

Contested Resources, History and Epistemologies: The Lived Experiences of the Indigenous Forest Villagers in North Bengal

Mrinalini Paul

PhD Scholar, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai,

Email: pmrinalini2209@gmail.com

We are widely diverse human beings united by the idea that the understanding of the world is much larger than the Western understanding of the world. We believe that the transformation of the world may also occur in ways not foreseen by the global North. (De Sousa 2015: 15).

Abstract: *This paper argues that Adivasi and tribal studies in India have been overshadowed by methodologies and ideologies bearing heavy colonial underpinnings. In order to develop this discipline further with sound epistemological base, it is necessary to engage with methodologies of a more organic and post-colonial nature. This paper uses the Adaptation-Negotiation-Freedom (ANF) framework (Bodhi and Jojo 2019) to understand the historical and contemporary critical events in the lives of the indigenous and Adivasi communities of the forest villages of North Bengal. The ANF framework has been developed contesting the predominant Isolation-Assimilation-Integration (IAI) framework that arises from a caste society understanding and defines the “tribal” as a residual category. The larger significance of adopting such a framework, beyond academics, is that these researches and data contribute to the policy framework of the country. One of the reasons for the continuous socio-economic deprivation and cultural dispossession of the tribal communities in the country, in spite of various legal safeguards, protective legislations and constitutional provisions, can definitely be attributed to the epistemological injustice taking place. This paper is based on a qualitative ethnography which places the researcher’s descriptions, observations and the forest villagers’ experiences (mostly Rabhas and*

Oraons) in both the ANF and IAI framework, and finds that the former offers a relatively authentic story of the micro socio-cultural politics and narratives arising from the landscape.

Keywords: Forest village, Bengal, framework, Tribal, Adivasi, Rabhas, decolonial, epistemology.

Introduction

Though great minds like Kant and Foucault, were successful in replacing the Lockean ideas but in place of that *tabula rasa* they put forward presuppositions or a priori that condition all contemporary human existence. They were unaware that all experience was truncated to disregard those experiences on the other side of the colonial line.

Research and emphasis on the historical relationship between tribes and forests and the different social formations emanating from it, started with the colonial administrators and anthropologists and was not limited to India. Such research became an exercise in imperialism and did not simply disappear with the British. Colonising of knowledge accompanied colonising territory and no instance bears more truth to this than the Adivasi-tribal-indigenous narratives all over the world, though associated with the global South. As the independent Indian state's policy moved from isolationist to assimilationist to an integrationist approach for the tribes in the country, the corresponding change from colonial to post-colonial in the academic circles was lauded. However, this paper would like to point out the "post"-colonial significance in the histories and lives of many in the country such as the Dalits, Adivasi/indigenous, women, religious and sexual minorities and other such minority groups who are not a minority simply because of numbers but because of the minor role they play in shaping their own discourse. For such groups, the coloniser-colonised is a power equation and not a specific period in history which has passed; but something they still might experience in their everyday. Further, the problem with the post-colonial is not only epistemic but also ontological because apart from the way it frames its arguments, the arguments themselves seem flawed. Cusicanqui puts this lucidly: 'just as the global market for material goods, ideas leave the country converted into raw material which becomes regurgitated and jumbled in the final product. Thus a canon is formed for a new field of social scientific discourse, postcolonial thinkers' (Cusicanqui 2012: 105). This can be best exemplified, in the new genre of tribal studies, which provides a critique to the developmental practices that the neoliberal State indulges in. However,

in this genre of critical Adivasi studies too, we need to question, how many of these studies are real-life testimonies rather than well worded arguments within the “state versus community” framework and perpetuating the stereotype of the Adivasi either being anti-development or too naive. It is necessary to be cautious that the Adivasi is not used as a mouthpiece to simply critique environment-degrading practices and the capitalist system’s excesses.

