detailed description of physical violence perpetrated by the police during an anti-eviction protest, which Rokeya shared nonchalantly, left me with a feeling of unexplainable numbness. It brought back some memories of being disturbed by images of police officers beating peasant women in my home state, West Bengal, during an agitation against land acquisition. As evening descended, I felt the chill in the wind more acutely as I tried to process what Rokeya said, while scribbling in my diary. Rokeya's son brought me a glass of water, which afforded me a welcome break. At this point, I saw a young boy delivering an Assamese newspaper to Rokeya's house. I was surprised since I did not expect to find a newspaper delivery network in the hill settlements. However, Rokeya said that one of her neighbours is a newspaper hawker, and he would deliver the newspaper in the evening after the end of his day's work. Rokeya picked up the newspaper. While going

through it, she remarked that she had read a report in the newspaper about the prospect of eviction in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary in 2017.

After demonstrating on the road against evictions, the hill settlers in Amchang had to face another eviction drive in 2017. But due to large scale protests across Assam and in Guwahati, the eviction could not be completed. In the next section I discuss some moments in the eviction drive of 2017 which became confrontational due to people's resistance.

'Hoi bachim nhoi morim' – Resisting eviction

The hill settlements that fell within the boundaries or eco-sensitive zone of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary developed different strategies for opposing the threat of eviction. These strategies vary, depending on the social demography of the settlement and its history and location. These variations also determine which political or social organizations have a presence in different settlements. In chapter 4 I discussed the debates about the notification of Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary and outlined the legal and other strategies employed by settlers to challenge eviction orders. But settlements like Shantinagar adopted a more confrontational approach in addition to legal avenues.

In Shantinagar, KMSS was the prime organizing force through members like Rokeya. When the Amchang evictions were declared in 2017, people apprehended that eviction would take place in settlements such as Shantinagar which the Forest Department claims as under its jurisdiction. KMSS asked Rokeya to organize people from her settlement to sit for *dharnas* (sit-in protests) on the pathways leading to the hill settlements, and to prepare to physically resist the eviction forces. Under the leadership of their local committees, people from nearby settlements also joined the sit-in. With no assurance from the government about resettlement or rehabilitation of the evictees, a physical confrontation to stop the eviction drive seemed like the only option.

When the eviction team reached the pathways leading to the hill settlements, scuffles ensued between the settlers and the police forces. After some time, the police used tear gas to disperse the demonstrators and managed to move into the settlements with the eviction team. Once the eviction team entered Shantinagar, the settlers pleaded with the labourers, telling them that demolition of their houses would leave them homeless. According to Rokeya, the labourers engaged in the eviction drives were sympathetic to their cause and would slow the work when they were not in sight of the supervising government officials. This was because the labourers too live in similar informal

settlements. As a result, some houses were only partially demolished, or damaged in such a way so that they could easily be reconstructed.

As I talked with Rokeya, a young man arrived in the courtyard. I noticed that he was carrying a bag containing knives of different sizes, and that he was observing me from a distance with a question in his eyes. Rokeya told me that he is her elder son, who had dropped out of school after class 10 and now works in a chicken shop located in the foothill area of Nabajyotinagar. The son kept the bag filled with knives outside the house and went inside. Pointing to the bag, Rokeya recalled the day they confronted the eviction team in Shantinagar:

> *People took in their hands whatever they could that day to confront the eviction team. These knives were also taken by some of us when we went to the sit-in demonstration. It was 25 August 2017; the monsoon was still on its way out. Trees and plants were in full bloom. The eviction team comprised of elephants, JCBs*[106] *and labourers. There was an announcement on the mike to give way for the eviction team, but people continued their dharna. Then the police put up a banner stating that they would be forced to use tear gas to dispel the crowd. Once tear gas cannisters were hurled at the crowd, people started dispersing and running back to their houses to dismantle them, to minimize their losses. Those who resisted the eviction team got hurt when the tear gas shells burst near us. This was the fourth time I faced tear gas, and every time the police would put up a banner warning that they would hurl the tear gas shell.*
>
> *The demolition took place over two days. After massive protests, it was called off on the third day. On the day the second round of the eviction was supposed to take place, in November 2017, people resolved that* 'hoi bachim nhoi morim' [either we will live (by stopping the eviction) or die]. *People laid down on the ground to stop the eviction team entering from the foothills. Once again, tear gas was employed by the police, injuring many. When the police were beating up Bishnuprasad, who lives nearby, his son went to stop the beating. Well, he got beaten up as well. He was studying in class 11, but after that incident he had a mental breakdown and became very silent. Now, he does not want to talk much.*
>
> *When the eviction team reached Shantinagar, I dismantled my house, so there was nothing much to demolish. When the labourers conducting the eviction came, I told*

