

**PROJECT BORDERLAND: A MULTI-SITED  
CURATORIAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
PROBING IN SELECTED PARTS OF INDIA**

Anshuman Dasgupta

Ph.D

Department of Visual Cultures

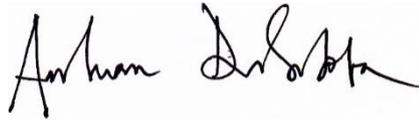
Goldsmiths College

University of London

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**All the work presented within this dissertation is my own.**

**Signed:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arham D. S. S. S.', written in a cursive style.

Student ID: 33106305

#### NOTES

- While this dissertation follows British grammatical and spelling standards, it preserves the original spelling and grammar used in quotations and titles of quoted works.
- All translations from the vernacular are mine, unless otherwise mentioned.
- In the transcripts of conversations and interviews, the asides have been placed in square brackets.
- All photographs used as illustration in this PhD are mine unless otherwise mentioned.
- Citations are footnoted in Chicago style.
- Titles of foreign language works are presented first in their original language, followed by a parenthetical English translation.

## ABSTRACT

This theory-practice PhD project combines multi-sited curatorial and anthropological research in selected north-eastern and eastern borderland sites of India. The borderland is a choice for this research due to its manifoldness. Borders, though manmade and historical, often produce ambiguous lines of divide that are amenable to myths and memories, and related animosities and allegiances in a variety of configurations. The abstract borderland is potentially capable of creating different subject positions like citizens, denizens and non-citizens.

This is the project of a curator-participant who works in alternating nuanced roles as participant observer, complicit observer, ethnographer and the critical entity to tease out the different aspects of the borderland from complex anthropological interactions. The research process involves three phases in each site. The first two are the study of the territorial issues via theoretical grounding and fieldwork. These lead to the curatorial intervention in the form of workshops that emerge as knowledge producing situations.

The idea is to work with a curatorial strategy that emphasises the processual and is interactive and collaborative, with a view to exploring the shared body of knowledge generated at the workshop *mise-en-scènes*. Hence, the workshops are conceived as interactive and participatory, involving theatre and cartographic activities among others. Also, the ideas, images and concepts culled from hybrid sources during all the phases of research are juxtaposed here to create fields of multiple inflections, bringing different spaces and times together without merging under a singular discipline. The workshops are, thus, events poised at multi-disciplinary crossroads, where the knowledge of the border experiences maximum density.

The project is aimed at studying the relational features of the selected sites; examining the emergence and nature of communities, the role of outsideness in the implicated cultures and the different temporal registers encountered in the anthropological probing into the physical and metaphorical borderland(s) in their micro-social aspects.

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## INTRODUCTION

The grandest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer (by virtue of some unknown decree of necessity, for we bear witness also to the exhaustion of thinking through History), is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community.<sup>1</sup>

With this provocation in his book *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy shook up the notion of community on which public engagements largely rest. His provocation has had widespread implication for the global thinking on community. Nancy debunks the concept of a lost ideal community as myth and defines community as being neither a collection of separate individuals, nor reducible to a hypostasised communal thing like Fascism. The community that turns into a single undifferentiated entity (body, mind, fatherland, Leader...), loses the potential of togetherness – so that the “in” of the “being-in-common” is lost, or the “with” of the “being-with”. Nancy suggests, that the attempts to design society following a pre-planned definition, may lead to social violence and political terror, and asks as to how to conceive of questions of politics and society with this knowledge in mind. He also argues that the community is not a result of production, be it social, economic or even political production (such as in nationalism). It is not a “work of art”, in the sense that it is not subject to artifice. In a later essay, he further describes his concept of community as – “neither communion nor atomization; just the sharing/ dividing [*partage*] of a place, at the most, contact: a being together without assemblage”.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Nancy sees community as impossible if it has an imposition on it of any totalisation or collectivism. The only possible community that he can conceive of is one that does not subject itself to a timeline or durational act. Thus, it is inoperative.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1. Originally in French – *La Communauté désœuvrée* (1986) – English translation in 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “Confronted Community,” trans. Jason Kemp Winfree in Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree, *The Obsessions of George Bataille: Community and Communications* (New York: State University of New York), 25.

Art historian Grant H. Kester, who is engaged in theories of community-based and new genre public art practices, critiques Nancy's concept of community. He considers it non-committal, and is concerned about consequential apathy towards any form of organised collective that can hence be easily suspected of being exploitative or co-optive. He thinks, Nancy's writing is emblematic in this regard. Community, for Nancy, can only be ethically constituted if it arises in an instant, in a "moment of 'unworked' epiphany". As soon as the experience of community involves a durationally extended process of social exchange, it descends into mythic essentialism. Thus, Nancy's ideal community is a "workless and inoperative activity". "It is not a matter of making, production, or instituting a community," writes Kester.

And he further writes, "Nancy reduces all human labour ('work', 'making', 'production') to a simple expression of potential aggression, functioning only to rule over and negate difference." The result, Kester argues, is a "fetishisation of simultaneity in aesthetic experience (the sublime, shock or disruption) and a failure to conceive of the knowledge produced through the durational, collective interaction as anything other than compromised and totalising".<sup>3</sup>

While Nancy's invocation of community denies the existence of any collective, Kester's critique speaks of the possibilities of collectives. He cites several interactive artist-led curated projects that establish dialogue as central to them, as being significant in human content and holding revolutionary possibility for social change. He argues that such will no longer happen if the possibility of collectivism were to be nullified.<sup>4</sup>

My proposition in this thesis might be contextualised, in part, against the background of this discourse on community. What has been attempted, at the disciplinary crossroads of anthropology and the curatorial, is a passage between these ideological poles – towards examining community and studying the

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<sup>3</sup> Grant H. Kester, "Lessons in Futility: Francis Alÿs and the Legacy of May '68," *Third Text* 23, issue 4 (July 2009): 407-408, 407-420.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Dahlberg, "Review of Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*," *Leonardo* 39, no. 2 (2006): 168-169.

emergences in a crisis geographic situation like the borderland. Nancy's pronouncement is from the point of view of a philosopher and Kester's is that of a critic – a post-facto analyst, outsider to the artistic action. Inbetween these two positions, comes my theory-practice engagement with the question of community, wherein I am an observer as an anthropologist, and as a curator I am setting up strategies, initiating interactive situations, provoking, participating, theorising and articulating.

### **Encounter with Third Theatre**

My first encounter with the dialogical and interactive form was through my exposure to the world of theatre at a formative age. This happened when the city of Calcutta was undergoing a political transition and cultural transformation, around the time when the general elections that would topple the then existing power in favour of a new Left Front government, were in the offing; right after the Emergency in India (1975-77).

I had already come across theatre and film related literature at home, as a cousin was researching the New Theatre Movement (*Naba Natya Andolan*). Her topics also included the Third Theatre, which was an emerging challenge to the proscenium theatre prevalent at the time. I pleaded with her to take me to a performance by the group Shatabdi, headed by the legendary director-playwright Badal Sircar.<sup>5</sup> His name came up frequently in newspapers, little magazines, as well as in our household discussions, whetting my childhood curiosity. I was taken to one with the warning that Third Theatre practitioners were strictly against minors entering their performances. Sure enough, we were stopped at the

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<sup>5</sup> Badal Sircar (1925–2011) is founder of the 'Third Theatre' – the first public theatre movement in India, which rose during the turbulent times of the 1970s and shares its ethos with the Theatre of the Oppressed, introduced by the Brazilian doyen of public theatre – Augusto Boal. Although Sircar's fellow-following is lean, he influenced a lot of young minds during his two-year tutorship at Santiniketan, as an Artist-in-Residence. In 1967, he formed the theatre group, Shatabdi. He evolved the *Angan Manch* (courtyard stage), inspired by the direct communication techniques of *Jatra* (rural theatre form in Bengal), which eventually became his 'Third Theatre', a protest against prevalent commercial theatre establishment. Often performed in 'found' spaces rather than rented halls, without elaborate lighting, costumes or make-up, with a participatory audience, it added a new realism to contemporary dramaturgy, while retaining thematic sophistication of social committed theatre. In 1976, his group started performing at Surendranath Park (then Curzon Park) Kolkata on weekends. This must have been when I first attended his performance.

entrance by the volunteers. In desperation, I offered to be, and was, subjected to a quiz on theatre and finally allowed in. The theatre hall was actually a Theosophical Society classroom turned into an arena, with a space cleared out in the middle – the wooden benches pushed to the edges to provide the seating for the audience. That day, a new play was being performed for the first time – an absurd play called *Khat Mat Kring* [gibberish]. The theme was globality, nationalism, internationalism and alienation – unusual of Badal Sircar's plays, which mostly related to issues and circumstances around Calcutta. It was a somewhat unscripted and improvisatory play, with limited dialogue and the performers' use of the body as instrument. One of the brief lines I remember was, "What is international? Inter-national – *bhitore-bhitore* national (Internally national)."

Sircar was playing multiple characters. Sometimes he would look like a corporate gentleman, next he would jump upon a stool and act like a circus animal, then he would become a vulture and produce strange noises. There were hardly any props; random objects were pressed into improvised use; a comb doubled as a knife, a ball became a mirror, tin canisters became the musical instruments. There were more surprises as the play progressed; some members of the audience suddenly got up to join hands with the performers in the centre, in the process drawing out a few of the other viewers with them. The realisation that they were actually part of the theatre group strategically planted in the audience to pull it into the performance, dawned on me gradually.

It was a very abstract play to follow, and I had to struggle a bit initially. *Khat Mat Kring* was multi-lingual, using English, Bengali and one other language I could not comprehend. However, I enjoyed it very much and came away with much food for thought. At home, the unknown language was identified for me as Esperanto.<sup>6</sup> Badal Sircar was supposed to be one of the few living experts of Esperanto at the time.

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<sup>6</sup> An artificial language devised in 1887 as an international medium of communication, based on roots from the chief European languages. It retains the structure of these languages and has the advantage of grammatical regularity and ease of pronunciation. Esperanto is an auxiliary language, unconnected with any particular ethnicity, and the most widely spoken constructed language in the world.

This early exposure to the Third Theatre revealed to me the forms and possibilities of community interaction. It also opened me up to the fact that all that is required in theatre is the body. In a way, Sircar gave me access to the global aspects of theatre; the communication system he was devising was somewhat universal because of its simplicity – the informality of the space, the minimality of props, costume, lighting and music, the easy improvisations and the flexibility of the theatre devices that encouraged the initiation of dialogue between the actors and the audience. Much later, I was introduced to Augusto Boal's work and his Theatre of the Oppressed.<sup>7</sup> While the methodology of my interactive situations in this project is closer to Boal's theatre techniques (elaborated in the methodology section), Sircar's was the trigger that started the process. Revisiting the lessons of this introduction to Third Theatre proved useful while planning the research design for Project Borderland.

### **Personal Curatorial Engagements**

My direct engagement with site-specific collaborative curation began in 1998, when I worked with a colleague and the students of the art institute at the Visva Bharati University to put together an installation project titled 'Blip'. Conceived as a provocation to the subjectivity of the people of Santiniketan about the site of our common belonging, it was based on a relational model.<sup>8</sup> The concept was developed by using different aspects of the site as take-off points. I have also been designing, for my students, courses that combine anthropological exploration of their surroundings and study of the local architecture as a lived environment. Another site-related, performance cum installatory collaboration, was during an international seminar-workshop organised by BTC<sup>9</sup> in Kokrajhar, Assam in 2004.<sup>10</sup> As a part of the performance, local art institute students, among others, were invited to draw and write on a 100ft scroll. The juxtaposition of the

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<sup>7</sup> Augusto Boal (1931–2009) was a Brazilian theatre director, writer and politician and founder of Theatre of the Oppressed, a theatrical form originally used in radical popular education movements.

<sup>8</sup> This was before the popular emergence of Nicholas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics.

<sup>9</sup> Bodo Territorial Council (BTC), renamed Bodo Territorial Administrative District (BTAD)

<sup>10</sup> I did two site-related exercises in Kokrajhar; the second one is described in Chapter One.

text and the images was coordinated by me. The text inserts were related to the violent history of the place and selected from the writings of local activists. Similar involvements over the years have led to my discovering methods of participation with different communities in their daily concerns and anxieties about change. In 2005, I did a collaborative, onsite installation called *Babu* (gentry in Bengali), during a Khoj Kolkata workshop.<sup>11</sup> The site was a cluster of gardens on the southern edge of Kolkata belonging to indigenous elites who visited only occasionally for picnics. The gardens were surrounded by shanties inhabited by migrant workers. The work dealt with the evolution of the concept of the 'literate gentry' as a result of the enlightenment project of Bengal. We attempted to shift the idea of gentry from the pre-colonial to the postcolonial with the help of textual, cinematic, architectural and other cultural material. Prior to joining the Curatorial/Knowledge PhD programme, therefore, I had already been exploring the contingencies of sites and interactivity, as well as the dynamics of collaboration. In 2008, I had the opportunity to jointly curate the show 'Santhal Family: Positions Around an Indian Sculpture' in the Museum of Contemporary Art (MuHKA), Antwerp, which was, in a way, a culmination of many of the ideas I had been working with and involved multi-layered collaboration. The site concerned was once again Santiniketan – Tagore's University town, the site of Ramkinker Baij's sculpture, Santhal Family, which played the absent signifier; the exhibition grew out of the various positionings around it.