Context: A socio-ecological setting

Struggles over forests are simultaneously struggles for power over symbolic representations and material resources. To the south of the Eastern Himalayas lie the Duars¹; it is part of the *Terai-Duars* savanna and grasslands ecoregion known for its rich biodiversity and wildlife, marked by the presence of three protected areas – Gorumara National Park, Buxa Tiger Reserve and Jaldapara National Park. The Duars, forests permeate the being and becoming of Duars’ landscape and people, as well as their relationships with the State. The region is inhabited by diverse indigenous and tribal communities including the Bodo, Rabha, Mech, Toto, Koch, Rajbongshi, Lepcha, Tamang/Murmi, Limbu, Majhi, Mangar, Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Mahali, Lohara and ChikBaraik. Tribal communities like the Majhis, Tamangs and Mangars are from Nepal, and so are the Sharmas, Chhetris and Pradhans who belong to the general category and the Vishwakarmas who belong to the Other Backward Castes category (OBCs). Oraons, Mundas, Kharia, Mahalis, Loharas and ChikBaraiks are tribes from Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas. Apart from them, a significant Bengali population, mostly those displaced from East Pakistan (present Bangladesh), also make up the demography of the region. Each of the settlers apart from the autochthonous Bodos, Meches, Rabha, *Garo* and Koch and Toto, have come in during different waves of migration. Revenue villages and tea gardens are almost interspersed with these forest villages, except for some which are quite cut off from the rest and lie in the deep jungles.

The history of the landscape becomes an amalgamation of the histories of all these communities. However, this research will discuss in detail two communities i.e., the Rabhas and Oraons (who are referred to as Adivasi in this paper as that is how they refer to themselves as well) since they form the major population of the forest villages. Among them many have converted to Christianity and those who have not, identify themselves as Hindu. The paper sticks to this terminology as well since the discussion of religio-ethnic changes is not taken up elaborately in this paper.

A forest village setting provides a long unique history of tensions between Forest Department and forest community. The presence of a peoples' movement (*Bon Jon Sromo Jibi Manch*²) prior to the coming of Forest Rights Act³ (FRA), 2006, provided the scope of forest communities' to take up the role of political subjects in a new form.

Forest villages (FVs) which form the field setting of this research refers to 'the settlements which have been established inside the forests by the forest department of any State Government for forestry operations or which were converted into forest villages through the forest reservation process and includes forest settlement villages, fixed demand holdings, all types of *taungya* settlements, by whatever name called, for such villages and includes lands for cultivation and other uses permitted by the Government' (2 (f) FRA 2006). Simply put a forest village is a descriptive term that refers to a village situated in a forest. More importantly, the forest village is an administrative term that refers to villages situated within a Reserved forest and under the administration of the Forest Department. As per the Forest Department estimates there are 170 forest villages⁴ in the state, however, people working in the area for long, say there are almost 300 FVs.

The British fought and defeated the Bhutias in 1865, and in the same year the Indian Forest Act was enacted and in 1864 the Imperial Forest Department was set up. This marked the changing socio-ecological landscape for millions of hectares of forest land and forest dwellers. The Duar forests were mostly "open" but between 1874 -1884 they were "reserved" by the British. Shebbeare⁵ (1920) mentions that in 1894 the first forest villages came up and in 1904 it had become a regular policy of the department. The semi-nomadic communities were thus forced to 'settle down' and the practise of *begari* (free labour) became the chief source of revenue generation and forest planting labour of the Duars. *Begari* was abolished only much after independence(70s) and even after that the questions of rights were not brought up by the State. Additionally, the influx of the Western driven 'fortress conservation', only further deprived the forest villagers of their access to the forests.

Gaps in Existing Literature

A brief mention of few selective texts from the existing literature on forest villages of the Duars and the communities (mainly the Rabhas), establishes the pattern and perspectives which have been dominant epistemologically

and ontologically. In one of the earliest colonial accounts, Hunter's Statistical Account of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Sikkim (1877)