[106] JCB is the colloquial name in India for earth-moving equipment often used in construction and demolition activities. It refers to the name of the manufacturer.

them that I am a poor person. They nodded and said that they understood the situation. They uprooted a few bamboo structures and tilted the kitchen cover so it could be repaired quickly. The labourers could act like this because the officers would not make an effort to come up this high. They would shout their orders from a lower altitude and ask the workers to wrap up their work quickly.

In many places around us, women and children collectively faced the eviction team and the labourers had to run away. And when they were running away, their food packets fell down, which were later consumed by us. So, the officials know the women of this area very well. Whenever we are there in any agitation and negotiation, they would choose their words very carefully.

The eviction drive was incomplete, halted by the settlers' resistance and widespread criticisms by social and political organizations in Assam. However, some houses, like Rokeya's, were demolished at least partly and had to be rebuilt. Rokeya's family and several others spent ten days in a makeshift camp. After that, she sent her children to a relative's place outside Guwahati.

The eviction in Amchang was called off after a massive outcry by numerous organizations, including KMSS. KMSS' confrontational stance against government forces has earned it massive support among the hill settlers of Guwahati. Its proactive anti-eviction and land rights movement has made it far more popular than urban-based groups such as MUS. The tribal identity of the affected people as tribal and indigenous was also highlighted by numerous ethnic organizations, which played an effective role in limiting the duration and impact of the eviction drive in Amchang. Their accusation that the government was not sensitive to the indigenous communities' concerns forced the authorities to withdraw. Non-indigenous people, however, are not usually accorded such consideration in Assam. I illustrate this point in the next section through a case study of a Dalit slum.

Settlement Rights and National Citizenship: Comparative Case of an Urban Slum

'These people are facing an eviction notice, and many of them have not made it to the final list of the National Register of Citizens', commented Rehana as she guided me through the

narrow alleys of 'Rail Colony' in the northern part of Guwahati. Rehana was working in the colony as a community mobilizer, focusing on the rights of women domestic workers.

Although the slum is known locally as Rail Colony, the control of the Railway Department over the land where it is situated is contested by the settlers. The residents of Rail Colony are mainly Dalits whose forebears originally came from Bihar. Many were brought to Guwahati during the British colonial period to take up sanitation jobs in the growing town. Some residents got involved in the fish trade in Uzanbazar by the Brahmaputra River. After independence, Guwahati Municipality relocated the forefathers of the current inhabitants, who were working as municipal sanitation workers, to this colony from other parts of Guwahati, where they were allotted housing.

Until the 1990s, Rail Colony was located at the edge of the city, and the railway line from Bharalu port to Chandmari used to run through the colony until 1962. Over time, people from other communities started settling in the colony, but the Dalits remain the largest group. Thus, most residents of the colony belong to families that were settled here by the civic authorities, hence they are not 'squatters' in the usual sense. Several children of the original sanitation workers are employed in the lower rungs of Guwahati Municipality and other government departments and have continued living in the colony. However, most residents are engaged in low-income, informal sector occupations, so it is beyond their means to buy land or pay rent in Guwahati. Therefore, they have desperately tried to hold on to their houses and small plots of land in the colony by fending off attempts to evict them.

Multiple eviction drives have been mounted to remove the settlement, but they have been unsuccessful as the settlers were able to secure stay orders from the court. However, the residents have not been able to secure tenurial rights from the government. Consequently, the Railway Department continues to issue eviction notices on a regular basis (about once every two to three years).