### **The Curatorial Design: Event of Knowledge**

Project Borderland encompasses a curatorial intervention built on anthropological research into multiple sites of Indian subcontinental borderlands. The focus of the project was the exploration of the relational possibilities of specific sites, which were diverse and complex, in simultaneity with the working out of an appropriate curatorial design for the same. Generally, borderland ventures are likely to encounter various fragments as consequences of division

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<sup>11</sup> Khoj is an artist-led alternative art organisation functioning from New Delhi since 1997. Khoj Kolkata – the Kolkata chapter, started as a project in 2005 and had two workshops in succession in Dec. 2005 and Oct. 2006 in West Bengal.  
<http://www.khojworkshop.org/view/projects>.

of land; not only because the line that divides spaces slices up habitations as well, but also because there are many unaccounted for entities, which remain residual to the process of such slicing. Some sites may also have a history of multiple slicing. Thus, often the ground that links us to a possible communication network of spaces, objects and people, is uncertain. This was to be probed, via the different segments of places, spaces and sites<sup>12</sup> chosen for inclusion in this project.

In order to address this complexity of the multiple borderland sites, the project design was formulated in three parts; the archival and field research of the sites, research through an artificially created interface for interaction in each site and finally, the writing. Combining methods of multi-sited anthropological research for the field, the project was catapulted into a workshop platform, which formed the interactive interface. The curatorial strategy was to convert this workshop into an 'Event of Knowledge' for the participating observers, potentially including everyone present in the workshops – the participants and the provocative/catalytic agencies, but primarily voiced through the articulating agency. Event of knowledge may be interpreted as the intersection when knowledge emerged; for me, the interactive sociality of multiple voices produced the moment at the intersection of research and articulation. 'The curatorial' as a process, in the epistemologically contingent mode was the driving force of the event of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> It did not have a predetermined form but was reliant on contingents and the voluntarism of the workshop situation, where juxtapositions of multiple

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<sup>12</sup> 'Spaces' is used to signify the abstraction of borderlands, as denoted in official maps; 'places' suggest the actual places of dwelling in a neutral situation i.e. before action; 'site' implies a location that is either portent or activated. Some hint for these usages can be found in the new definition of emplacement and its relation to activism in Sarah Pink's essay. This is a model derived from an idea of 'emplacement' suggested by philosopher Edward Casey, indicating a settled and entrenched community. Sarah Pink, "Rethinking Contemporary Activism: From Community to Emplaced Sociality," *Ethnos* 73:2 (June 2008): 163-188.

<sup>13</sup> One may refer to the Curatorial/ Knowledge Programme at Goldsmiths and to the book on the curatorial, edited by Jean-Paul Martinon, which maintains the distinction between terms like 'curation' and 'the curatorial'. To quote from Martinon's introduction – "The aim of the following attempt is simply to realise that the curatorial is an embattled term that cannot be singularised and totalised and that it is perfectly OK to live and work with such a warring term". Further, by way of summary, Martinon says – "The curatorial is a jailbreak from the existing frames, a gift enabling to see the world differently, a strategy for inventing new point of departure, a practice for creating allegiance against social ills, a way of caring for humanity, a process of renewing one's own subjectivity, a tactical move for reinventing life, a sensual practice for creating signification."

Jean-Paul Martinon, ed., *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 4. Also see <http://tranzit.org/curatorialdictionary/index.php/dictionary/curatorial/>.

voices and temporalities at any given event-site were shared between participants. This occasion or event of sharing was potentially an inferential/interpretive situation. The knowledge event occurred at the crossroads of disciplines, was by nature informal and distributive (in that it did not originate from one source), and expectedly, discursive. It worked without an a priori position and unlike a positivist system of knowledge did not have a claim to truth or a categorical imperative.<sup>14</sup>

Badiou introduces the notion of “Event”, which is something that happens through a break in time, producing a temporary “rupture” within the narrative that normally sustains itself through repetition. The event is unconditioned, unpredictable, unprecedented, and unexpected.<sup>15</sup> As proposed by Badiou, in an event, the “inconsistent multiplicity which always lies beneath a particular social order is able to appear subjectively”. Only in an event can the excluded part be visible; thus an event succeeds in “representing a part which is previously unrepresented”. This unfolding of new representations from an event produces “Truths, Subjects, and new social systems”. According to Badiou, an event should shake up the identities and discourses of the situation.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Veena Das, while speaking on the concept of critical event says:

Francois Furet described French Revolution as a critical event par excellence because it instituted a new modality of historical action which was not inscribed in the inventory of that situation... The events I have selected... have one thing in common with Furet’s characterization... after the events I speak of, new modes of actions came into being which redefined traditional categories such as codes of purity and honour, the meaning of martyrdom, and the construction of a heroic life. Equally, new forms were adopted by the political actors, such

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<sup>14</sup> The observational dynamics in anthropology (in a positivist mould) assumes that the reality is visible. As Johannes Fabian says (1983), “The epistemological and ethical principles to the observational approach should be rethought. First it is possible to observe visible; this doesn’t necessarily mean that it is true. Secondly, the observational approach implies that we can observe and extract objective information (data) about our informants. This can be problematised as an objectifying approach that does research *on* but not *with* people.” Johannes Fabian, as quoted in Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2007), 31-32.

<sup>15</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Robinson, “Alain Badiou: The Event,” *Ceasefire Magazine*, accessed on October 14, 2015, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/alain-badiou-event/>.

as the caste groups, religious communities, women's groups, and the nation as a whole... A description of these critical events helps form an ethnography which makes an incision upon all these institutions together.<sup>17</sup>

Event is generally understood as an occasion where forces converge – it can be a moment in history, or in the life of a community or a person. It can be described historically or understood phenomenologically or socially. In its current usage in this thesis, however, 'Event of Knowledge' is a neologism to describe a juncture in the research process, when, after the fieldwork, the discourses surrounding the specific location of the workshop and the affect of the participants in a particular predicament implicated by borders, came together in a dialogical circumstance. It denotes an intersection, where concepts, ideas, visual and verbal expressions, clashed and cohabited in the same space and facilitated emergences; it was these emergences that transformed the workshop into the event of knowledge. The emergences here were not any permanent earth-shaking social or political changes, but collectively produced knowledge about the micro-social aspects of the specific borderland site. The event of knowledge was thus, a constructed workshop platform at its moment of transformation. Unlike Badiou's event, it was not a "rupture" in the narrative, though it might qualify as a short interruption in the regularity of everyday life for the participants, and, as will unfold in the course of this dissertation, in some of the sites at least, it might also have temporarily provided a kind of representation for the "previously unrepresented".

The workshop or the projected event of knowledge was built as a participatory platform with the help of various interactive devices culled from different disciplines; the most important of these being, theatre games and participatory mapping. Two main positions emerged as provocative agencies in the workshops – that of an artist, in the role of theatre-coordinator and the present author as curator, in the role of participant observer and articulator. The curator and the artist-theatre-coordinator were at times found in overlapping functions, defined by factors like the orientation of the particular workshop, the participating community and the instructional design. Different collaborative potentials were

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<sup>17</sup> Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (New Delhi: OUP, 1995), 5-6.

explored in the different sites; each time determined by the local dynamics and the transnational neighbourhood. Broadly, three types of collaborations emerged in the locations; apart from the artist-collaborator who was common to all the sites, I worked with different individual local collaborators and entrenched communities and/ or cultural groups. The claim to authenticity and unity of voice was no longer guaranteed, because in a multi-sited effort a single voice does not have the same authority as in an identity-site.

The main-stay of the thesis, for me, was the envisaging of multiple alternating roles for the curator. Primarily that of a participant observer in a multi-sited anthropological engagement, he was also a complicit observer. This was because he shared a relational link of mutuality with the group of local participants; wherein, he interacted with an expectation of information and knowledge from them and they in turn nurtured the expectation of attracting mainstream attention through his help. A participant observer's engagement, though, may or may not always be complicitous. The curator's role as ethnographer was in the more general sense of 'participant observer' as invoked by James Clifford; "Ethnography is simply 'diverse ways of thinking and writing about the culture from the standpoint of a participant observer'."<sup>18</sup> When the material gathered was sifted to glean ideas and facilitate inferences from the *mise-en-scène* of the workshop environment, the role of the curator as anthropological interpreter began.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the curator functioned at times as the initiator and the articulator – reporter of the situation; at times as an interlocutor – a critical entity.

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Miwon Kwon, "Experience vs. Interpretation in the Works of Lan Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee", *Site-Specificity, The Ethnographic Turn, De, Dis-, and Ex.-.* ed. Alex Coles (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2006), 26.

<sup>19</sup> In literary convention, ethnography and anthropology are divided in function. The primary difference is evident in the two root terms – *Ethno* and *Anthropos*, which describe the position of nominator. By Oxford English Dictionary definition, *Ethno* recognises race/ language as central to the articulating process, while *Anthropos* has a more general appeal, which also has a liberal humanistic space to invoke. 'Graphy' suggests a simple recording, while 'logy' suggests an analytic function (as in sociology as against sociography). However, there is a consensus today in the anthropological circles that there is not much difference between ethnography and anthropology. The interdependencies between these disciplines are acknowledged by the new school of reflexive anthropology represented by James Clifford, George E. Marcus and Michael Fischer. Another school that believes in the disciplinary distinction is represented by Radcliffe Brown and Tim Ingold. While Brown wanted an absolute distinction between ethnography and anthropology, more contemporarily, Ingold defends certain distinctions between the two related disciplines. Tim Ingold, "Anthropology is not Ethnography," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 154 (London, 2008): 69-94.

As an interlocutor in the role of a quasi-maker, I was able to transform the visual situation by shifting its guarantee of authenticity, which is usually attributed to the authority of an artist. Thus, another possibility for 'the curatorial' opened up by the flexible treatment of authorship within the frame of an artist-curator combination in the workshop. To an extent, authorship acted as a distributed entity, as the artist-theatre-coordinator and the curator shared the space – in being catalytic of the process of turning the event-site into an event of knowledge. But the artist-coordinator's space of interactivity was narrower than the curatorial-strategist's, who, armed with prior researches on other sites, could map the terrain in terms of its connectives. He had an itinerary of the project at hand, which the artist (looking for the experiential and generative potential of the interaction), perhaps did not have the scope for. Therefore, the curator's role as a strategic interlocutor in multiple sites put him in a situation distinctly different from that of the artist participant or a community representative. As the curator, I had more advantage in terms of the perspective, even while disturbing the absolute authorial presence of a sovereign curator. Also, specifically in the context of Project Borderland, the authorship could not be uniformly distributed, for the obvious technical constraints that the project was conceived as a PhD project, therefore limiting the scope for collaboration. In summation, I visualised my role in this project as that of a curator generating events of knowledge, while disrupting, to an extent, the authorial gesture of the curator in the participatory nature of the events, and an anthropologist, or analyst of the situation.

### **Emergences: Critical and Curatorial Practices**

My notion of 'the curatorial' was formed amid the epistemological uncertainty in the world of art and my increasing unease with terms like curation and curating – that carry with them a certain anxiety about an end in view. Before the 1990s, both, art and curation seemed to be suffering from certain ritual protocol of repetition in their practices, especially when governed by institutional norms. 'The curatorial' seemed to be a rescue term – a processual entity – that has a relation of tension with institutional art practices, their categories and operations, and tries to work from outside of all that, in the zones of human relations.

Within the Curatorial Knowledge (C/K) programme, 'the curatorial' has been described as an attempt to move away from the binaries of 'Art versus Art History' or 'Theory versus Practice', into a more philosophical discourse that is speculative in a deconstructive way. Differentiating practical curation from the discursive and indicative 'curatorial', the introduction of *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* says, "'Curating' takes place in a promise, of redemption to come. By contrast, 'The Curatorial' is what disturbs this process, it breaks up this stage, yet produces a narrative which comes into being in the very moment in which an utterance takes place..."<sup>20</sup> In 'curating' there is a prospect of some fulfilment; 'the curatorial' disturbs this expectation by constantly asking questions – it invites more and more ethical questions to interrogate the practices. Thus, 'the curatorial' takes the relation of the existing and the possible to the disciplinary edge. In one sense, 'the curatorial' looks like a space clearing gesture, where it is away and apart from almost all existing and established practices.<sup>21</sup> In another sense, it is a continuous process. In the words of Maria Lind, "The curatorial can be employed, or performed, by people in a number of different capacities in the ecosystems of art... For me there is a qualitative difference between curating and the curatorial. The latter like Chantal Mouffe's definition of political in relation to politics, carries a potential for change."<sup>22</sup>

In this project, the concept of curation (noun) may lie in between curating (verb) and the hybrid adjective curatorial. Conceiving the curatorial as a process of human interaction that functions in the space between physical interactivity and discursivity; and as a site of possibility for emergence – I attempted to operate in an innovative mode – with the key governing terms of site/ location, event, intervention, participation, collaboration and relationality. Additionally, there were thoughts on inclusiveness, geographic and social margins. The design was nurtured by the ongoing discourses of the curatorial, and the research had a

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<sup>20</sup> Irit Rogoff and Jean-Paul Martinon, "Introduction," in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), ix.

<sup>21</sup> "The curatorial...is not exhibition-making, a curatorial practice or curating as such." Aneta Szylak, "Curating Contexts," in *Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 219.

<sup>22</sup> Maria Lind, in Jens Hoffmann and Maria Lind, "To Show or not to Show," *Mousse Magazine* no.3 (Nov, 2011). URL: <http://www.moussemagazine.it/articles.mm?id=759#top>.

processual approach, inviting the ethics and aesthetics of participation of the various sites as it went along.