there is no direct or detailed mention of the Rabhas. Again, H. H. Risley in his extensive volume of the Castes and Tribes of Bengal (1892), makes no mention of Rabha. But in the Census records we find mention of the Rabha specifically, firstly as Scheduled Caste and then Scheduled Tribe. An account by Dr Wangyal in the Journal of Bhutan Studies² casts doubts over the mostly unchallenged records of colonial historiography. While Hunter's accounts describe the Bhutanese as ruthless barbaric invaders and responsible for the deplorable conditions of the 'frontier' people, along with the Bhutanese disrespect for the British, as the reason for the British to fight and become sole rulers of the frontiers; Wangyal's paper in the Journal quotes accounts of other travellers to Bhutan who wrote more favourably about the Bhutanese kingdom. Apart from Wangyal's paper, Charu Chandra Sanyal in his work on the Rajbansis (1965) documents testimonies of those belonging to the Mech community who have memories of the times of the Bhutanese rulers and these testimonies do not testify against their rule but rather provide an account of a certain decline in their conditions post the British conquest. Though accounts of the British-Bhutanese disputes and the deplorable living conditions of the inhabitants living in this region, is not completely false, it is certain that the British had vested interest in annexing the Duars due to its strategic geopolitical and ecological importance. With respect to anthropological works, Karlsson's (2001), account on the Rabhas, remains most intensive. However, he does not dwell much into the dynamics existing between the other communities and the Rabhas in the forest villages. True to his style he offers a broader critical perspective on the indigenous identity and cultural transition of the Rabhas (much of which this paper draws from as well) but there is not much mention of intra or inter community dynamics. An 'insider's account is also offered in M. K. Raha's work, *Matriliny to Patriline: A study of the Rabha Society* (1989) but this monograph, though enormously rich with ethnographic details regarding the community's lifecycle and social system, does not provide reasons for the transition that Raha claims is happening among the Rabhas. He attributes the change from matriline to patriline in the village Rabhas, due to their contact with the patrilineal Rajbanshis. But the crucial questions of the micro-processes involved in such a major shift, the levels of resistance and/or co-option, the question of their larger ethnic identity, of which matriline is a crucial factor, all such deliberations remain untouched in this work. Even further, no narratives of any women inform his study.

Research Design

Ethnographically studying three forest villages, this paper argues that there exists a gap between how most academics (including anthropologists) view and portray “tribes” and how these communities view and express their lifeworld and everyday. Such gaps lead to contestations over resources, histories and epistemologies. The paper articulates this gap by using two different frameworks - the Adaptation-Negotiation-Freedom (ANF) and Assimilation-Integration-Isolation (AII), and argues that most perceptions in academics and policy are driven by the respective framework that is selected. This paper has initially drawn from Bodhi and Jojo’s edited work *Voices from India’s Alternative Centre* (2019), and simultaneously drawn from other writings on decolonial methodologies.

The Frameworks

Concept	Old Framework/Dominant ; AII	Critical View	New Framework/Indigenous; ANF	Counter-Concept
Assimilation ↕ Integration (diff levels physical/geographical, cultural/religious, historical, psychological) ↕ Isolation	Necessary for ‘their’ perpetuation Necessary for their development Detrimental to its existence (though those like Elwin first propagated isolation policy for the wellbeing of tribes)	Why cannot differences be perpetuated? ‘development’ is itself contentious in nature Detrimental to whose existence- the tribal or non-tribal community?	For tribes Assimilation is a survival culturo-social strategy of Adaptation For tribes, Integration is a compelled politico-historical necessity of Negotiation Isolation is the Tribal community’s desired socio-political goal of Freedom	Adaptation ↕ Negotiation ↕ Freedom
Note: Dotted lines represent a continuum more than different stages clearly demarcated				

Figure: Understanding a Decolonial Framework- ANF

To understand briefly where this new frame of reference - ANF arises from, it is necessary to understand the three broad possibilities, which are not mutually exclusive of each other, in the multiple narratives of Adivasi/ indigenous; these are, an adaptation to new political structures dominated by non-Adivasis, challenging political dominance of non-tribal society and thirdly, subtly oscillating between or surrendering to the political will of larger caste society. The older AII framework meanwhile has been derived from the Indian casteist society and the epistemology of the West, where the ‘West’ is not just a geographical location but rather a colonial mind-set.

What is conceived as “isolation” by theorists/dominant society is perceived as “freedom” by tribal/Adivasi society. Hence the tribal communities see ‘assimilation’ as a survival culture-social strategy of “adaptation”; “integration” as a compelled politico-historical necessity of “negotiation” and “isolation” as a socio-political goal of “freedom”.

Findings and Analysis

1. **Adaptation / Assimilation:** The Rabhas had adapted from a semi-nomadic life into settling down in forest villages. They were forced to transform from hunter-gatherers to sedentary lifestyles. They slowly adapted to agricultural practices. The ANF framework gives the space to explore how not only their ways of life adapted to the changes that colonialism brought with it but also how their very own knowledge systems were often adapted by the colonial system. This landscape provides a wonderful example of such a phenomena-adaptation of their system of production - *taungya*⁷, by the colonial forestry system as “scientific forestry”. E.O. Sheabbear, Deputy Conservator of Forests during the early 1900s, provides a detailed account of how the *taungya* method of intercropping Sal with the swidden (shifting) cultivation that the *jhumma*⁸ had always practised, was used to artificially regenerate *Sal*, and by 1921 all the *Sal* plantations in Duars were brought under the *taungya* system. This uptake of ecological knowledge from the colonised by the colonisers can never be recognised under the AII framework.