I originally had no plans to carry out fieldwork in an urban slum of Guwahati such as Rail Colony. But during my fieldwork when I learned from some activist friends that an eviction notification had been served on the site, I volunteered to accompany them. I was keen to see how communities other than the hill settlements respond when faced with the prospect of eviction.

On my first visit to the colony, when I reached the entrance, I realized that I had passed this settlement several times in the past. When I was a postgraduate student, my friends and I used to frequent some shops near the colony's entrance to buy pork and

liquor. The colony has a reputation for making country liquor. In the past, I had noticed banners stating that no country liquor is made in the colony and that people should not come looking for such liquor there. However, when I entered the colony, I was greeted with the pungent smell of country liquor being brewed, and I observed that liquor shops and shops selling fritters of meat and vegetables were situated opposite each other. These are examples of the residents' engagement in the urban informal economy for their livelihoods.

A show-cause notice was issued by the Railway Department in August 2018 to many households of the colony, asking why they should not be evicted from the place. The notice required a response within 15 days. Several women with whom Rehana was working shared their anxiety and sense of helplessness about this notice and sought her guidance. Rehana, together with her other activist friends who were associated with student politics, organized meetings in the colony where lawyers and political activists spoke in favour granting land rights to the residents of Rail Colony. The lawyers stressed that there is an ongoing conflict between the Railways and the Revenue Department over the ownership of the land, and thus the former have no right to issue eviction orders. I gathered from the speeches that the colony had been served eviction notices several times in the past, in 1985, 1991, 2002, 2007 and 2017. A worker of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) said that in 2007, when a member of the Railway Standing Committee -- Basudev Acharya (elected Member of the Parliament affiliated to the CPI[M]) – visited Guwahati, he had assured slum residents that no eviction from Railway lands would take place without rehabilitation. This stance had stopped the eviction process at that time. However, as the status of the land remained unresolved, the threat of eviction again arose.

The impact of evictions on students living in affected informal settlements has been a major issue in Guwahati. The case of Amchang showed how eviction drives could adversely affect students' academic careers. Similarly, several students in the Rail Colony had board examinations coming up, and they were apprehensive about how they would prepare for their examinations if the eviction took place. Student leader Kashyap Chowdhury, a member of the leftist Students' Federation of India (SFI), highlighted the potential plight of the students among other issues, in his address at the meeting:

> *We have been involved in organizing the students of the colony who have exams scheduled in the upcoming days. Eviction of settlements has taken place across Assam in the recent past, which has caused great hardship for the poor people. The Assam government must*

be held accountable. It is unfair that after staying in the colony for so many years, the people suddenly received an eviction notice. It is only reasonable that there should have been a plan of rehabilitation and compensation. There are around 260 colonies or slum-like settlements within Guwahati, whose residents are involved in different activities in Guwahati's informal economy. The labour of these peoples is imperative for Guwahati's functioning. The government would claim that the land is being cleared to facilitate governmental works. But it has been seen that the lands are often transferred to business enterprises and capitalists. Recently an eviction took place along the banks of the Bharalu river supposedly to solve Guwahati's flooding issue, where the houses of poor people were demolished. But the eviction team did not even touch the palatial house of Himmat Singhka [an influential businessman of Assam].

When the eviction was planned on Railway land near Anuradha Cinema Hall, it had to be called off as people resisted unitedly. If all of you give your consent, we will submit a memorandum to the DC and the Railways Department. We would also submit a memorandum on behalf of SFI as many students have upcoming exams, and an eviction drive would be detrimental to their education. Multiple memorandums are meant to create pressure on the bureaucracy. Given your agreement, we would give a counter timeline of one week to the DC and Railway authorities to respond to the memorandum, as the show-cause notice has a timeline of 15 days. If the response does not come in the stipulated timeline, we will organize protest rallies on the streets. You should push for a permanent settlement. Otherwise, eviction notices would continue to come every few years, as they have been since the 1980s.