It might be interesting to mark some of the global inflections beginning from the decade of the 1990s, to trace the growth of community based practices and the emergences in critical and curatorial thought. Post Nancy's articulation, the 1990s was a period of rethinking about the social theories of community that were directly or indirectly affecting the intellectual climate of the time. This period also saw a global emergence of the 'new genre' public art practices, with artist and independent curator led initiatives that displayed a whole shift in focus from site-specificity to community-oriented. Among the first of these projects, later to be theorised as new genre public art, was the 'Culture in Chicago' project. In the words of Miwon Kwon:

In the early morning hours of May 20, 1993, one hundred large limestone boulders... mysteriously appeared on sidewalks, plazas street corners and parkways throughout the Loop in downtown Chicago. This odd and "spontaneous" outcropping of lumpy boulders on the streets of Chicago, each adorned with a commemorative plaque honoring a woman from the city (a total of ninety living, ten historical), was masterminded by Suzanne Lacy, a California-based artist best known for her feminist performances and protests from the 1970s. The event marked the unofficial inauguration of the temporary exhibition program "Culture in Action: New Public Art in Chicago"... Conceived and directed by the independent curator Mary Jane Jacob... Claiming to break from previous models of public art, "Culture in Action" took the entire city of Chicago as its stage and "focused on the active participation of residents in diverse communities in the creation of the artworks."<sup>23</sup>

Suzanne Lacy qualifies the function of the new genre public art as that of an "integrative critical language through which values ethics and social responsibilities can be discussed in terms of art". This art is community based, often related to marginalised groups, socially engaged, interactive and aimed at another less anonymous public than that of art institutions. Lacy also proclaims an alternative history for the new genre public art; disassociating it from the public

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<sup>23</sup> Miwon Kwon, *Once Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), 100.

art movement that developed through the 1970s and 1980s, she links it instead to the development of “various vanguard groups, such as feminist, ethnic, Marxist, media artists and other activists...”

Both, Jacob and Lacy (within the context of urban vanguardism), are concerned about the conceptual distinction between ‘site’ and ‘place’.<sup>24</sup> Art critic Jeff Kelley, distinguishing between the two, says the former signifies an abstract location and the latter an intimate and particularised culture that is bound to a geographical region. In associating ‘site’ with previous models of public art and ‘place’ with new genre public art, Kelley highlights the limited social consciousness of site-specificity as evidenced particularly in the art-in-public-spaces mode of practice. Christopher Sperandio (one of the participants in ‘Culture in Action’) defines the change exemplified in this work as a move from site-specific to community specific. Jacob calls it a shift from issue specific to audience specific. Kwon says that these reassessments of site-specificity, representing a fundamental rethinking of how an art work is to (or should) engage with its “public,” turn on a crucial shift in which the “site” is displaced by notions of an “audience,” a particular social “issue,” and, most commonly, a “community.”<sup>25</sup>

New genre public art practitioners, thus, seek the “democratisation” of art by making it accessible to all – by working with “real people”, “real places” and “everyday issues” engaging with (non-art) issues that are close to the “hearts and minds of the average man on the street”. In doing so, they seek to empower the audience by directly involving them in the making of the art work, either as subjects or, even, as producers themselves. New genre public art redefines audience, relevance for communities and collaborative methodology, leading to “an attack on aesthetic categories” and “individual notions of artistic competence”. The focus is shifted from artist to audience, object to process and production to reception, and to direct, unmediated engagement with audience groups. As Kwon points out, the “rhetoric and practice” of the Culture in Action project and of new genre public art in general, indicate a “fundamental

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<sup>24</sup> As mentioned in footnote 12, in the Event of Knowledge section, my usage of ‘site’ is in the sense of – a location that is either portent or activated– in accordance with Sarah Pink’s articulation.

<sup>25</sup> Kwon, *One Place after Another*, 107- 109.

redescription of site-specificity, aesthetic necessity, conceptual parameters and social and political efficacy”<sup>26</sup> Kwon sees this new emphasis on community participation, interaction and collaboration – with the limitation of the authorial presence of the artist – as a role reversal from the previous decade. This, taken together with the articulations of Suzi Gablik, and later, of Grant Kester and Maria Lind (in their study of the public art of the 1990s), offers a counterpoint to Nancy or Giorgio Agamben’s scepticism about community as a coherent entity. These early 90s efforts were indeed attempts at recouping and perhaps overcoming this scepticism.<sup>27</sup>

Artist and theorist Gablik advances the theory of ‘connective aesthetics’ (1992), as an empathetic means of seeing through the eyes of the other, in which she defines art as collaboration between several individuals rather than having an autonomous author. She says, “Art that is grounded in the realization of our interconnectedness and intersubjectivity – the intertwining of self and others – has a quality of relatedness that cannot be fully realized through monologue: it can only come into its own in dialogue, as open conversation.”<sup>28</sup> Connective aesthetics is the antithesis of modernism’s “anti-relational, non-interactive and non-participatory orientation” It is thus, listener-centred and not vision-oriented; a model based on both psychotherapy and ecology that, in effect, rests on “compassion and healing”.<sup>29</sup>

In the European scene of the 1990s, the term ‘relational aesthetics’ was created by curator Nicolas Bourriaud to describe the art practice based on, or inspired by, human relations and their social context. First used by him in 1996 in an

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 107-108.

<sup>27</sup> Noticeably, around this time many people are found engaging with community-based and site-related practices as an extension of public art. There is a renewed interest in addressing community in its changing aspects, leading to various discursive platforms, dialogic forms and varieties of interactivities. Among other things, Nancy’s essay gave a significant shake-up to the interface thinkers between art and society (and community). This instability announced at the outset of a book examining the central aspect of bond in a societal form, also may have generated newer interest in communities, in the field of art, among others. <https://prezi.com/9trpi2elsj6l/a-set-of-artistic-practices-which-take-as-their-theoretical/>.

<sup>28</sup> Suzi Gablik, “Connective Aesthetics,” <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109088>, content downloaded on Sun, 3 Feb 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Suzi Gablik, “Connective Aesthetics: Art After Individualism,” in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 80.

exhibition catalogue, the term is defined in his book *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) as “A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space”.<sup>30</sup> In some ways, Lacy and Gablik’s kindred theorisations on public art, prefigure the questions addressed by Bourriaud. In relational art, the artist is merely a catalyst who replicates an existing social environment for the audience to participate in. The audience is taken as a community and the work is expected to connect with the audience in an inter-subjective encounter. In this way, the relational concept moves away from object-based art and the artists’ approaches are often interdisciplinary, involving areas like music, architecture and mass media.

Articulating on the community related art of the 90s from a critical distance, Christian Kravagna, a mixed genre theorist artist-curator, observes that all participatory art has:

The background of... criticism of the socially exclusionary character of the institution of art, which the community-art enthusiasts counter with ‘inclusionary’ practices. For all of them, ‘participation’ means more than just expanding the circle of recipients. The form of participation and the participants themselves become constitutive factors of content, method and aesthetic aspects. The separate tendencies differ significantly, in their ideas of ‘community’, and their criteria for social relevance. Some understand the community as pre-existent and therefore tend to attribute a (fixed) identity to it. For others community is a temporary phenomenon with a potential for development that emerges in the course of the project.<sup>31</sup>

Lind and Kester offer two different perspectives on the community based art of this period. Kester writes about the significant changes in the field of contemporary art during the 1990s, focusing on art intersecting with cultural activism, based on collaboration with diverse audiences and communities. Presenting his concept of ‘dialogical aesthetics’, he discusses various artist-led

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/r/relational-aesthetics>.

<sup>31</sup> Christian Kravagna, “Working on the Community: Models of Participatory Practice,” trans. Eileen Daries, EIPCP, 1999. URL: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1204/Kravagna/en>.

curated projects like WochenKlausur's 'Temporary Closure' (on the Lake Zurich involving dialogic sessions on a boat between people entangled in drugs and prostitution and policy makers for rehabilitation) and Lacy's collaborative 'The Roof is on Fire' (series of unscripted dialogues on the problems faced by young people of colour in California), to bring out the potentially emancipatory form of dialogue and conversation – where they become part of the work – as an active, generative process.<sup>32</sup> Lind examines some of the community-based works from the point of view of the different aspects of collaboration in contemporary art practices.<sup>33</sup>

Lind and Kester are sympathetic towards community related projects, as attempts to reach out to not so traditional audiences and to the community people themselves. Kester asks, "What possible threat does it pose to global capitalism if a small community in Houston or Hamburg (e.g. Park Fiction, 2007), is preserved from the wrecking ball, or a few villagers in central India are able to talk together at a water pump?"<sup>34</sup> He finds a possible answer in the process by which these works operate – "Here the goal of political resistance is to publicise and even exacerbate these tensions in order to provoke a heightened critical consciousness among the poor and the working class, who are the potential agents of true revolutionary change."<sup>35</sup> These are the evolving global paradigms of the site relational works, which take the projects beyond the available definitions. In effect, Kester seems to believe, these projects are both local and global in their dimension, and they connect with the overall resistance to the neoliberal hierarchies that govern the world today.

In India, the social relevance of 'art' has been debated since the late 1970s, in sporadic journals like 'Vrishchik' published from Baroda, and thereafter in curatorial attempts like the 'Place for People' in Bombay in 1981, whose

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<sup>32</sup> Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Maria Lind, "The Collaborative Turn," in *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 183.

<sup>34</sup> He is referring to Navjot Altaf's Kondagaon Project in Bastar, Madhya Pradesh, India, 2006. Asian Art Archive references this <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/Details/17740>.

<sup>35</sup> Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 222.

implications were visible for decades, in the directions taken by the art of the Indian metros.<sup>36</sup> The change in terms of public intervention, however, comes through disparate engagements, from different directions. What is initiated as a debate in 1992–93,<sup>37</sup> proliferates by the late 1990s, into discourses on public space and the public sphere, and related artistic articulation. This is preceded by the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association (87–89)<sup>38</sup> that works with a relatively mixed idea of location, from a much more ideologically entrenched position. The mid 1990s see the emergence of groups like Khoj<sup>39</sup> and Raqs Media Collective (Raqs)/ Sarai<sup>40</sup> in New Delhi, Camp/ Pad.ma<sup>41</sup> in Mumbai and Periferry/ Desire Machine Collective<sup>42</sup> in Guwahati. While Khoj and Raqs produce both tactile and new media work, Periferry and Camp/Pad.ma concentrate on new media. The latter three groups are complex in their configuration; each has a public outreach programme and a section associated with the internal creative projects of the members.

During the 1990s, the global discourse on curation also gets institutionalised, and in that context, influential. This period sees a new curatorial rhetoric of flexibility, connectivity, transformativity, intersubjectivity, contextuality, collaboration and hybridity. O’Neill argues that globally, the curatorial practice and discourses “have become established components within the field of contemporary cultural production”. Helmut Draxler points out that there is an institutionalisation of curatorial function in the early 90s with an “institutional shift

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<sup>36</sup> Reference to the curatorial perspective and its history from a particular point of view may be found in: Geeta Kapur Interviewed by Natasha Ginwalla in 2011, URL: <http://www.afterall.org/online/geeta-kapur-part1#.V6zG6rt97Z4>.

<sup>37</sup> Refer to Shivaji K. Panikker and Anshuman Dasgupta, “The Transitional Modern: Figuring Postmodernism in India?” *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, no.41 (1995).

<sup>38</sup> Anita Dubey, “Tragedy of a Lone Revolutionary,” URL: [http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.36/midnight-dreams\\_the-tragedy-of-a-lone-revolutionary](http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.36/midnight-dreams_the-tragedy-of-a-lone-revolutionary).

<sup>39</sup> Khoj, an artist-led alternative art organisation which has functioned from New Delhi since 1997, [khojworkshop.org/](http://khojworkshop.org/).

<sup>40</sup> [www.raqsmediacollective.net/](http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/).

<sup>41</sup> <https://pad.ma/>

<sup>42</sup> Operational since 2004. In their own words: “Periferry is a nomadic space on ferry for hybrid practices. It is a translocal initiative which looks at critical uses of technology, collaborative experiments with local communities in an environmentally and socially sustainable manner.” <http://www.periferry.in/>.

occurring from the sixties towards making a curator centrifugal figure”.<sup>43</sup> In recent times, curation has developed an involvement with the site – via a certain kind of active theorisation and engagement with the practices, in a direct or indirect way; thus live action and performances have entered curatorial ventures. The new curations, to an extent, engage with the process of site exploration, involving participation and collaboration.

The emergence of ‘the curatorial’ as a concept since the 1990s, perhaps defines the field of curatorial-cultural praxis in its broadest sense. Curatorial work no longer solely concerns the task of exhibition-making; it is now also understood as “a practice centred on longer-term, less object-orientated, discursive-educational projects that involve various people as instigators and actors”.<sup>44</sup> For Lind, ‘the curatorial’ is a “methodology” with a “multi-dimensional role that includes curating, critique, editing, education, communications...” It is a mission to rescue the art world from the media related utopias. It exposes their process and acts as a kind of anti-merchandising mechanism – by creating a world of its own where use-value is visible and exchanges take place with the human material, not by replicating.<sup>45</sup> In Lind, however, the term ‘art’ comes back without a qualm. Hence, when she invokes agonistics as a constant battle of opposites (quoting Mouffe) it is understood as a battle of the existing forces and not a jettisoning of the current practices/ structures, while Rogoff’s is a deconstructive exercise to constantly question and drive out the idea of ‘art’ from within the discourse of ‘the curatorial’ as a previously necessary, but now defunct appendage.<sup>46</sup>

In Lind’s conception, ‘the curatorial’ operates in parallel with Chantal Mouffe’s notion of ‘the political’, to produce “a more viral presence consisting of signification processes and relationships between objects, people, places, ideas

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<sup>43</sup> Helmut Draxler, “The Institutional Discourse,” *Meta 2: A New Spirit in Curating*, Stuttgart: Kunstlerhäus, 1992, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Tranzit, Curatorial Dictionary:  
<http://tranzit.org/curatorialdictionary/index.php/dictionary/curatorial/>.

<sup>45</sup> Maria Lind, “The Curatorial,” in *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 63.