In the process of Assimilation, the community experiences a loss of control over their own labour/bodies and capital (land). Through the system of *begari* they got assimilated into the colonial system of capitalist means of production. Further, loss of their rights over the landscape and its resources (especially forests) led to their de-facto rights becoming conditional concessions or privileges.

Thirdly, assimilation involves a loss of their “original” cultural and traditional practices. But we also find an adaptation to the dominant group’s non-tribal way of life; in this case the Bengalis, by learning their language and few of their customs and rituals. The Hindu Rabhas and Hindu Adivasis have adapted the major Hindu festivals to suit their customs and beliefs. They celebrate Durga and Kali puja but with their own deities and also on different dates than

those of the Bengali Hindus. The dominant explanation of Sanskritisation would not explain this situation.

All the Rabha and Adivasi families speak in their own language among themselves, i.e., Rabha and *Santhali* or *Kurmi* respectively. Hence a complete 'loss' of their language had not taken place but instead they are using a different language for their private and inter-community life, and a different one in their public space.

When it comes to the social institution of religion, the Assimilation framework uses the vocabulary- "converted to Christianity" and "assimilated into Hinduism" or "returned to Hinduism." The term "converted to Hinduism" is barely used, hence propagating famous nationalist anthropologists' ideas, that tribes were simply "backward" Hindus (Ghurye). In this way again, the AII framework deprives the indigene of having an independent identity apart from a residual identity (Xaxa: 2008 74).

Many non-Christian Adivasis and Rabhas answer the question of which faith they belonged to, by saying Hindu and on further discussion and probing it would be found that many practices of theirs, with slight modifications perhaps, were much closer to animism and naturalism. For instance, the most common puja among the Rabhas is the *Runtuk* puja which they now sometimes referred to as the puja of Shiva and Parvati but there were still no images/deities of Shiva and Parvati. They worshipped two earthen pots of rice and considered one a male and the second a female- *Runtuk* and *Basek*. These gods are found in every Rabha household and any family member travelling outside the village would take a handful of rice from these pots since they believed it would offer them protection by their Gods. Again, the Adivasi (Oraon) Hindu, shared how their main festivals were *Karam* and *Sarna*, both of which comprise of forest rituals and practices and also involves their traditional priest, the *Pahan*. Another determining factor as per the sociological study of Hinduism, is the caste system, and this is something which was not observed among the Hindu Adivasis or Hindu Rabhas. Similar arguments have been made by Xaxa (2008:78) in his early essays as well. These practices of fluidity and duality and co-existence, can only be articulated in an adaptation process, not assimilationist.

One of the common “critical events” which is taken up for study of tribal communities is their religious conversion. As per the AII framework, this process has been viewed as a passive process in which the tribal individual lacked any sort of choice or informed agency. On a closer examination one finds that conversion was often an individual based choice. Many forest villages are interspersed with both Christian and non-Christian families, belonging to the same ethnicity. When many were asked what were the reasons for them converting to Christianity, they related stories of either someone being very ill in their family when their earlier methods of healing had not worked and they opted for the new types of medicines which were accessible from the Christians and hence turning to Christianity. Many others (mostly middle-aged Rabha women) shared how in their younger days their fathers wasting money on alcohol and hence the family took up Christianity since drinking was forbidden by the Church.

2. **Negotiation /Integration:** Similarly, under the integrationist framework one tends to look at a mainstream religion as homogenous and religious conversion as a mass movement in which the converting populations do not have much of a role. But there are finer nuances in different denominations in the same religion. In this landscape the major denominations of Christianity are – the Roman Catholic(RC), the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA), the Baptist and the Protestant. The Adivasis were mostly part of the RC and had a *padree* from Ranchi side where most Adivasis sought their roots from. The medium of prayer and communication was *sadri* (a language from Jharkhand-Bihar-Odisha, spoken mostly by the tribal populations hailing from there, though they each have their own language as well) and Hindi. Whereas, the Rabhas were mostly part of the Baptist church which is believed to have come from Assam to this region. The language they followed was Rabha/Koch and their Bible and songs were all composed in the Rabha language. In terms of other social norms and practises, the Baptists were comparatively more accommodating as they permitted the earlier practices of the Rabhas rearing and consuming pigs, and the Rabha women are allowed to wear beads and other ornaments. The RC and SDA do not allow any of these practices. Hence there is a level of negotiation involved even when they are selecting which denomination of a religion, to take up. There is also the possibility that after joining a particular

Church there have been negotiations within it to shape few practices as per the community's comfort.