In the subsequent submissions of memoranda and protests, there was a significant presence of students. Most speakers, including colony residents, urged the people to unite to press for legal land tenure rights based on the settler's long history of dwelling in the same place. Alternatively, they urged implementation of resettlement policies of the government[107] and cited precedents of rehabilitation and resettlement in other India cities.[108]

[107] https://indianrailways.gov.in/railwayboard/view_section.jsp?lang=0&id=0,1,304,366,540,996 (last accessed on 2 September 2022).

[108] For examples of resettlement and rehabilitation in Mumbai, see: https://www.sparcindia.org/resettlement.html (last accessed on 2 September 2022).

This event occurred in 2018, around the same time when entire Assam and other parts of Northeast India witnessed an intense agitation against the Citizenship Act Amendment Bill, which proposed to grant citizenship only to non-Muslim refugees from neighbouring countries. While articulating their claims to land, people often point out that if 'foreigners' can be accommodated under such an Act, why are natives and indigenous people pushed out of their lands? The chair of the meeting exclaimed, 'Are we illegal foreigners that deserve such treatment?'.

Here it is pertinent to reiterate that since the early post-independence period, the political discourse in Assam has been dominated by the issue of migrants from erstwhile East Bengal (presently Bangladesh). The task of updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam was undertaken in 2018 to identify 'illegal immigrants'. Poor people across religious and ethnic lines in Assam found the NRC process torturous, as it required a submission of a large amount of paperwork – including documents which many people (especially refugees) do not hold or have lost. For example, in Rail Colony many residents said that their papers, such as birth certificates, caste certificates, and school registration documents, had been damaged or lost in fires. (Fires are a common occurrence in informal settlements in India, often deliberately started to clear the land.)

With the prospect of eviction as well as potential deportation to a detention camp, the residents of Rail Colony faced an uncertain future. The activist network that supported the residents to oppose eviction also helped them to file applications for inclusion in the NRC draft list. Petition letters were prepared to submit to the concerned authorities (see Figure 15). Political organizations also took steps to organize deputations and protest rallies involving the slum residents (see Figure 16). However, when some of the settlers read the petition letters, they were apprehensive: 'The wording and tone of the letter seem to be very strong and blunt. We are worried that this would further enrage the officials and jeopardize our prospects of staying here. We are hopeful that if we pray for consideration from the officials, they will heed our pleas'.

This mild or submissive stance toward the state and its procedures stands in stark contrast to the more confrontational response of tribal inhabitants of the hill settlements, discussed above. The hill settlers would aggressively stress that as an 'indigenous' community, they have the right to occupy and settle on a piece of land in Assam. The contrasting responses to eviction threats by Dalit and tribal settlers leads one to ask how ethnic or caste identity, as well as relation to place, shapes a sense of entitlement and rights,

including claims to material (land) and immaterial resources (citizenship), or one of marginalization and disenfranchisement.

Following a stream of petitions, memorandums, protest gatherings, and a lawsuit, the people of Rail Colony attained a stay order from the court on the eviction process. However, it was clear that the status of the land remained unresolved, which then keeps alive the prospect of eviction in the future.

Securing housing and tenure rights in informal settlements in India is a tedious task that entails a consistent effort by residents, as I have shown in this and the previous chapter. As we saw in the case of Kailashnagar hill settlements (chapter 4), settlers may initially pursue land settlement procedures, but later they may abandon this route drop out as expenses mount. Over time, as I interacted with social and political activists of Guwahati, I learned that there had been previous attempts to organize the residents of Rail Colony to demand secure tenurial or land rights. However, once the threat of eviction wanes, people tend to lose interest in pursuing the case for permanent land rights, as they are satisfied with their position as long as they are able to remain in the colony. The cycle of 'eviction-resistance-stay order-eviction' continues over the years. The uncertainty over citizenship only adds to the vulnerability and insecurity of the urban poor in Guwahati.