<sup>46</sup> Martinon, *The Curatorial*, X.

and so forth, that strives to create friction and push new ideas”.<sup>47</sup> This is a constant battle of adversarial ideas and not an idealised communication situation (implied by earlier theories of ‘communicative action’ like that of Jurgen Habermas’s) that leads to a smooth dialogue between people and therefore a prospective resolution (of an imagined problem).<sup>48</sup> Lind’s adaptation of “the political” as an “embattled” idea to the curatorial end indicates a potential relation across the continental boundaries. This adaptation to some extent explains the concerns of ‘the curatorial’ in Project Borderland; processually and circumstantially, it engaged with the affected people of the border sites in their daily politico-social circumstances.

Although, in its site relationality, this project had nothing directly to do with the world of artistic happenings (that is, more often than not, the basis for most writers theorising on ‘the curatorial’), it is, nonetheless implicated, by the global efforts at bridging gaps in societies and representations. The circumstances of Project Borderland differed from those of the global exemplars of community-based practices, in the locational and infrastructural dynamics. While I engaged with areas of crisis geography, the cases discussed here predominantly relate to urban, industrialised, late-capital and developed sites. Also, this project was completely self-organised, in the absence of any kind of institution or pre-fixed framework.

### **Intersection: The Anthropological and the Curatorial**

During the 1990’s, simultaneously with the changes in the fields of art, curatorial and critical practices, a shift was occurring in the anthropological sphere, where a similar disciplinary crisis gave rise to a set of flexible principles and some pressing questions for conducting research. As a result, the concept of multi-

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<sup>47</sup> It seems uncertain which text Lind actually refers to out of the two – Chantal Mouffe, “Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism,” *Political Science Series 72* (Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna, No. 72, 2000): 9; Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 7. Both have elements that form salient features of Mouffe’s thesis.

“‘The political’ is an ever-present potential that cannot be precisely located, yet grows out of the antagonistic bond between friend and enemy. ‘The Political’ is... the antithesis of consensus. For Mouffe, ‘politics’ is the formal side of practices that reproduce certain orders. Seen this way, ‘curating’ would be a technical modality.” Lind, “The Curatorial,” 64.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 187-188.

sitedness emerged in anthropology, introduced by George E. Marcus, Michael Fischer, Paul Rabinow and James Clifford, with the best-known articulation by Marcus.<sup>49</sup> Marcus states the urgency for multi-sitedness was felt due to the hegemony of the macro theories, as well as the teleology of the single-sited approach.<sup>50</sup> He feels the Wallersteinian<sup>51</sup> world system is merely a rhetorical standoff – in actuality a replication of the global theories; from this, he expects that micro-studies and the multi-sited approach could free the anthropological discipline. The new approach with its preference for microsociality and the multi-sited distribution of enquiry has a far-reaching effect for research on the contemporary world. Marcus also recognises the possibilities of a disciplinary overlap between the anthropological and the visual fields; he feels the participatory and collaborative aspects of the visual practices, could be incorporated in the focal areas of anthropology. In 1997, Marcus worked on an anthropologist-artist collaboration with Venezuelan artists Fernando Calzadilla and Abdel Hernandez – ‘The Market from Here’ project<sup>52</sup> at the Rice University, where he performed the curatorial function himself:

The process of creation involved ethnographic research and investigation, however, the outcome was not a work of analysis or a representation but a particular chronotope, to use Bakhtin's expression, for a drama. The installation does not attempt to represent the market by an ethnographic study, but by a *mise-en-scène*. Actually, the construction of the TMFH installation, with the involvement of numerous people from the actual marketplace they researched, is quite different than a mere representation as *mise-en-scène*.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> George E. Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95-117.

<sup>50</sup> “Strategies of quite literally following connections, associations and putative relationships are thus, at the very heart of designing multi-sited ethnographic research.” Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System,” 97.

<sup>51</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein did a world system analysis that was avowedly based on micro-study, but because of its wide frame, it actually performs the role of macro theory.

<sup>52</sup> ‘The Market from Here’ – an Art Installation/Experimental Ethnography produced in collaboration with Abdel Hernández for the seminar ‘Artists in Trance’ at the Anthropology Department, Rice University, Houston, Texas, in 1997.

<sup>53</sup> George Marcus, <http://www.digitalcultures.org/Library/market.pdf>.

This aspect of a scenic construction, brought out by Marcus, suggests possibilities for a *mise-en-scène* in a workshop-like situation. In Project Borderland, an ethnographic build-up through a scenography became the means of knowledge formation in the curatorial platform. Unlike TMFH, though, it happened on-site, outside an institutional mount.

Anthropology, from the perspective of visual or tactile practices is looked at unfavourably as “science”, Arndt Schneider writes. It is precisely the confines of a scientific discipline of which artists are critical. The so called “scientific” and the “creative”, are both disciplines in the sense of having canons of practice (however loosely defined), accepted histories (although these are frequently disputed and rewritten), and their own academies and institutions. He recognises that art and anthropology have both been active in criticising and extending their own boundaries, but they still involve broadly defined ways of working in regular spaces of exhibition, and sets of expectations. In some cases, differences between the two have more to do with exhibition sites and strategies (which dramatically influence the kinds of dialogues and audiences that are possible) – with finished products, rather than intentions or practices. Further, he says, “Both contemporary anthropology and art contain centrifugal movements and a diverse range of culturally, regionally, and historically located and inflected practices. We are concerned with questioning assumptions about 'anthropology' and 'art' – these are labels that can often work to obscure any affinities...”<sup>54</sup> We may, in this connection, think through the view of Kester who looks at the socially engaged practices (which are close to social work or activism) as areas of haze, and says that one response to these could be to accept their status as art, quite provisionally, and to limit the critical engagement to judging them by their political efficacy.<sup>55</sup> The relational correspondence between the curatorial and the anthropological – both disciplines standing at the crossroads of change and engaged in negotiating their internal questions of boundaries, participation, reception and reflexivity – informed the configuration of Project Borderland.

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<sup>54</sup> Arndt Schneider and Christopher Wright, “The Challenge of Practice,” in *Contemporary Art and Anthropology*, eds. Schneider and Wright (New York: Berg, 2006), 8.

<sup>55</sup> <http://moncon.greenmuseum.org/papers/kester1.html>.

Project Borderland also worked at the gap that is felt because of the lack of address of the micro-social and infra-national situations, in studying Indian society in general and the borderland situations in particular. Anthropologists do work there, but they tend to see communities as homogeneous or as products of legislation, which is also a fall-out of macro-perception. I was interested in micro-theories and smaller socialities; I attempted to link this interest to my engagements with the curatorial, by conceiving small provocative situations (the interactive workshops) through which the temporary emergence of group allegiances and relations could be studied.

The new anthropological ethnography which was of much use in this project, is defined by, what Marcus and Fischer call “the new and intense interest in person, self and emotions as organizing foci of the peoples among whom the fieldwork had traditionally been done, along with the various modalities of reflexivity that came to characterize the rhetoric and strategies of ethnographic writing”.<sup>56</sup> Hence, in the writing of the thesis, the so-called objective veneer of ethnographic reporting was broken with subjective travel narratives and interpersonal conversations, both in the fieldwork and the workshop descriptions. In the words of Clifford, “It thus recuperates at least a few shreds of what was exorcised in the conversion from the face-to-face field encounter to objectified science. That’s why such [personal] narratives have not been killed by science, and why they are worth looking at, especially to people interested in countering the tendency toward alienation and dehumanization in much conventional ethnographic description.”<sup>57</sup>

Reading a complex interregnum of discursive situation, critic and curator Claire Doherty writes about the purpose of the dialogical mode in curation as an attempt to rescue the sanity of dialogue from the discontinuous flow of globality.<sup>58</sup> This view is also shared by Kester and Lind, and currently performed by many groups, in a much diversified mode. Doherty suggests the possibility of transcendence of

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<sup>56</sup> George Marcus and Michael Fischer, eds., *Anthropology as Culture Critique: An Experimental Moment in Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), xxiii.

<sup>57</sup> James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 33.

<sup>58</sup> Claire Doherty, ed., *Situations* (London: Whitechapel, 2009).

the local through a self-aware interactivity. Considering significant site-related projects of the past years, like those of Jeremy Deller (2001) in Orgreave, Francis Alÿs (2002) in Peru and Javier Tellez (2005) in Tijuana/ San Diego, she says, “They are qualified by the terms, multi-faceted, temporary, and durational; experiential and highly visual; interdisciplinary, involving not only other art forms but other fields of knowledge; and lastly, spectacularly engaging.” She suggests that they cross the limits of Lima, Orgreave and Tijuana/ San Diego. The curatorial emphasis on the city – where different components are captured and absorbed within the set patterns of exhibition and/ or institutional scenario – as a research subject and exhibition topic, seems to her, an exhausted area. Doherty insists on the rethinking of the temporalities of engagements in terms of research and curation so that durational works bring in a criticality. She says, “The challenge to produce a situation in which such projects might occur in dialogue with one another, along with existing historical and contemporary works, in the context of dynamic intersection of place, is still hard to resist.”<sup>59</sup>

### **Three Sites: An Introduction**

The choice of border sites for this thesis sprung from an interest in locations of fragility – a wish to engage with sites that display qualities of a crisis geography. Project Borderland undertook the study of three different border areas with their different dynamics; the aim was to study their similarities, identify their individual implications and pitch these to knowledge platforms with the curatorial interest of producing participatory knowledge. The three selected sites were Coochbehar, Sikkim and Assam situated on India’s eastern crescent. While India shares complicated and multiple borders with transnational neighbours on the north and the west as well, my selection of these particular sites on the eastern and north-eastern borderlands was based on several considerations – their comparable but not homogeneous predicaments, their relative geographical contiguity and my physical proximity to them due to my location in Bengal. This latter aspect is also why socio-political factors, incidents, situations and relations with the neighbouring north-eastern states and the borderland aspects of this

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<sup>59</sup> Claire Doherty, “Curating Wrong Places or, Where are All the Penguins Gone?” in Paul O’Neill, ed., *Curating Subjects* (London: Open Editions, 2007), 108.

region are of immediate interest and relevance to me. Furthermore, I have over the years had occasion to travel and work in the north-eastern states and am relatively more familiar with the people, their languages and cultures. Another point of interest was due to my being a Bengali from Bengal; an identity-position which undergoes scrutiny, once one leaves West Bengal and goes to other parts of India, where the language Bengali is also spoken.<sup>60</sup> This seemed to be a zone where my engagement with the micro-sites was alive with the possibilities of nuanced interactive circumstances, because of our mutual, even if partial familiarity.

### **Coochbehar**

Coochbehar was a princely state ruled by the Koch kings harking back to a period before 1500 AD; the name of the place derives from here. Its territory was adjacent to that of the Ahom kings and Bhutan ruled territories. When a Bhutanese invasion threatened Coochbehar in 1864, the king called upon the British East India Company for military support. Thenceforth, the kingdom was bound by treaty to the Company.<sup>61</sup> Coochbehar became a tax paying sovereign princely state under the control of the British until India's independence, at which point it was given the option of either remaining with India or merging with the newly formed East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Coochbehar chose to be a part of India (in 1949). This resulted in the redrawing of its border, turning what was a separate princely state into a district of West Bengal.

The present day district of Coochbehar is situated at the northern head of the state of West Bengal at the foot of the eastern Himalayas – with two districts of Assam (Kokrajhar and Dhubri) at its north-eastern tip and the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal adjacent to it on the north and north-west. Its southern and eastern sides are bound by Bangladesh. The district town has a population of 76,812 (approximately, according to the 2001 census) and its literacy rate of 82% is above the national average of 62.3%. A characteristic feature of the town of

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<sup>60</sup> This is true of several of the places where fieldstudy and workshops were conducted, such as different parts of southern Assam, and, to an extent, Coochbehar.

<sup>61</sup> Non-aggression Treaty of Chinchula was signed between the British and Bhutanese rulers in 1865. Thereafter a contract was signed between the British and the Cooch king.

Coochbehar is the *para* (neighbourhood) culture, with a strong sense of community attachment. Typically, every *para* has its own community club with a clubroom, often a playground, and in a few rare cases, also a theatre group. This, together with the culture of *adda* (informal chat), governs the largely leisurely community life.

There is a difference from the urbanity of an industrial metropolis like Kolkata/ Calcutta, in not only language, but in the number of local festivals and the inter-community bonds (often hidden). For example, the city hosts a Vaishnavite fair called *Raaslila* every year in the month of October that brings in seven to ten days of gala atmosphere, which can be likened to the time of the *Durga Puja* in the southern part of Bengal. (ILL.1.4) While *Durga Puja* is widely celebrated by the Bengali community all over the world, the enthusiasm in Coochbehar's Bengali community for *Raaslila* far exceeds that of any other Bengalis in surrounding locations. Studying this festival at the centre of the *Vishnu* temple compound, we see a cultic syncretism mixed with a catholic knack for images in tableaux.

Coochbehar town has a major migrant community. The fact that it is a bordering region haunts its everyday, culturally and socially, for, by the feel of it, almost 80% of the population is comprised of migrants. But this perhaps increases its transnational responsibilities.<sup>62</sup> The drawing of the divide during the partition of the country, created landlocked enclosures called 'enclaves' in Coochbehar and the neighbouring lands of Bangladesh. Enclaves are territories of one country trapped within another. In this case, they were spaces that had primarily belonged to the Mughal outposts and the kings of Coochbehar and were lost by them, mutually to each other, pledged in a game of dice (as legend has it and the ethno-historian Brendan Whyte affirms).<sup>63</sup> Out of the total 162 enclaves that

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<sup>62</sup> The borders made their presence felt in various ways; one being in the gradual change in diction and dialect of the familiar Bengali (of literary and verbal usage in Calcutta), as we moved closer to the sites bordering Bangladesh. If the theatre activities are any indicator, the theatre festivals that we attended, showed a persistent concern over the pet theme of partition of India. Apart from some nostalgic associations, the other side of the border is occasionally expressed in the adaptation of cultural forms, such as a section from '*Maimansingha Gitika*' (Song of Maimansingha) – the collection of popular narrative ballads from Mymensingh in Bangladesh, adapted in an operatic style titled '*Mohua Upakhyān*' (Tale of Mahua).