“Integration” is mostly defined as a process more politically correct than ‘assimilation’ as it involves not losing one’s own identity but rather combining one’s identity with the other (considered more dominant /superior). Hence not only researchers but policy makers and national leaders have widely spoken of ‘integration’ of tribal communities.

Returning to the ANF framework, one can understand that access to forest and forest resources becomes an outcome of the negotiating capacity of communities. In this negotiation process the community might use a number of tools and strategies. While coping mechanisms of indigenous communities to natural calamities, has started to draw interest of anthropologists as well the communities coping mechanism with institutions like the Forest Department and legislations like Wild Life Protection Act, finds very little space for analysis. Scott describes one such strategy commonly used – hidden transcripts. Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a “hidden transcript” that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The powerful for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed. A comparison of the hidden transcript of the weak with that of the powerful and of both hidden transcripts to the public transcript of power relations offers a substantial new way of understanding resistance to domination (Scott 1990: 7). Though a number of transcripts can exist. This paper proposes one from each side. The communities’ hidden transcript is their belief that the Forest Department is completely incapable of raising successful plantations and forests. Their hidden transcript is framed in reference to the British times and the colonial Forest Department. As far as the hidden transcript of the FD is concerned, it comprises of the departments’ awareness of the internal strength and weaknesses of the communities. Often this knowledge is used to create rifts between the communities. However, the Forest Department’s alliances is very strategically placed with the relatively powerful groups/individuals in the villages. This strategy facilitates a smooth daily functioning and fulfilling of their own duty/job. A comparison between the two transcripts, throws up some interesting

observations; first and foremost, even if the FD cannot ever openly confess its transcript, the community seemed conscious enough to be aware of it. Whereas the communities' transcript might not be suspected by the FD. Secondly, the communities' transcript seems to address a larger consciousness in terms of ecological wellbeing and not just their wellbeing; the Department's transcript is narrower in scope and more immediate.

More recently, another form of negotiation is being exercised in the forest villages. Through the Gram Sabha (formed as per the Forest Rights Act), the community is negotiating with the Forest Department regarding what will be planted and where. Instead of the commercial species such as teak and eucalyptus which the communities claim, are harmful for the environment and of no use to them, they are instead proposing more local and useful species.

Another defining characteristic of Rabha society was that they are matrilineal but emerging the AII framework, is the general impression that they are no longer matrilineal and have been integrated into the mainstream patrilineal system. This paper had taken up a closer examination of the present status of the matrilineal system among the Rabhas and finds things to be a bit different. The matrilineal system followed by the Rabhas comprised of three elements- the location aspect post-marriage, the property rights, the following of (clan) lineage. With respect to lineage which is derived from *husuk* (could be considered the clan name), both Christian and Hindu Rabhas still follow their mother's *husuk* ie the children adopt their mother's *husuk* name and marriages cannot take place within the same *husuk* (as was always the custom). The matrilineal system which involves the man moving to the woman's household post-marriage, is something which is rapidly changing. On talking to people it was found that the reason for this is the changing times and men refusing to go to the wife's house anymore. The practise of matrilineal was justified on practical grounds that many times when there was no son in the house, the son-in-law would be bought to work on the land and perform similar duties associated with a man. Now, people felt there was no need for such an arrangement anymore. However, few men gave a more truthful reason that the insecurity of a man in terms of property was what had driven men to start refusing to relocate. This point is related to the third feature of the institution, i.e., property rights.

The property, in most cases here, the land was passed on and/or divided among the daughters and not sons. This system was what supported the matrilineal practice. At present, with a decline in the practice of matrilineality, the question of land division remains upon personal discretion; i.e., two options existed either if there were all daughters in a household then at least one daughter's husband would be brought home and the land would be given share-wise to her and her sisters only if they brought husbands home too but if they were marrying and moving out of the village then their share would be forfeited. The second option was one where there were all sons, then the daughter-in-law would be brought home and the land would be divided equally among the sons of the household anyway; thirdly if there was a son and daughter, in that case, the decision would be mutually dependent on the siblings' respective marriages, if the son married and went to his wife's household he would lose his right over his property, and in such a case the daughter's husband would be brought home.