Figure 15. Delegation of Rail Colony residents meeting the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup (Metropolitan) District
Photograph by the author

Figure 16. Anti-eviction demonstration by residents of an urban slum organized by Left groups in Guwahati, 23 April 2019
Photograph by the author

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined and elaborated on various anti-eviction struggles that have evolved in Guwahati, focusing on two main types of actors – civil society groups and peasant movements. I then compare the strategies used by these organizations and across different hill settlements with the case of an urban slum. The comparison highlights how the settlers' social identity plays a key role in determining the methods and outcomes of anti-eviction politics. But even within the tribal hill settlements, we find differences in oppositional tactics based on their specific histories and social and spatial locations.

The discussion of the interventions by MUS and KMSS above highlights the different strategies and pathways these two organizations have taken to address the land issue in Guwahati. While MUS adopted the approach of civic politics, focusing on representing the interests of hill settlers through government channels and by invoking laws and government policies, KMSS embraced a more confrontational strategy. A key reason for KMSS' success is that it has taken to the streets to protest against government policies and practices which they deem as anti-people. As the discussion in this chapter

shows, KMSS has successfully organized demonstrations and protest movements for land rights in Guwahati, which are mobilized by dedicated leaders (such as Jatin) and cadres (such as Rokeya). As no other opposition force in Assam has matched the intensity of KMSS programmes, KMSS earned the support of the people of Assam in a short time. For a long time KMSS kept away from electoral politics. However, in the 2021 State Assembly elections it contested few seats and Akhil Gogoi was elected as an MLA. In the coming days, the implications of KMSS' entry into parliamentary politics for Assam's popular movement would become clear.

The case of the Dalit urban slum presented in this chapter shows how social groups with less political leverage in Assam (due to their non-tribal or migrant status) respond to the threat of eviction, compared to the hill settlements. This comparison suggests that the politics of land in Assam is profoundly shaped by the larger ethno-politics of the state, which determines the political influence and identity of different groups. Unlike the tribal hill settlers, the Dalits of Rail Colony were not keen on asserting their rights aggressively, fearing repercussions from the authorities which they believed would be detrimental to their quest to stay in place. The colony had faced eviction notices in the past and had always managed to avert demolition through petitions and led to stay orders from the courts. However, these slum residents had not taken any steps to secure land rights, unlike some of the hill settlers. Their lack of tenurial security in turn resulted in intermittent eviction and show-cause notices, leaving them in a constant state of precarity.

The varying responses to evictions outlined in the case studies in this and the previous chapter show that tribal migrants (even those not from Assam) can invoke their 'indigenous' identity to oppose eviction and make claims to land, unlike the Bihari Dalits who are tagged as migrants. The effectiveness of such a strategy draws on the larger citizenship politics of the region, which asserts the prior claims of 'indigenous' groups as against others who are identified as 'outsiders'. This larger context is reflected in the uneven politics and experiences of eviction across different kinds of informal settlements in Guwahati.

Conclusion

Ruli was waiting for me at the entrance of the Lakhimpur hill settlement. After climbing up the road for about 15 minutes, she took me to the house of Prafulla, one of the earliest settlers of Lakhimpur. Our conversation was in Assamese, and I kept taking notes in my diary. When I conveyed that I was studying contestations around land on the Guwahati hills, Prafulla said, 'On 2 May 2002, an eviction took place in our locality. The eviction team approached the settlement from the Kalapahar side. Look, we are fighting the case in the court. We wanted to find out how much of the land in our settlement falls under forest and how much under non-forest land. The High Court ordered a joint survey by the Forest and Revenue Departments. The survey was conducted in 2017. Now we have a copy of the map demarcating forest and non-forest area jointly signed by the Forest and Revenue officials.' Prafulla showed me the copy of the survey report, which contained the signatures of these officials. He pointed out the boundary of the forest area on the map and said that it was near his place, where there is a 'bihutoli' (a community ground where festivals are celebrated). I asked how many houses would fall under the forest areas on the hill. Prafulla responded that there are around 1000 houses in the settlement, and around 70-75 percent of the houses would be on forest land, according to the survey map. Prafulla's house is not in the forest area, but Ruli's house is. Ruli expressed her anxiety, saying that there is no security in living here, but where will they go as an alternative?