<sup>63</sup> Whyte mentions the legend that the Coochbehar kings and the Mughals engaged in a game of dice and lost some territories to each other. Another legend published in the newspaper *The Hindustan Standard* (September, 1953), states that the enclaves were the ground positions

exist between the two neighbours (51 Indian enclaves inside Bangladesh and 111 Bangladeshi enclaves inside India), the district of Coochbehar has 91. The Bangladesh border is at a distance of 40–45 kilometres from the district headquarters of the town of Coochbehar. It mostly witnesses the flow of people from immediately neighbouring areas, apart from occasional visitors from the district town who may be linked for professional purposes or business to the nearest border towns or enclaves.

For one wanting to reach the enclaves there are link roads in all directions from the Coochbehar city centre. If one goes eastward, off the National Highway 31, one can reach Baxirhat and the Tufangunj subdivision; southward by a similar link road across the Torsha river would take one to Dinhata, and then from the junction if one were to turn west one would reach Gosaimari; left would take one to Poaturkuthi or Goyabari. Westbound from the junction would take one to Mathabhanga subdivision and a deviation from the junction leads one to the *Teen Bigha* corridor. A north road from the junction takes one to Jalpaiguri District and the Dooars,<sup>64</sup> while the NH31 towards the north-east leads to Assam's Dhubri district.

The old Coochbehar kingdom and the newer enclaves, products of the history of distribution of space that determines the relative centres and peripheries at different points of time, are part of the complex borderland situations that engaged me in my research here.

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held by the Mughal army at the end of the war, which were handed over to them in the truce treaty with the Coochbehar kings. The British, then took over the administration of Coochbehar and maintained the status quo. The main problem occurred, not with the partition of the country, but with the passport regime introduced in 1953. Brendan Whyte, "Waiting for the Eskimo? An Historical and Documentary Study of Enclaves Between Bangladesh and India" (PhD thesis, University of South Wales, 2002), 32, <http://eprints.unimelb.edu.au/archive/00001314/01/brendan%5Fwhyte.pdf>.

<sup>64</sup> Dooars or Duar (literally meaning 'the gateways' or 'door' in Bengali), are passages from the plains to the mountains, mostly in Bengal and Assam. Sometimes, people's occupational surnames were also associated with this, e.g. the surname *Lon Duaria* in Assamese means gatekeeper of salt. This refers to an old practice of guarding salt mounds – a rare and expensive commodity in the mountains. This surname is still in use in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Sikkim

Sikkim at present is the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of the Indian Republic. It is situated in the eastern Himalayas, covering an area of 2,818 square miles, 70 x 40 miles from the North to South and East to West axes respectively. Bounded on the north and east by Tibet, south-east by Bhutan, on the south by the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, on the west by Nepal. A few hundred years back, the territory of Sikkim was many times its present size. It used to extend to Thong La (near Phari, Tibet) in the east, to Tgong la (near Paro, Bhutan) in the south, to Titalia (near the Bihar-Bengal borders), and till Timar Chotan, (Nepal) in the west. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Nepali kingdom invaded Sikkim's territory and came closer to the Teesta Valley. Following the treaty of Sigaulee, the British handed over the mountainous country situated eastward of the Mechee River and westward of the Teesta River (formerly occupied by the king of Nepal) to the Rajas of Sikkim. Next, through another treaty in 1835, the Sikkimese king made over a gift of Darjeeling to the East India Company. The northern boundary of Sikkim was fixed by a treaty between the British government and the Chinese British rulers in 1890.

Past studies on the generic Northeast<sup>65</sup> apply to contemporary Sikkim as well, though it came into being separately. Its geography and its predicament were determined by the colonial policies of divisiveness and sly borderline strategies, till 1975.<sup>66</sup> This is visible in the 'Inner Line' phenomenon of the Northeast – the controlling of internal immigration in order to control the community better. However, in the case of Sikkim, the purpose was also to bring in Nepali immigrants to stave off the less governable Tibetans. Today's Sikkim is governed

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<sup>65</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). Other studies specifically related to Sikkim's transitional episode from monarchy to democracy: A.C. Sinha, *Sikkim: Feudal and Democratic* (New Delhi: Indus Publications, 2008); Madhumita Bhadra, *Sikkim: Democracy and Social Change* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1992); P.R. Rao, *India and Sikkim (1814–1970)* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1972).

<sup>66</sup> Sikkim Bill Protest Joint Action Committee, *Sikkim: Background Papers* no. 3 and 4 (British Library, Acc. No. P 805/178, 1975).

by the state government in a constitutional arrangement as the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of India, but its social mechanism is a result of an organised internal network.<sup>67</sup>

Sikkim is known as Denjong in the Tibetan language, which means the 'Land of Rice'. The name Sikkim was derived from the Limbu term meaning 'The New Palace' or 'The Peak'. The Shingalila and the Chola are two mountain ranges, which run southwards separating Sikkim from Nepal on the west and from Tibet and Bhutan on the east, respectively. A number of easy passes run through Sikkim to the Upper Torsa or Chumbi valley. These passes are the Nathu La, Tangkar La and Jalep La – perhaps the shortest route to Tibet. Gyantse (800 ft) and Lhasa (20,000 ft), the two Tibetan cities, lie along the northern or north-western boundaries of Sikkim. The eastern peak is Kanchenjunga, 28,146 ft. (worshipped as a main goddess by the Lepcha Sikkimese). Between the Shingalila and the Chola ranges there are a succession of valleys; the Teesta is the deepest of all the rivers which flow through Sikkim, her tributaries are Lachen, Lachung, Rangit and Rangpo. Wet terraced rice cultivation has replaced the shifting cultivators over the years. Influx of Nepalis<sup>68</sup> into Sikkim which started in the late nineteenth century, created a land shortage. This is partly the cause of the change from shifting to terraced cultivation. Forest resources, minerals and rare plants are the natural repository of this place.

It is believed the name Teesta came from the Sanskrit word *Treesrota*, but according to Chogyal, the deposed king of Sikkim, it came from the Tibetan *Trashi trag*, meaning, precious stone.<sup>69</sup> Another legend popular in Sikkim says that the demon Laso-mung-pano lived in a tree called sago palm, people were angry with the demon and as they fell the tree, water came out of the bottom.

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<sup>67</sup> The presence of the inter-ethnic network came out in an interview with Pema Wangchuk Dorzi, the Editor of the daily 'Sikkim Now' on the 16<sup>th</sup> October, 2011.

<sup>68</sup> In the National Geographic's Style Manual – 'Use Nepali for a native of Nepal (the plural is Nepalis), as the adjective referring to the country, and for the language. Use Nepalese (noun and adjective) only in proper names that have not changed to follow current usage, such as the Royal Nepalese Army.' <http://xnepali.net/movies/nepali-or-nepalese-what-is-the-difference/>.

<sup>69</sup> Pranab Bhattacharya, *Aspects of Cultural History of Sikkim* (Calcutta: KP Bagchi & Co., 1984), 24.

This stream of water became Rung-nyo-yung or Teesta River.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the same legend has different lives among the different ethnicities inhabiting the space. Sikkim as a landlocked terrain is a generator of many myths and legends, the economy of rumour forms the mainstay of the communication nexus, as well as records of the rifts between the communities.

The state of Sikkim gets extra military attention from the centre due to the focus hitherto accorded to it by neighbouring China (China's claim to Sikkim was withdrawn in November 2009) and for the past incursions via its borders.<sup>71</sup> In contrast to Coochbehar and Assam, it poses a different problematic. It is a naturally landlocked terrain, dominated by Nepali immigrants, whose culture and tongue today constitute Sikkim's majority culture. There is no literary organisation for the Sikkimese people other than that of the Nepalis. Though there is an ethnically mixed Sikkim Academy, the most powerful cultural body in Gangtok is the *Nepali Sahitya Parishad* (Nepalese literary organisation).

The borderland factor is relevant as much in Sikkim as in any other bordering space, but in a more futuristic and developmental aspect than anywhere else in the rest of the Northeast. (These developmental prospects projected by the Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region – MDONER<sup>72</sup> – specially created by the Union government – are further discussed in the context of the site of Assam.) Sikkim's future can only be partly compared with the rest of the Northeast, since it is by its physical positioning, linked with West Bengal and not with any other north-eastern state. Though it has become a part of the North Eastern Council, for convenience, its contiguity to three different transnational

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<sup>70</sup> As recorded in "Sikkim Expedition," *Derbyshire Campaign Series*, no.4 (London: Her Majesty's Office, 1888).

<sup>71</sup> The Sino-Indian war which broke out in October 1962, occurred over two disputed zones along the border of the two countries – one is in Ladakh, called the Aksai Chin (north-western part of India), and the other is along the McMahon line, in what was called the North Eastern Frontier Province or NEFA, currently in Arunachal Pradesh of India. The McMahon line drawn by the British Secretary, Henry McMahon, was placed for ratification in 1914, during the Shimla agreement. This was not accepted initially by the British who, finally in 1935, ratified it as a boundary defining line. There were claims and disputes over this line and the Chinese were always unhappy about it since they saw it as an encroachment into their territory and as a part of Indian expansionism. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War* (New Delhi: Natraj Publishers, 1970), 48-50.

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.mdoner.gov.in/>

neighbours makes it physically very different and constitutes its culture differently.

Because Sikkim is largely tourist oriented, the place is interested in the economy of attentions. Due to its locational advantages as an alternative hill station to the subjacent Darjeeling district of West Bengal, it emerged as a tourist place in the 1990s, and has once again, in the last few years of the current millennium. This is because agitations for a separate state have rendered the Darjeeling Hills inaccessible. With tourism, have come new developments such as hotels and resorts and a broader touristic network of advertisements (banners, posters and billboards) and popular magazines. Highly networked and transnational hill-based musical bands have emerged.<sup>73</sup> All this, together with governmental efforts and private initiative has brought Sikkim, more than any other northeastern state, into the glare of attention.<sup>74</sup> This aspect is boosted by the presence of an enthusiastic new generation with contemporary aspirations and hopes for a fresh start and new directions. Currently, in conjunction to the huge touristic inflow, Sikkim has started a new spate of building activities – including hotels, new tourist spots and airports, supposedly with an eye to new connectives across the border. Local hearsay tells us that public architecture in general and the cinema theatres in particular are in the process of being demolished and replaced by multistorey buildings, as old forms of congregation are being replaced by a newer sense of communities in transition.

The new developmental projects of Sikkim also mean different things to different people. To the people affected by the big dams (popularly known as hydel projects) they are sites of displacements. People lose their landed property or are forced to sell them to the dam projects at cheap rates, because their lands, houses or even schools are likely to be inundated. The affected Lepchas of the reserve put up resistance to the dams and establish their community relationship

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<sup>73</sup> Neha, one of the band members in my video, says, “We had to just walk up to a person from the music world and introduce ourselves.” Anshuman Dasgupta, *A Dictionary of Four Entries: Keyword- Borders*, DVD, (video time: 32:25).

<sup>74</sup> This may also be because Sikkim has kept its identity separate from the rest of Northeast India, comprising Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, which were until 2012 called the seven sisters. Additionally, Sikkim has kept its non-violent image relatively intact, compared to its other north-eastern neighbours.

via nuanced actions. This has given rise to the non-violent Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) movement that aims to protect the land and people from the threat to the Biodiversity Hotspot (Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve).<sup>75</sup> This takes on fatalistic colour due to the strong presence of faith in the possibilities of monastic interventions in solving practical problems. Apart from the entrenched Lepcha communities, there are Bhutia/ Tibetans and Nepalis, among whom there is a widespread, though usually hidden, feeling of uncertainty about the future – a feeling lurking all over the hills of Sikkim. But because relative densities of different communities vary with terrain, different parts of Sikkim respond differently to situations such as the death of a Rinpoche (monk), the big dam and related grievances or natural disasters. In addition, the transnational neighbourhood of Sikkim offers both, deterrence and possibility, and the communities are often affected by this predicament.

## **Assam**

Assam was almost a natural choice for this project, as a result of its historical predicament of being a product of the political dynamics of the border. In its popular imagination, Assam is a combination of two river valley cultures continuing next to each other – the Surma/ Barak Valley and the Brahmaputra Valley. Assam was ruled by the Ahom kings until it was taken over by the British when the Yandaboo Treaty was signed between the East India Company and Burmese rulers in 1826, The circumstance of the treaty was caused by the invasion of Assam by Burma – amounting to territorial breach of the British governance, to which there was a British military response. It became more prominently a part of British India in 1874. In 1905, during the first partition of Bengal, Assam was attached to the Sylhet district of East Bengal, a step that was rescinded later in 1911.

Unlike the rest of Northeast India, Assam was a very large state in the colonial period and comprised of Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya in the south–south-

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<sup>75</sup> ACT is an organisation of the indigenous Sikkimese, to protect the land and the people from the threat to the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve, due to implementation of numerous mega hydro-electric power projects that endanger the demographic profile of the indigenous primitive Lepcha tribes and their right to live in their homeland with dignity and security <http://www.actsikkim.com/>.

eastern direction, and Arunachal Pradesh in the north. Post Indian independence, these were allowed to secede following separate-state status demands from the tribal domains.<sup>76</sup> Naga Hills became Nagaland state in 1963 and Meghalaya became a separate state by the Meghalaya Treaty introduced in 1969 and implemented in 1972.