It is hence safe to argue that the matrilineal system has not been given up completely by the Rabhas, in spite of the ANF framework wanting us to believe otherwise. M. K. Raha unfortunately seemed to be limited to this framework and offers the explanation that village Rabhas compared to the Forest Rabhas, have given up matrilineality due to the influence of their neighbours, the Rajbanshis (non-tribal Hindus). Hence like numerous other social practices in the lives of the tribal and Adivasis, the change is simply attributed to the process of Sanskritisation. The argument that the paper makes in this case is that the community is very much conscious about which practices to hold on to and which to change. On interacting with many Rabha men, they expressed that the matrilineal system was a unique feature of the Rabha community (and hence their decision to not let it fully disintegrate).

Another interesting feature of the Rabhas which comes to life through the ANF framework and not the ANF framework, is the scope for negotiations not only between the community and the State but within and among communities themselves. The Rabhas are caught in a dilemma as they try to fix one day in the calendar as their *Runtak* puja. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the puja is a traditional indigenous one and hence does not depend on the western calendar. However, since the Christian Rabhas now have

a fixed day – 25th December to celebrate Christmas, the non-Christian Rabhas feel that they too need to have a fixed date for Runtak puja. This type of negotiation leads to a very different type of assertion and freedom which the old AII framework fails to perceive.

The community begins to experience epistemological disintegration as they negotiate to retain their ground in the structure of the dominant group. This can be seen in the matrilineal system, the traditional pujas, or the everyday negotiations with the FD. AII framework has no place to “fit” these dynamic and multi-layered micro processes.

We see a fluid back and forth movement between “adaptation” on one end and “freedom” on the other with capacities for “negotiation” with the powers based on given contexts defined by ethnicity, population, religion, geography, history, etc. Further while being in a state of “negotiation”, a tribal/Adivasi community can also begin to experience degrees of freedom, when they are able to overtly negotiate with the dominant group (State and non-State) in the realms of power.

Epistemological Disintegration and Distortion

In the case of the forest villagers and the Rabhas, a deeper ethnographic study is required to be able to recognise and describe the processes and points of epistemological disorientation. This paper aims to cite only a few critical moments which could be gathered and analysed within the limited scope of engagement.

Brouwer (2000: 2) offers an anthropological understanding of the concept of ‘indigenous knowledge’ as constituent of- indigenous knowledge systems and indigenous technical knowledge. He briefly describes each, where indigenous knowledge systems comprise of theories and perceptions of Nature and Culture; and indigenous technical knowledge (ITK) as the operation of local thinking in agriculture, health, fishery and other technological fields. The two cannot be seen as mutually exclusive of each other. The cognitive and empirical nature of interaction that takes place when an indigenous system comes in contact with a non-indigenous one is when the disintegration begins to take place. The paper proposes that epistemic disintegration is a point where the empirical starts to undergo

certain changes to a larger extent than the cognitive i.e., the forest communities begin an uptake of settled agricultural practices and get co-opted into the neoliberal economy and market forces. In this process, ITK gets modified or sometimes completely lost and sometimes even appropriated.

With respect to the concept of epistemological disintegration, it has happened among other reasons, for the changing relationship of the communities with forests and the influence of dominant non-tribe groups, mostly the Bengalis. For both Rabhas and Adivasis, the forests were the mainstay of a symbolic and not just materialistic foundation. The Rabhas described how in the forests they would make temporary shelters out of mud, bamboo and leaves for each of their deities (not idols) and then worship them; one of their main religious customs was to worship the elephant and the river Teesta before the harvest season began. The decline of this system of belief and practices was brought about by a combination of both ecological and social changes. Apart from the physical change and assault that the large scale commercial forestry brought in, the use of European statistical methods of census, cadastral maps, surveys, land settlements, and even the Forest Management Plans had the deeper effect that dislocated the ecological and physical landscape from the social relations of the communities.