I asked about the settlement's history and how people started living here. Prafulla said that in the past, the Bodo and Karbi communities practised jhum cultivation on the hills. He came here in 1985; he bought the land from a Karbi person named for Rs 10,000. People from different parts of Assam came and settled on Lakhimpur hill, mainly to escape rural distress caused by fragmentation of landholdings, diminishing returns from agriculture, and soil erosion due to shifting rivers. In Guwahati, there are opportunities to work in companies and do manual labour. However, as the income from these jobs is too low to afford the high rents of the plain areas of Guwahati, people look for a piece of land to settle on the hills.

An eviction drive in 2002 demolished many houses. However, the eviction team did not break down the nearby Kali mandir. In 2010, when eviction was carried out in the nearby Garchuk hills, threats were issued over electronic and print media that

encroachments would be carried out on all the hills of Guwahati, saying that the Forest Department would not part with any land under its jurisdiction.

Prafulla expressed doubts about the role of the Forest Department in all this. When he first came here, he said, there were no trees on large stretches of the hills. They had mostly been chopped down earlier. At that time, he was able to communicate with people on the next hill just by shouting. Over time, as people settled on the hills, they planted and maintained the trees you see now. Prafulla commented, 'Manuh thakile' he gach thakibo (only if people are here will there be trees)'. II asked whether the court case asking for the survey to be carried out had been filed jointly by all the unnayan samiti (development committees) of Lakhimpur. Ruli responded that initially they had decided to file the case together, but at a later stage the financial contributions became erratic. So Lachitnagar was continuing with the case alone, with the aid of a lawyer.

Ruli and Prafulla both alleged that the state government declares land as forest area as a way of getting funds sanctioned by the central government. They blamed the social forestry programme undertaken by a previous government in Assam for this. They were also resentful about wealthy people and politicians who build fancy houses on the Kharghuli hills, saying that those houses should be broken down first. Speaking about the survey report given by the court, they were unsure of how to inform people of the outcome. Prafulla allowed me to take photographs of the verdict document but was not keen on giving me a photocopy. They both believed that the government should take a premium (onetime amount charged by the Revenue Department to grant a long-term leease) and allow the settlers to live on the hills peacefully.

After our interaction at Prafulla's house concluded, Ruli requested me to visit her house, where she offered me tea. As I was drinking the tea, Ruli asked, if there is no security of tenure, what will happen if there is an eviction ten years later? By then, she would be older, and it would be difficult to start life afresh elsewhere. If she returns to her native place of Bijulighat in Nalbari district, she will not have the same work opportunities that she does now – she works as a volunteer with a social organization. After having tea, I started heading down the hills with Ruli accompanying me. She said she would arrange interviews of other settlements on the hill later.

This interaction in Lakhimpur with Ruli and Prafulla highlights the central theme of the dissertation. As I have shown in the preceding chapters, the hill settlers in Guwahati have employed a wide range of strategies to avoid eviction and to secure tenurial rights. The

conversation quoted above shows how people living on contested land reflect on their settlements and articulate their claims to land and place through different kinds of narratives – by relating the history of the settlement, obtaining forest maps, and putting forth demands for land settlement. For most settlers, many of whom are migrants who came to the city in search of better livelihoods, the hills provide one of the few places they can afford to live. The hills are close to the city so they can commute to work daily, while living rent-free. But the state and middle-class citizens of Guwahati view the hills differently – as 'forest' that is home to wildlife, and that must be protected from 'encroachment' to prevent environmental degradation and the periodic landslides and flooding that plague the city. The consequent notification of the hills as protected forest, and later as a wildlife sanctuary, has generated the complex conflicts between the settlers and state agencies that I have outlined in the thesis.

Such contestations between environmental concerns and the settlement rights of the urban poor are seen across other cities of India and the global south. What is distinctive about this case is how the topography and location of the city has made forest lands a central part of the urban land debate and the Forest Department on of the key actors in these conflicts. This in turn has shaped how settlers have resisted eviction and made claims to land – by challenging the demarcation of forest land itself, or by claiming their rights as tribal and indigenous subjects. Settlers also draw on the long history of peasant movements for land rights in Assam.