Assam became a geographical hinterland after its annexation by the British in 1834, who treated it as a land frontier to the administrative capital of Bengal<sup>77</sup> and blocked its porosities with neighbouring zones, as well as effected internal segregations between the hills and plains. The Bengal Land Frontier Regulation Act of 1873 created the north-east frontier and demarcated two distinct zones of political and economic governance within Assam – the ‘Inner Line’ or the hill areas, and the plains.<sup>78</sup> This was an administrative shortcut and a stereotype, built upon an assumption that all the valleys belong to one single order, while hills, since they form the accent and protrude and divide plains, form natural allies. This assumption and its related decision seems to be based more on calculation of material wealth of the region than anything else. Hence the divides were harsh and controls, at times, stringent. The Government of India Act of 1935<sup>79</sup> further demarcated areas of Assam around the Naga Hills as ‘backward tracts’; the Simon Commission called them ‘excluded’ or ‘partly excluded’ tracts.<sup>80</sup> Post 1947, with the formation of East Pakistan, this hinterland situation grew further, because now the region was left physically accessible to mainland India only through a narrow strip of corridor.

Within this geographical hinterland lie the Brahmaputra and the Barak River valleys, nurturing cultures with two different allegiances. The Barak shares the

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<sup>76</sup> <http://indiankanoon.org/doc/743270/>.

<sup>77</sup> Baruah, *India Against Itself*, 28.

<sup>78</sup> Fuhrer Heimendorff who visited Commissioner J. P Mills (the administrative head of Assam and Naga Hills in 1936) suggests that the ‘Inner line’ is not the administrative frontier, it is a guide for the administrators to show as to how far their jurisdictions were, it is not to cancel out the British treaties and rights with the tribes.

<sup>79</sup> A Government of India Act was passed in 1935, as a part of the policy of giving partial autonomy to the natives; <http://lawmin.nic.in/coi/SIXTH-SCHEDULE.pdf>.

<sup>80</sup> Fuhrer Heimendorff, a Dutch anthropologist quoted in Baruah, *India Against Itself*, 35-36.

culture of neighbouring Bangladesh (erstwhile East Bengal) from which it was segregated, while the Brahmaputra Valley is dominated by what may be called an 'ethno-Assamese' culture.

In the recent past, Assam has gone through many phases of revolt and anti-state upsurge; the Assam movement from 1979–85, the ULFA<sup>81</sup> starting in 1979 and continuing till the 90s, garnering continuous violence and military presence. Bomb blasts leading to 80–350 approximate deaths every year had become the norm until recently. The demand for the repealing of the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) still remains.<sup>82</sup> Interestingly though, claims to local sub-ethnic sovereignty create strong rifts between, for instance, the Bodos, Misings and Nagas (who are some of the major tribes in post-1972 divided Assam). In fact, according to some, this strife is much stronger inside Assam than elsewhere in north-eastern India and has produced many new identities like the SULFA (the surrendered ULFA militants) and the Bodo militants. Thus, with the mono-ethnic secessionist movements on the wane, in 2013, there seem to be new ways paved for further divides along ethnic lines. Also, for more than a year now, ethnic rifts have become visible along the lower tip of the state. The dissent in South Assam is sparked off at any instigation over issues of development, language, culture and in general – of deprivation, though the latent dissent may be much more than is visible on the surface. The Barak Valley forms one such area of address where one finds culturally entangled relations, across the

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<sup>81</sup> ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) was founded in 1979, alongside the popular Assam movement, which began as subnational resentment against the Indian state, premised on the reaction to the immigrant communities and Assam's deprivation as a state. While the ULFA had no express resentment against the immigrants, it wanted independence of Assam from the Indian state and wanted to grant citizenship to anyone who accepted Assam as his/ her motherland. While they signed a treaty with the Burmese insurgents to found a separate state under Indo Burma Revolutionary Front in 1990, the recent episodes of ULFA are tales of their gradual depletion.

<sup>82</sup> AFSPA (enacted in 1958 and amended in 1972) was introduced in the bordering regions described as 'disturbed areas' to keep greater state control and throughout the Northeast, to stop militancy. The Act gives enormous power on the ground and legal cover to the armed forces who can take any action on mere suspicion, without necessary probity. It constitutes some of the most draconian laws that have been abused by the armed forces to violate human rights. The local populace as well as the human rights groups are almost always against the Act, while the representatives of government and security personnel speak in favour of it. According to the Union for Peoples' Right to Democracy (UPDR), this has led to 'militarization as a way of life'. The list of human rights violations mentions the ill treatment of other militant organisations within Assam, such as the Bodos, the Karbi and the Mising communities [thereby acknowledging their existence]. Baruah, *India Against Itself*, 148, 153, 169.

international border, as well as laterally within India across the Assam state border, with spaces which prove the zones of 'others' where the same ethnicity is distended by privileges of location, such as the Calcutta populace with respect to that of the Barak Valley.

Assam is a producer of many minerals and bio products; tea and oil form the two most popular exports, which bring colonial forces here and connect the place with the economic and political mainland, as well as the transnational neighbourhood. The tea export has especially brought with it many transnational and European actors into the imagined territorial geography of the state. The future of this state, together with that of the rest of the Northeast is also being debated by India with its neighbours, along a developmental and transnational line. In addition to the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) current and prospective involvement,<sup>83</sup> the specially empowered MDONER cell created in the cabinet of the Union government in Delhi is entasked to decide over future road maps of these borderlands, amid huge local scepticism and speculation.<sup>84</sup>

In the Barak Valley, which emerged as my specific location of interest following my research in the state, most of the areas studied are a part of the transnational developmental schemes. These places live within the contrary pulls of interests and projections; interests of the ethnic pressure groups as well as militants, contrasted with the projections of openness of transnational exchanges across the border. This may lead to the question of who is an insider and what is outsidership. This is a question that vexed Assam in particular and the anthropological inquiries in general.

### **Border Discourses: Contextualising Project Borderland**

There are two ways of looking at the border. One is from the point of view of governance, which is concerned with the abstract border that defines territorial

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<sup>83</sup> Bodhisattva Kar, "When was Postcolonial: History of Managing an Impossible Line," in *Beyond Counter Insurgency*, ed. Sanjib Baruah (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 72-73.

<sup>84</sup> Baruah, *India Against Itself*, 1.

state. The other, deals with the predicaments of the geopolitical border, which relate to spatial anomalies, anomies and animosities that challenge the sovereignty of the territorial state, subject-making and the experiential. The modern concept of border started with the Treaty of Westphalia,<sup>85</sup> where the notion of the territorial state was established. The border as it is known today was invented by the modern nation state and combined the ancient forms of 'marches' and 'limes',<sup>86</sup> signifying militarisation and territoriality. In this way, it became a line that had administrative, military, fiscal, juridical and linguistic functions. One could argue that the invention of the border transformed the previously more indefinite and heterogeneous space into territories.<sup>87</sup> After the industrial states emerged and colonialism proliferated, the border took on increasing importance. Territorial limits were defined by colonial interests and control over trade routes. During this period, the formalised concept of borders spread outside the western world along with the spread of colonialism. The current militarisation of the border comes with the more recent formations of state. Modern state started exercising and displaying its power in the bordering zones with the help of modern technologies such as telephones, telegraphs and helicopters and all-weather-roads only after 1945 (end of WWII). The absolute sovereignty of the nation state inside the border became a reality the world-over, after 1945. There was a new consciousness of 'historical' borders after the World War ended (Fischer, 1949, 215). After the end of the Cold War, the future of the border was seen as a zone of economic and social penetration. The current functionalist approach, leads to a projection that sees cross-over trade and human exchange to be the future of transnational borders. Even though the

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<sup>85</sup> "The treaty of Westphalia (1648) recognized the existence of interstate systems composed of contiguous, bounded territories ruled by sovereign states committed to the principle of non-interference in each other's internal affairs ... This binding of territoriality to the state sovereignty is the essential characteristic of the modern interstate system". Neil Brenner quoted in Willem Van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond Nation and State in South Asia* (London: Anthem, 2005), 19.

<sup>86</sup> Limes is a Latin term that comes from ancient Roman practices suggesting limits of the state or territory of governance and its usage is traced to 1530–40. Marches is a Middle English (1375–1425) term and has parallels in different European languages, suggesting the militarized territoriality or a border– such as the zones where soldiers keep vigil by marching.

<sup>87</sup> Raffestin, a Swiss geographer, called space the 'original prison', while territory is the prison that 'men designed for themselves'. "Limology", April 27, 2010, URL: <https://criticalgeography.wordpress.com/2010/04/27/on-borders-boundaries-and-borderlands-theoretical-limology/>.

neoliberal campaign for and claims about a “borderless world”<sup>88</sup> have been rising in the last two decades, it is yet to be realised. For now, the borders are not disappearing and scholars keep raising ethical questions around them.

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The most documented border theories belong to the period beginning post-World War I, to the present. Over the years, border studies have increasingly captured the attention of many theoreticians, giving it a renewed interdisciplinary focus.<sup>89</sup> While geography was the first discipline to study borders and boundaries, today borders are studied by psychologists, lawyers, anthropologists, economists, ethnologists and many others.<sup>90</sup> The attempt here is to discuss some of the concepts in the specific contexts of the sites examined in Project Borderland. The location of the articulation determines the nature of the border theories. Due to the differences in origin and constitution from the Euro-American borderlands, the South Asian and Indian borderlands show certain complexities which are special and circumstantial. There is not always a complete correspondence of registers, therefore, between the universal theories that largely emanate from the Euro-American experiences and those particular to the South Asian and Indian borders.

The South Asian borderland zones, which were my areas for study and interaction, are, as previously described in the section on the three sites, creation of specific and multiple historical circumstances. There are some areas that are rife in migrancy and porosity (licit and illicit flows), while there are others where

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<sup>88</sup> If we consider the works of Francis Fukuyama (1989), Richard O’Brien (1992), Jean-Marie Guéhenno (1995), Kenichi Ohmae (1995), Bertrand Badie, (1995), Bruno Latour (1996) and Milton Friedman (2005), they all, in different ways, seem to suggest or project a borderless world that has either come about or is imminent, suggesting a dissolution of the territorial nation state.

<sup>89</sup> Border studies are mushrooming all around the world (Newman, 2006). The scope of study has expanded and new approaches are invented, no longer is the border considered as a line alone, a physical manifestation of separation that has to be studied empirically, but has increasingly become known as a process (Paasi, 1998). “Limology” URL: <https://criticalgeography.wordpress.com/2010/04/27/on-borders-boundaries-and-borderlands-theoretical-limology/>.

<sup>90</sup> Geography played, and continues to play, a pioneering role in the study of borders. As Julian Minghi said: *‘Boundaries are perhaps the most palpable political geographic phenomena’* (Houtum, 2005). “Limology” URL: <https://criticalgeography.wordpress.com/2010/04/27/on-borders-boundaries-and-borderlands-theoretical-limology/>.

the moot question is that of confinement. They can be called local emergences of some of the most global issues of our times, and addressing one zone may require a completely different order of engagement compared to another. Indian borders are a creation and fall-out of its colonial governance and the partition of the country in 1947. Apart from the trauma that the partition brought into the Indian subcontinent, border researcher and sociologist Willem Van Schendel writes, “In the borderland, partition inscribed itself in the landscape. It was here that the South Asians learned first-hand what it meant to be allocated to different modern states and to be separated by international borders.... The physical signs of partition continue to exert overwhelming influence over everyday life in the borderlands”.<sup>91</sup> Thus, the effects of the partition continued to subsequently impinge on the day-to-day lives and surroundings of the people in the borders.

Borderlands are forced to become periphery of the nation state that exercises power from the centre. Border policies are formulated at the centre, which is generally insensitive to the predicament of the periphery. Therefore, grievances accumulate at the border. Also, the border is usually conceived at the centre without adequate research on the ground or connect with its reality, and often by cruel political dispensation and geographical disposition, it produces different categories of subjects apart from the citizens, like aliens, proxy-citizens and temporary citizens (called denizens).<sup>92</sup>

Guy Standing (2013) defines the denizen as being in a kind of middle state between an alien and natural-born subject.<sup>93</sup> He credits Thomas Hammar (1994) with the modern reintroduction of the term in reference to migrant workers who came to Western and Northern Europe from the 1960s onwards and became long-term residents. They were granted negative freedoms, including access to the labour market, and gained some positive social security rights. But denizenship remained an ‘in-between’ concept (Oger 2003; Walker 2008). In the European context, this idea of denizenship as an ‘in-between’ status has

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<sup>91</sup> Schendel, *Bengal Borderlands*, 31.

<sup>92</sup> Etymologically it means ‘A foreigner allowed certain rights in their adopted country’. URL: <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/denizen>.

<sup>93</sup> Guy Standing, *A Precariat Charter: From Denizen to Citizen* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 8. Guy Standing is Professor of Development Studies at SOAS, University of London.

historically been one of progress for the person involved. A denizen was “someone who moved from being an outsider to a partial insider, with some rights.”<sup>94</sup> However, this term shifts in connotation when it is used to describe the subject categories of South Asian borders. Political sociologist Sanjib Baruah has used ‘denizen’ in the context of Assam to denote second generation migrants in the state who are isolated as outsiders, though they may well be legal citizens of the country. This is often the fall-out of the various ethnic tensions in Assam, rising out of the ethno-Assamese homeland discourse that saw its peak expression in the ULFA movement of the 1980—90s and still flows in subdued currents in the state, manifesting in sporadic outbursts of violence. Baruah cites as example, the displacement of the Santhals from the Kokrajhar district in Lower Assam, in the late 1990s:

The Santhals in Assam are descendants of tea workers brought to Assam as indentured workers — many of them more than a century ago. Their displaced forefathers provided the muscle for the tea industry that marked the arrival of global capitalism in Assam in the nineteenth century. That such a group could be displaced for the second time in the course of an indigenous group’s search for an ethnic homeland... brings home the absurdity of the way insiders and outsiders are framed in the homeland discourse of Northeast India.<sup>95</sup>

In the north-eastern borderlands of India, thus, a denizen status does not hold out any promise for the future. It is a regression, where generations old migrant settlers may suddenly be derecognised.