Hence the distortion begins with the further interaction and consolidation of a new way of life over the old. This would require an active and conscious though sometimes subtle attack on the older existing cultural systems of the communities. One Rabha interlocutor shared that the declining number of their traditional priests (*hujji*, *dhammi*, *kaviraj*- each with a separate set of skills and knowledge) was brought about by the fear instilled in them during the times of the Christian missionaries. The British and other Christian missionaries would brand these people as evil, *dayans* (witches etc.), and in the fear of being persecuted, many of these traditional healers and practitioners of medicine and ecological knowledge, stopped public disclosure and practise anymore. This was accompanied by a robust system of providing the indigenous and local peoples with an alternative form of medicine and healing at no cost.

This is a classic micro-example of what imperial colonial powers did in places they wanted to conquer and control; by carrying out systematic assault on the local indigenous systems of knowledge and practises. An extreme form of this attack leading to the complete destruction of a community/race's history is recognised as epistemicide within the ANF framework. In this particular landscape the process and moment of

epistemicide might not have occurred the way it happened in Africa, where entire towns and centres of excellence were wiped out, and in the 15th century in Spain – destroying structures of culture and knowledge- libraries, museums etc.

The indigenous knowledge systems and hence their worldviews, is what starts changing as distortion begins to creep in. It is interesting to explore when do communities embark from the moment of epistemic distortion to epistemic stability and though this paper does not attempt a complete understanding, there is an attempt made. One of the factors in this field, leading to this movement was the repeated threats of eviction from the Forest Department. The climax was when in 2019, the Supreme Court's decision⁹ of evicting millions of forest dwellers whose claims had been rejected under the FRA, brought together all the communities from across forest villages and even revenue villages living close to the forests, in a peaceful protest. At this moment - the communities create the path for confrontation i.e., beyond negotiation and hence embark on the movement from epistemic distortion to epistemic stability.

In a more generic sense this moment of transition needs be described. Till a certain point, cultural and social interaction-adaptation and to a certain extent negotiation accompanied by a degree of epistemic disintegration leading to distortion, are directly proportional to each other. But there reaches a climax, a moment of saturation and disintegration after which a new process working towards epistemic stability, unfolds. This reminds one, of what Ber Berochev says and Wolf quotes, 'why, on the one hand, the capitalistic system appears as international, and destroys all boundaries between tribes and people and uproots all traditions, while on the other hand, it is itself instrumental in the intensification of the international struggle and heightens national self-consciousness' (Wolf 1982: 308). It is a strange inclusive-exclusive dialectics. While there is the fear of being left off the band wagon of 'development' there is a greater fear of being forced onto it through violent means that will be destroying their cultural and natural resources. Hence the attitude of the State to integrate only those aspects that pleases it and exclude the rest, is well reflected in the major academic discourses around tribal studies as well. Cusicanqui, calls this 'co-optation and mimesis, the selective incorporation of ideas and selective approval of those that better nourish a fashionable, depoliticised, and comfortable multiculturalism...' (Cusicanqui 2012: 104).

Epistemic stability in the sense of political and cultural autonomy, for different communities, could adopt different methods and demands. The Northeast

in itself can be seen as host to a number of tribal movements displaying a variety of ethnic politics and movements for autonomy. While those like the Nagas and Mizos, demand for a complete freedom from the Indian State, Khasis, Jaintias, *Garo*, Bodos, Koch Rajbangshis, demand for a separate state within the Indian Union, and Tiwas and Misings, demand for a separate administrative arrangement within a state. The Rabhas' levels of political autonomy seem to fit in the last group. Through the Rabha Development Council (RDC), the Rabhas of the Duars are attached to the Rabhas in Assam and participate in all their politico-cultural activities and decisions. The Rabhas are also in the process of formalising a script for their language. The "freedom end" of the spectrum may also involve re-asserting rights over their environment in ways other than territorial rights. In the forest villages this movement can be seen through the engagement with the Forest Rights Act. Both the Rabhas and Adivasis have been coming together since the past decade and have formed the Gram Sabhas and other institutions. Armed militant struggles are mostly the only form of action associated with indigenous and tribal movements and demands for 'Freedom' but further research on different processes and expressions of "freedom" is vital since these projects of modernity and freedom demand concepts and institutions of a decolonial nature.