The thesis traces the exclusionary nature of Guwahati's urbanization over several decades, demonstrating how the capacity of tribal communities and other groups to claim a 'right to the city' has shifted over time, in line with larger political trends. It explores several aspects of the contestations around the hill settlements of Guwahati. We have seen that the government may notified land for forest protection and wildlife conservation regardless of the existence of human settlements, which are then designated as 'encroachments' regardless of how long they have been there. But we have seen how settlers invoke the same regulations and tools of the bureaucracy to defend themselves against eviction – pressing the state to discharge its duty to carry out surveys to ascertain whether the land is Forest or Revenue land. Once they get clarity on the status of the land, they push forward by applying for regularization of the land in accordance with the law. The quest of Prafulla, Ruli and their neighbours to get themselves classified as legal inhabitants rather than encroachers is a common exercise seen across the hills of Guwahati, as I have shown in the preceding chapters. Again, invoking the law against the state, hill

settlers and organizations engaged in anti-eviction struggles allege that the forest boundaries have been drawn in such a way that influential people and business establishments, which have also encroached on the forest, are not targeted for eviction. But with no conclusive steps taken to ensure secure tenure, the anxiety of settlers like Ruli is unlikely to dissipate in the foreseeable future.

In addition to these legal routes to secure tenurial rights, hill settlers (especially those belonging to tribal communities) have staked claims to urban citizenship as indigenous subjects, aligning with the broader regional and national politics centred round ethnicity and citizenship. In chapter 4, I detailed how protests against eviction by tribal bodies successfully halted the eviction and forcing the government to reconsider the notification of the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. Such assertions by tribal people to claim tenurial rights in Guwahati stands in stark contrast to the displacement and dispossession of tribals during the early post-independence phase of urbanization, which met with little resistance (chapter 3). Although anti-eviction movements were being organized by Left groups during that period in Assam, these mobilizations did not specifically foreground the issue of *tribal* displacement.

The issue of land rights came into prominence again in the 1990s, after being in the shadows during the anti-immigration movement in Assam during the 1980s. Small-scale eviction drives took place throughout the 1990s, with the hill settlements as frequent targets. Since the early 2000s, the hill settlements have again been under pressure from the Forest Department as 'encroachments' on forest land that are harmful to the environment. This reflects the wider environmental politics of Assam, where the conservation agenda has been a significant source of contestation on the agrarian-forest frontier since the colonial period. Demands for land and cultivation rights for peasants have often confronted restrictions on settlement on forest lands. The conflicts on the hills of Guwahati are similar, where settlers in protected forest areas attempt to get their land holdings regularized and confirmed as Revenue or urban land, rather than making claims to rights to forest lands (such as under the Forest Rights Act). To that end, settlers have contested the boundaries of the designated forest areas and Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. They have also questioned the logic of designating protected forest areas so close to a dense urban settlement. The grey areas in land administration in Guwahati have compounded the conflicts around land and rendered the hill settlements vulnerable to eviction. The thesis also explores how different groups in a city understand the 'environment' and the implications of these differences for urban governance.

The entry of the peasant organization KMSS into this struggle marked a significant turn in Guwahati's land politics, as settlers gained support and could become more assertive in challenging eviction and claiming land rights. How and why different social and political organizations became prominent or faded from this struggle over the decades is a question that merits deeper inquiry. But the recent involvement of KMSS in this issue shows how developments in other parts of Assam and Northeast India have influenced these urban contestations. This case also points to how rural fault lines may re-emerge in a city, as wider issues such as land rights for peasants and ecological sustainability are refracted on an agrarian-urban frontier.