In South Assam or the Barak Valley, the issue of denizen identity takes on a different dimension, stemming from the conflict between the dominant ethno-Assamese territorial identity pressure and the majority Bengali ethnic community in the region. Uneasy cohabitation was achieved in this conflicting relationship in the 1980s by:

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>95</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 204.

Marking out the illegal alien ('Bengali-speaking, Muslim, Bangladeshi infiltrator'), as the constituent Other. Indeed, the conceptual apparatus of citizenship summoned by the components of the hyphenated citizen — 'Indian' and 'Assamese' — iron out the multiple layers and corresponding contestations within each. The citizenship question in Assam has a long postcolonial history fraught with conflicts, and is reflected in the manner in which the citizenship law in India has responded to the contests over citizenship in Assam... The process of identifying "citizens" through the preparation of the National Register of Citizens for Assam, coupled with changes in the Citizenship Act, 1955 that apply specifically to Assam and allow for a "hyphenated" citizenship — "Indian" and "Assamese"— continues to be troubled issues that have not abated since the 1980s.<sup>96</sup>

At the back of this conflict lies the changes that Assam has undergone from the time when it was part of a larger Bengal, and the peculiar predicament of the Sylhet district in all this; a history of multiple reconfigurations, beginning from the colonial period and ending with the partition of India in 1947. The partition resulted in the influx of the Sylheti Bengalis (both Hindus and Muslims) from the newly formed East Pakistan into the Barak region of Assam, as refugees. Pre-partition, they were residents of Assam as the whole of the Sylhet region was part of Assam. Now they became 'legal migrant settlers' in what was hitherto, their own state. In the 1985 amendment of the Citizenship Act, there was special provision made for Assam in recognition of the extraordinary conditions prevailing there. By this, only people who had documentary evidence of having resided in the state prior to the date of March 24, 1971, were to be considered as legal residents of Assam. This was to keep Bengali Hindu refugees of the 1971 civil war from entering Assam via the border with erstwhile East Pakistan that was now Bangladesh.<sup>97</sup>

However, on the ground, the exaggerated anxiety over 'illegal immigration' has spilled over to affect the lives of the Bengali populace of the Barak as a whole, whereby often legal migrant citizens are labelled as illegal 'D' or doubtful

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<sup>96</sup> Anupama Roy, "Ambivalence of Citizenship in Assam," *EPW* 51, issue no. 26-27 (25 June, 2016):45.

<sup>97</sup> Sanjib Deblaskar in his self-published booklet, *Portents of Disaster: Challenges before the Linguistic Minorities in Assam* (August 2011), 2-9.

category voters. According to the Barak Human Rights Protection Committee (BHRPC):

Imaginary statistics and numbers are regularly floated to build up a picture of native and indigenous population losing land to immigrants, be it Bengali, Hindu or Muslim, and an entire Muslim community is particularly dubbed “illegal” by a motley combination of ethno-nationalists and indigenous activist groups.

To complicate matters further, there is an existing legal mechanism of identifying “suspected illegal immigrants” by tagging them “doubtful” beside their names in the voters’ list and by subjecting them to a legally tortuous process of proving their bona fides and, in the process, many have died in detention camps.<sup>98</sup>

This situation offers a study of the unique crisis of a dominant ethnicity struggling anew to gain its foothold in the place of its origin, after being segregated from it by geographical division. As Baruah says, “We need a framework that does not involve the state forever categorising groups of people in ethnic terms and making descendants of immigrants into perpetual immigrants”.<sup>99</sup>

Assam’s mainland theoretical discourse has been for a long time influenced by this general anxiety over the insider-outsider question; the long tract of violent action marking this debate. An instance where this tendency in scholarship reverses position may be mentioned here (even though it does not relate to this project’s area of study). This is Sanghamitra Mishra’s recent attempt in interdisciplinary studies, in which she has focused on a region in Lower Assam. Her deliberations are on cultural overlaps and appropriations, rather than conflict – thus avoiding the trap of ethno-bias.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> “Retired chief justice of the Supreme Court of India Altamas Kabir once pointed out that suspected ‘D’ voters’ human rights were violated in Assam as they were kept with criminals and were deprived of access to legal assistance. The Hindu legal cell of Assam has filed a petition before the National Human Rights Commission against the Assam government’s policy of keeping suspected foreigners in ordinary jails with common criminals.”  
<https://bhrpc.wordpress.com/tag/citizenship/>.

<sup>99</sup> Baruah, *Durable Disorder*, 204.

<sup>100</sup> She focuses on a region in Lower Assam, which is constrained by its position between Bengal and Assam – “Fraught by contesting narratives and counter-narratives... local politics as well as in the trajectories of the neighbouring nationalisms...”, Sanghamitra Mishra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial North Eastern India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 2.

Standing speaks of a different kind of denizenship that is being created by the state. According to him, neoliberalisation has resulted in the “systematic dismantling and unbundling of all instruments and mechanisms of social solidarity and reciprocity that stood against the market”.<sup>101</sup> This perspective produces “an image of layers of citizenship and layers of rights”,<sup>102</sup> because, this dismantling has caused, among others, the “unbundling of occupational communities”, which was one of the spheres that gave citizenship — in a local sense — to people who were inside them. At the same time, as a result of neoliberal policies, many citizens are increasingly losing their basic rights of civil, cultural, social, political and economic freedom and turning into denizens. He calls this process of growing precariousness and insecurity leading to a possible outburst in rebellion a “precariat path”:

Around the world, more people are being turned into denizens; they are having rights associated with citizenship whittled away often without realizing it or realizing the full implications. Many are joining the precariat, an emerging class characterized by chronic insecurity... For the first time in history, governments are reducing the rights of many of their own people while further weakening the rights of more traditional denizens, migrants. In sum, denizenship can arise not just from migration but also from an unbundling of rights that removes some or all of the rights nominally attached to formal citizenship... Precariat is a class-in-the-making... It is also dangerous because... the combination of anxiety, alienation, anomie and anger can be expected to lead to more days of riot and protest. And it is dangerous because stress, economic insecurity and frustration can lead and are leading to social illnesses, including drug-taking, petty crime, domestic violence and suicide. Finally, the precariat is dangerous because it is confronted by a strident divisive state.<sup>103</sup>

In Sikkim, one finds remarkable evidence of this growing alienation in Dzongu, where an entire ethnic community of standard citizens is being pushed into a

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<sup>101</sup> Guy Standing speaking at a Seminar, at UNRISD, Geneva, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGLSGeqF1Po>.

<sup>102</sup> Standing, *A Precariat Charter*, 7.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-35.

precariat condition by the new developmental projects and the big dam projects that are adversely affecting its traditional occupation of farming, hurting its local economy, changing its eco-system and even uprooting it from its land. This has given rise to an anti-dam movement in the Lepcha reserve, where a section of the community is in confrontation with the government.<sup>104</sup>

Ethno-historian James C. Scott (1990) proposes the concept of ‘infrapolitics’— which are the hidden strategies of resistance – the low profile forms of resistance that, according to him, subordinate groups/ communities employ against their dominators. He asserts that silent acquiescence in public is always a misleading signal to the actual position of the oppressed. Those who seem to accept their oppression in public, always question it offstage – “Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a ‘hidden transcript’ that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant” and, “When, suddenly, subservience evaporates and is replaced by open defiance we encounter one of those rare and dangerous moments in power relations”.<sup>105</sup>

Scott (2009) describes another form of resistance that is an “encounter between expansionary states and self-governing peoples”.<sup>106</sup> He theorises about the comparatively inaccessible peripheries of the state that, according to him, have always become “zones of refuge” for communities escaping and /or hiding from the oppressions of the state; he thus offers a counter-narrative to the traditional story about modernity – that once people are exposed to the conveniences of modern technology and the modern state, they will assimilate. Speaking specifically in the context of the region designated as Zomia (the hill regions of

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<sup>104</sup> Chogen Lepcha explaining the growing crisis of the Lepcha community in Dzongu because of the developmental processes and the dam, in conversation with me in Dzongu (video time: 9:57-11:35); Tenzing Lepcha — the leader of the anti-dam movement, expressing the importance of their land for the Lepchas (video time: 14:03-14:08; 15:28-15:43); Dawa Tshering Lepcha — another leading activist speaking on the distressed situation of the people who gave their land to the government for the dam projects (video time: 16:01- 16:17). Dasgupta, *A Dictionary of Four Entries*.

<sup>105</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: The Hidden Transcript* (Yale; Yale University Press), 1990, xii, 6.

<sup>106</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New York: Yale University Press, 2009), 3.

mainland Southeast Asia, including parts of Burma and the Indian Northeast),<sup>107</sup> he describes their population as conscious refugees from the early state formation, whose migration to the hills happened over the last 1,500 years. Scott argues that hill people cannot be understood in isolation, such as in the formulation of the term “tribes”, but need to be viewed in relation to the valley kingdom and valley governance. He describes Zomia as zones of relative autonomy for these trapped, but self-organised runaway communities, as well as zones of resistance. Among the strategies employed by the people of Zomia to remain stateless are physical dispersion in rugged terrain, agricultural practices that keep them mobile, pliable ethnic identities, and maintenance of a largely oral culture that allows them to reinvent their histories and genealogies as they move between and around states. Apart from taking advantage of their geographical isolation from the centre of power, the hill population of Zomia have actively "resisted the projects of nation-building and state-making of the states to which it belonged."<sup>108</sup> Scott says that the attempts of the state to fully incorporate the people of the Zomia has been culturally styled as development, economic progress, literacy, and social integration. In practice, it has meant something else. It has been an attempt to harness and control their land and human resources, as well as exploit their mineral and other natural resources.<sup>109</sup> He writes, “History of the people who have history is the history of class struggle, while for those who don’t have history is a struggle against the state.”<sup>110</sup> Falling within this description of Zomia, one finds the Lepchas and the early Tibetan migrants of Northeast India. More specifically, the Lepchas in Dzongu who have perpetuated legends around a sacred place of origin – ‘Mayalyang’<sup>111</sup> – that they associate with the zone in and around Dzongu and the Teesta River and its

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<sup>107</sup> ‘Zomia’ derives from the term Zomi, which in the Tibeto-Burman language group means ‘the highlander’. It was first coined by Schendel in 2002 and then used by Scott. According to Scott, Zomia comprises of people who ran away from the statist tax and slavery regimes. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, vii.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>110</sup> At a lecture delivered at the University of New England on the occasion of the publication of his book, *The Art of Not Being Governed*. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNkkEU7EoOk>.

<sup>111</sup> The people of Zomia invoke a legendary, secret, holy and magical land of origin in the remote regions of the mountains. The Bhutias and Tibetans call this land ‘Beyul’. For the Lepchas, it is Mayalyang.

tributaries, and their ongoing struggle against state onslaught on their resources.<sup>112 113</sup>

If we think of spatiality as an aspect of social relations that is continually being reconfigured, borders become much more significant. It is here that the state territoriality is dramatised and state sovereignty is flaunted. In other words, boundaries and borders are now understood as a verb, it is not so much about the border, but about b(/)ordering.<sup>114</sup> “It is also here,” says Schendel, “that many countervailing strategies contesting state territoriality are clustered.”<sup>115</sup> Further, he writes about the Bengal borderland, “The Bengal borderland is far from being sleepy backwater in a lost corner of the world that many imagine it to be. It is a dynamic site of transnational reconfiguration, a hotbed of rescaling, and an excellent space to help us shake off the state-centric social imagination. It provides a strong case for reimagining the social space.”<sup>116</sup>

The state centric imagination faces further challenge when confronted with the issue of enclaves, especially the enclaves in the Coochbehar district of the Bengal borderlands, which are stark spaces that produce statelessness. There is a general dearth of border studies with regard to the phenomenon of enclaves and then hardly any referring to the Coochbehar enclaves. American geographer

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<sup>112</sup> “Assam – a lot of tribal issue is going on – Bodoland and thing...135 people were killed. Same thing is going to happen in Sikkim one day or another. People will flock from other places... and take advantage...Because our people are not aware of whatever material they have, minerals and all... This is going to happen out here, because major encroachment has happened earlier... They have the power, they are the one enemy, unseen. After 20-30 years maybe we will be on the edge. Dam is just one topic, within it we don't know what is going on...” Chogen Lepcha in conversation with me in Dzongu, *Dictionary of Four Entries*, DVD (video time: 9:57–11:35).

<sup>113</sup> “The State has repeatedly referred to all those opposed to the slew of mega hydroelectric projects planned in the region as ‘anti-nationals,’ a standard lament that has an unmistakable whiff of totalitarianism... ‘If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country.’ This evoking of the ‘national interest’ to justify exploitation of natural resources for economic gain and to suppress local agitations and voices of resistance raises several important questions: who really owns and has rights over resources like land, water, rivers, forests and hills?” <https://savedzongu.wordpress.com/background/>.

<sup>114</sup> Henk Van Houtum, “Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries,” 2005. DOI: 10.1080/14650040500318522.

<sup>115</sup> Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland*, 9.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Additionally, Schendel states, “I study the border to understand processes of territoriality and global restructuring, ‘in a period of reterritorialization’” because, (he states quoting Donnan and Wilson) “Certain things can only happen in the borders”. *Ibid.*, 15.