Conclusion

The struggles of the forest communities have to be seen beyond resources, the struggle of tribal institutions like the Rabha Development Council) RDC has to be seen even beyond territorial autonomy and a distinct script for the Rabhas; the struggle of the Adivasis has to be seen beyond the State's exploitation of natural resources excesses; these struggles are part of a larger war, a war of paradigms (Mander 2006). Similar to the indigenous discourses arising from other parts of the worlds- former colonies in Latin America, Africa etc. these struggles then need to be theorised beyond expressions to reclaim territorial and language rights, to a reclaiming of epistemologies. However, most often, in our country, these movements take place within the structures of the post-colonial apparatus and hence are not free from colonial epistemologies. Hence the question remains to understand how and to what extent the Adivasi/indigenous communities are being able to establish a decolonial discourse and what is it ontologically. The paper would like to appeal to co-researchers that we are responsible for forwarding the above in our country. The ANF framework provides an opportunity to do so by challenging the dominant AII framework not only in

academics but in policy as well. The paper has attempted to argue that this war of paradigms comprises of endonyms as they replace exonyms, and the ANF perspective is one such space. Even if the author of this paper is not an ‘insider’, but it is crucial to realise that this alternative framework provides the researcher, a theoretical vigilance and a moral duty.

Notes

1. Deriving their name from the Sanskrit word meaning doors/ gateway.
2. Forest People and Forest Workers Platform
3. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, FRA; provides for tenure security at both individual and community level, along with management rights. The institutional foundation of this Act is the Gram Sabha.
4. Annual Report 2014-15 (Forest Department, Govt. of West Bengal)
5. E. O. Shebbeare, British naturalist and forester, Chief Conservator of forests for Bengal.
6. Dr. Sonam B. Wangyal is an Indian doctor running a clinic in Jaigaon, a border town abutting Phuentsholing. He was a columnist for *Himal*, *The Himalayan Magazine* (Kathmandu) and *The Statesman*, *NB Plus* (Siliguri & Calcutta). He currently runs a weekly column in a Sikkim daily, *Now* and a Kalimpong fortnightly *Himalayan Times*.
7. Bhutanese word meaning hilltop, it had been practised by the hill and forest tribes since long. The British Forest Departments had started using it in Bhutan under their supervision. In this case it primarily involved the inter-cropping of Sal and with other crops.
8. Colloquial term used for those practising *jhum*, i. e., shifting cultivation
9. There was a case filed by certain conservationists (in 2008) against the Forest Rights Act 2006 challenging the validity of the Act in the Supreme Court on the grounds of it being unconstitutional and anti-conservation. In 2019 the SC passed an

order that all those whose claims had been rejected (over 16.3 lakh families) could be evicted. There were large scale protests across the country and ultimately it was put on hold.

References

- Bodhi, S. R. and B. Jojo. 2019. *The Problematic of Tribal Integration Voices from India's Alternative Centers*. Hyderabad: The Shared Mirror Publication.
- Brouwer, J. 2000. 'Practices are not Without Concepts: Reflections on the Use of Indigenous Knowledge in Artisanal and Agricultural Projects in India.' *Journal of Social Sciences*, 4 (1): 1-9.
- Cusicanqui, S. R. 2012. 'Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization'. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 111(1): 95-109.
- de Sousa Santos, B. 2015. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. New York: Routledge.
- Hunter, W.W. 1877. *Statistical Account of Bengal*. Vol X. London: Trubner and Co.
- Karlsson, B. G. 2001. *Contested Belonging: An Indigenous People's Struggle for Forest and Identity in Sub-Himalayan Bengal*. London: Routledge.
- Raha, M. K. 1989. *Matriliny to Patriliney: A Study of the Rabha Society*. Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.
- Rangarajan, M. and K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds.). 2014. *Shifting Ground: People, Animals and Mobility in India's Environmental History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Risley, H. H. 1892. *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary* (Vol. 1). Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.
- Sanyal, C. C. 1965. *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*. Kolkata: The Asiatic Society.
- Scott, J. C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Shebbeare, E. O. 1932. 'Sal Taungyas in Bengal.' *Empire Forestry Journal*, 11(1): 18-33.

- Sundar, N., R. Guha & J. P. Parry. 1999. 'The Indian Census, Identity and Inequality'. In N. Sundar et. al. (eds.) *Institutions and inequalities*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press: 100-27.
- Tauli-Corpuz, V. & J. Mander. 2006. *Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Globalization*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Wangyal, S. B. 2006. 'A Cheerless Change: Bhutan Dooars to British Dooars.' *Bhutan: The Journal of Bhutan Studies*.
- Wolf, E. R. 1982. *Europe and the People Without History*. Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press.
- Xaxa, V. 2008. *State, Society, and Tribes: Issues in post-colonial India*. Delhi: Pearson Education India.