The comparison between a Dalit slum and the tribal hill settlements in chapter 5 illustrates how social location shapes both vulnerability to eviction as well as people's responses. This comparison highlights the uneven capacity of these groups to claim rights to land and place, based largely on their social identity. The hill settlers have been able to deploy their classification as 'indigenous' in asserting their rights to land, while others who are considered outsiders or illegal migrants are in a more precarious situation. This difference is also reflected in their strategies to prevent eviction – the tribal hill settlers, many of whom are recent migrants to Guwahati, attempt to claim land rights, while the Dalit slum residents have not initiated regularization procedures despite living in the colony since the 1960s. This difference in the responses to eviction threats in Guwahati foreground the uneven capacity of different social and ethnic groups living in urban informal settlements to attain security of tenure. Thus, the thesis shows how struggles around housing and land rights in Indian cities are shaped by the larger political climate. In the case of Guwahati, it is the regional politics ethnicity and citizenship that deeply marks struggles of the urban poor against displacement.

The thesis traverses a range of issues that create conflicts between people and the state, particularly around the delineation of forest lands and rights to settlement. Significantly, but not unexpectedly, ethnic identity and citizenship have emerged as central to Guwahati's land question. The question of urban citizenship has become enmeshed in the larger debate on national citizenship and regional belonging in Assam, often in non-inclusive and problematic ways. In addition, the involvement of tribal and peasant organizations in Guwahati's land struggle reveals the changing nature of politics in the region.

As targeted evictions are increasingly seen in cities of India (such as Muslims in large parts of North India),[109] as well as in other countries (Palestinians in Jerusalem),[110] research on the implications of race, ethnicity and citizenship for the 'right to the city' becomes urgent. Such cases demonstrate how eviction has become a tool in divisive political agendas across countries nations with growing majoritarian political tendencies. Conversely, another question that warrants further exploration is how particular ethnic, religious, caste and other social identities may be deployed by different groups to stake claims to urban space. We might also ask how the environmentalism of the urban elite might intersect with such politics on an urban terrain.

Many of the Guwahati hill settlements are located in vulnerable sites subject to heavy rains and landslides. While people are forced to settle in such places because of the inadequacy of affordable housing in the city, their presence is challenged by environmentalists and government agencies – especially the Forest Department. But even residents of resettlement colonies set up by the municipality (such as Rail Colony) are denied land tenure rights. These issues, together with the confusing ambiguities in the governance of land described in the thesis, illustrate deep problems in urban governance that have been debated by many scholars and policymakers. Across India, the urban poor lack a secure place to live in the city although they are central to the functioning of the economy. Such exclusions have disproportionately affected historically marginalized groups such as Adivasis and Dalits. Violent evictions as well as anti-eviction protests have led even to deaths – underlining the precarity of the poor in Indian cities.

In this context, urban governance needs to become more democratic, equitable and inclusive, while extensive reforms in the administrative set-up are also needed to make the state more transparent and accountable. The voices of the urban poor are hardly heard in the framing of urban policies and programmes, which increasingly align with the interests and agendas of the urban middle classes, the elite and corporate capital. This thesis draws attention to how urbanization, and urban governance, are deeply inflected by regional and national politics – yet Indian cities have yet to develop a robust political space for democratic deliberation and decision-making. In the absence of inclusive mechanisms

[109] https://www.outlookindia.com/national/bulldozer-is-back-in-up-a-lawful-act-or-a-political-vendetta-news-201961 (last accessed on 13 September 2022).

[110] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-61777306 ; https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/palestinians-fear-loss-of-family-homes-as-evictions-loom (last accessed 10 June 2022).

for political participation, citizens engage in other kinds of politics, from anti-eviction mobilizations to everyday negotiations with state or political actors.

The case of the Guwahati hill settlements presented here illustrates the deep engagement of even the poorest urban residents with laws and policies as they have been framed by the state; yet the same laws and policies do not accord them even basic security or rights. What is particularly significant about Guwahati's land struggle is how popular movements emerge in a region that has been heavily militarized since India's independence, often resulting in ineffective and dysfunctional civilian governing institutions. Ordinary citizens as well as the leaders of collective mobilizations, like those seen in Guwahati, are deeply aware of how decision makers are 'seeing like the state' (Scott 1998), and in response they carefully strategize their moves to exert pressure on the state to meet their demands. Despite attaining a degree of recognition and leverage, most hill settlers continue to live in a state of extreme precarity, since the 'value' of environment often supersedes the value of those who are most marginalized in human society.

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