Catudal, in his book on Western European enclaves, defines the word simply as “A portion of territory surrounded by foreign dominion”.<sup>117</sup> He looks at the problems of access, defence, policing, smuggling and so on that are associated with borders in general, mentioning Coochbehar only in passing. Concentrating mainly on the European cases where the enclaves have been absorbed into their host countries, he considers the problem largely as resolved. In 2002, Schendel introduces the enclaves of the Bengal borderland as a special case of study for the first time, giving it global importance. This is followed by Brendan Whyte’s micro-study of Coochbehar enclaves. Coochbehar has a substantial enclave population and a large number of post-partition migrants who cohabit amid the conflicts of newer demands of sovereignty and/ or freedom. This turns it into a zone of non-citizens and migrant settlers. Additionally, states try to explain the ambiguities and porosities by using a different kind of scaling to define identities, which pertains also to enclave dwellers, sometimes as ‘stateless’ and at others as ‘proxy-citizens’. The proxy-citizen has an ambiguous status. Schendel writes:

A striking characteristic of the nationalisms that developed in India and Pakistan after 1947 was trans-territoriality. Both states saw themselves as being in charge of the populations living in their own territory, but also of a category of people living in the territory of the other state. These two groups can be described as citizens and proxy citizens. Thus India’s proxy citizens were the Hindus in Pakistan, and Pakistan’s proxy citizens were the Muslims in India. This complementary trans-territoriality — backed up by various agreements and institutions — was seen as a safeguard for the wellbeing of minority religious communities, but it also weakened their position. For example, Muslims in Pakistan simply were citizens of Pakistan, but Hindus in Pakistan were citizens of Pakistan (their territorial nation) as well as proxy citizens of India (their trans-territorial or potential nation). This highlighted their liminality as loyal citizens of their territorial nation.<sup>118</sup>

In case of Coochbehar this is true literally, for the residents of the enclaves are technically from Bangladesh, while they live inside India. Their complete lack of

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<sup>117</sup> H.M. Catudal, *The Enclave Problems of Western Europe* (US: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 18.

<sup>118</sup> Willem van Schendel, “Stateless in South Asia: The Making of India- Bangladesh Enclaves,” *Journal of Asian History* 61, no.1 (2002): 127.

access to basic amenities and rights of citizenship, coupled with their trapped situation, also makes them stateless people. In this aspect the situation of the Coochbehar enclaves is like no other in the world. In a more recent book that provides a comprehensive documentation of the enclaves of the world, Vinokurov compares the prosperity of the small European enclaves to the situation in the Coochbehar enclaves:

In today's peaceful and integrated Europe, enclaves prosper... On the one hand, there is Baarle, with 22 Belgian and eight Dutch enclaves.... the two nations in Baarle coexist very closely. They have even learned to use their complex border as a tourist attraction... On the other hand, there is Cooch Behar, with its 106 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and 92 Bangladeshi enclaves in India, home to some 60,000 people. The situation remains dreadful in these enclaves despite the fact that they have existed on an international level since 1947. No governance; no police protection; innumerable obstacles to normal economic and social life...<sup>119</sup>

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Subject-making is a significant function of existing border theories in their literary or metaphoric aspects. There are several perspectives on this. One among them is Homi Bhabha's, on the emergent subject, wherein he does not advocate strict positioning in a conflictual situation. Bhabha believes in finding a way out of the conflictual situation and the hegemonies produced by master-slave dichotomy of the conflict narrative. He suggests a third and figurative position of hybridity that is beyond the 'I and the Other' conflict. For him, this middle space constitutes the space for politics; "The 'third space' to the extent it avoids polarity and, thus, polarization and positionality, remains unfounded, always to be thought, always to come"<sup>120</sup>

This "in-between" stance on the production of subjectivity and agency is contested by the positions occupied by both Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and Chantal Mouffe. Spivak articulates her position on the border and identities via

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<sup>119</sup> Evgeny Vinokurov, *A Theory of Enclaves* (Lexington Books, 2007), 4.

<sup>120</sup> Scott Michaelsen and David E. Johnson, *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 35.

her deliberations on two major rebel figures; Rigoberta Menchu of South American transnationalism, and Poppie Nongena of South Africa. These were two figures with considerable entanglements with border and border crossing, who raised questions about how migrants are treated and demonstrated the growth of different singularities. Spivak uses the story of these two to suggest that rebel voices are suppressed in the name of their subalternity, not allowing them to become “organic intellectuals”.<sup>121</sup> Chantal Mouffe proposes a constant battle of adversarial forces as a model for democracy.

Robinson discusses another order of metaphors signifying invisibility, weightlessness, spectrality and so on as stand-ins for the different border conditions. Thus, the conception of ‘nowhere’ would represent “partitioned territory” and “dismembered spaces”. “Atopia” is “an anomalous nowhere place” that refers to “dispossession” and “de-territorialisation”, and is produced by conditions of “peripherality, statelessness or supranationality” as a “signifier in metaphor and narrative”. Robinson says, “Nowhere is a political territory, given an aesthetic form”— this can relate to the idea of “dwelling in displacements” as in James Clifford’s Benjaminian readings of the borders.<sup>122</sup>

Such “atopias”, like the enclaves of Coochbehar, are creations of the ambiguities of the border the world-over and evade classification within the regular narrative of sovereign space. Often they are named after their predicaments, for instance ‘Gayabari’ which roughly means, ‘the dwelling of the dead’. As, in the fictional mode we see, in the European context, novelist Enzo Bettiza, calling the people of Istria — Apolidi (people without Polis).

In Europe, literatures of different genres deal with the questions of territorial ambiguity. Alfred Jarry concludes his proto-absurdist play ‘Ubu Roy’ (1896) by saying that the action was to take place in Poland — “that is to say, nowhere”. Metaphors of inhabitation and exile are a simultaneous co-existence, such as

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<sup>121</sup> Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean, ed., *The Spivak Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993), 293. This becomes an important contrast with Bhabha, as far as positionality and confrontational theories are concerned. Bhava develops a theory of non- confrontational emergence while Spivak seeks an engaged and translator activity that calls for a positioning.

<sup>122</sup> Richard Robinson, *Narratives of the European Borders: A History of Nowhere* (London: Palgrave, 2007), 4-7.

'insider' and 'outsider'. In this borderland project, I found exilic novelists, who were effectively, both insiders and outsiders, voicing similar ambiguities of position in their memoirs and fictional travelogues; yet their articulations were always marked by the particularities of their locations. Unlike in the relatively smooth European experience, in this project, the questions of insider and outsider were complicated by factors like ethnicity and complex allegiances to locations.

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While dwelling on border predicaments and conditions, it would be relevant to mention the role of rumour. Veena Das (2007) elaborates on the power and characteristics of rumour, via Ranajit Guha:

Following him (i.e. historian of the French Revolution George Rudé), many scholars have seen the power of rumour to mobilize crowds as agents of collective action for redressal of moral wrongs, in a positive light. In Indian historiography, the unique voice of Ranajit Guha secured an analytical place for rumour as a form of transmission in popular peasant uprisings. In Guha's formulation, rumour is important as a trigger and mobilizer, "a necessary instrument of rebel transmission." Guha further identified the anonymity of the source of rumour, its capacity to build collective solidarity, and the almost uncontrollable impulse to pass it on as important elements on which to build a theory of rumour. He drew repeated attention to rumour as an important means of mobilization of the peasantry, one that was "specific to a pre-literate culture," reflecting "a code of political thinking which was in conformity with the semi-feudal conditions of the peasant's existence." From the official point of view the peasant insurgencies fueled by rumour were instances of peasant irrationality: for the peasant insurgents these were means of spreading the message of revolt.<sup>123</sup>

In the course of this research, I found the phenomenon of rumour sometimes prove to be a kind of binder of communities dependent on oral transmission. This was largely true of confined places like the enclaves and the reserve zones in

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<sup>123</sup> Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (California: University of California Press, 2007), 117.

the hills. In one instance in Assam, the rumour of selective persecution became originator of trauma, as it engineered a mass exodus in the country.

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Border discourses are rarely produced in the borders; they are generally produced in the centres (and are mostly determined by the stake that centres have in them). For instance, Schendel, who is noted for his theories on South Asian borders, states that his book *The Bengal Borderland* could not address certain issues which are of general historical importance in the context of South Asia – such as the Bangladesh War of Independence (1971) or the many changes in the government, because not enough attention was given to them in the media and scholarly literature.<sup>124</sup> This seems to confirm that knowledge of the physical borders depends on the availability and control of the information about them.

Schendel writes about the need to restore the importance of borderland studies, while admitting the existence of hiatuses in the archives that make the representation of borderlands episodic and fragmentary. There is also a mismatch between orality and literacy in the study of borders. The physical studies on the ground often yield material that is not supported by the available archives (this is partially the reason for which border studies are bound to be fragmented). This is where the realm of rumour takes over, guiding many phenomena in the border. In referring back from the physical space or spatiality of the border to the archival resources, where a regular historian would be expected to dig for facts, Schendel accepts the dearth of corroborative material. He feels such digging is bound to face hurdles, making the sensitive historians look for smaller voices and imaginary reconstructions.<sup>125</sup> He buttresses this argument with historian Gyanendra Pandey's articulation – who suggests that without these voices the history of South Asia is an incomplete one.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland*, 15.

<sup>125</sup> Schendel writes, "Since 1947, the public in South Asia has had no access to accurate maps showing a band of some 80 km either way of the land borders. The borders that play such an important role in South Asian politics are, quite literally, left to imagination." *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>126</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, "Voices from the Edge: Struggle to Write Subaltern Histories." in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. Vinayak Chaturvedi (London: Verso, 2000), 281.

The border-studies scenario in India, however, has been more lopsided in the past. For years, the partition studies genre of social science and history has made the partition of Punjab the centre of its focus and a model against which all other zones were counted or compared. Schendel states that the scene is changing with more material available (significantly from the 1990s onwards) on Bengal, with thorough relook at Assam, Sindh, Rajasthan and Bihar still pending.<sup>127</sup> Since most of these studies have a macro dimension in their scaling,<sup>128</sup> Project Borderland had the challenge of opening up a space for the micro-social dimension of the border.

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The pragmatics of the border relate to the state-centric policy decisions taken by the governments to chart the future of the borders. The most recent approach in border studies is the so called 'Policy-Practice-Perception' approach.<sup>129</sup> This method considers borders and boundaries as products of social practice and attempts to integrate knowledge from analyses at different levels of implementation of programmes. It studies the practices and happenings at the borders, the cross-border activities and the kind of businesses and people that are involved with the borders. It also takes into consideration the policies, strategies and the actions of local and regional governments. In India, the Look East Policy (LEP) and the resultant MDONER (2004) — a derivative of functionalism — came into existence in the wake of economic liberalisation (1991). It is currently responsible for building connectives between the mainland of India through the Northeast, to Tibet and the world at large.<sup>130</sup> In relation to

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<sup>127</sup> Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland*, 28.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>129</sup> "Limology", April 27, 2010, URL: <https://criticalgeography.wordpress.com/2010/04/27/on-borders-boundaries-and-borderlands-theoretical-limology/>.

<sup>130</sup> Samaddar suggests that there is a greater planning and a global scaling involved, citing the example of the World Bank's meeting held in Guwahati, Assam on 10—11 November, 2005, which was to "utilize water, other natural resources and the environment". Ranabir Samaddar, "Government of Peace" in *Policies and Practices*, occasional paper no.53 (Kolkata: MCRG, 2012), 15.

For further reference see Sanjib Baruah's *Durable Disorder* and Dilip Gogoi, ed., *Beyond Borders: Look East Policy and North East India* (Guwahati: DVS Publishers), 2010.

this ambitious projection, the theories of facility and deterrence will obviously become important. Several local factors will need to be resolved, especially in Assam and Sikkim, before the projected schemes can be successfully implemented.

### **Workshops: The Events in the Three Sites**

As was briefly mentioned while introducing the project design, the concept of border was seen to perform in different ways. There seemed to be a need for a connective and a catalyst, between the disciplinary orientation for addressing the border and its life-world. While the curatorial event was perceived as the connective, the function of the curator was assumed to be that of the catalyst. However, in the functioning, there was a difference between the curator as a participant-observer and what is generally understood as a purely catalytic agent. By definition, the catalyst is a neutral agent that precipitates an event.<sup>131</sup> Whereas in the case of the interactive workshop, by the rule of participation, the curator had to perform an active role that overlapped with that of the artist-coordinator and perhaps sometimes even with that of the rest of the participants. Unlike the anthropologist, the curator may not have had to struggle in gleaning data, but in participating in the process of enactment, an effort needed to be made. By the definition of this thesis, therefore, the curator as catalyst – in a limited metaphorical way – is expectedly a facilitator placed between an event and an inventory, occupying an in-between space, which is often subjective and vulnerable, and unlike the clinical catalyst, does not have absolute neutrality as a guarantee. He/she is, nevertheless the one who precipitates the event of knowledge. Thus, the engagements for the curator and the anthropological analyst with respect to the community at the border are different. Participation, though, cannot be assumed as a guarantee for ‘overcoming’ any borderland

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<sup>131</sup> A catalyst has been variously defined as:

‘One that precipitates a process or event, especially without being involved in or changed by the consequences’, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/catalyst>; ‘Something that causes activity between two or more persons or forces without itself being affected’ or ‘A person or thing that precipitates an event or change’, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/catalyst>.

predicament or issue. It may be a way of negotiating “the complex network of motivation, expectations and projections among all involved”.<sup>132</sup>

There can be different communities in evidence in the transient interactive field of a workshop, in addition to, and one may add, divergent to what Kwon projects from her studied classification of emergent communities in her far away field (in Chicago). Our communities, as they emerged in the workshop situation, were what I would like to term ‘found communities’ (of senses) – that is, a community that temporarily emerges to our perception. As has already been discussed at length, community is a part of the contemporary discourse in social sciences, philosophy and anthropology. This factor has also come to complicate site related art practice. Community works as a framing device, a question that moves our thoughts in different directions and charts our paths.<sup>133</sup> As there is the ‘coming community’ referring to the future, the ‘inoperative community’ suggesting fraction and/or absence of cohesion, ‘found community’ is a coinage referring to the emergent fractious civility as was found in the youngsters participating in the workshop. Found community is random and temporary and bound by the location. This aspect of temporary or contingent community took on further dimension in the context of this project because of its situation at the borderlands. This community and its resultant dynamics of uncertainty determined the role of the curatorial in the event of knowledge.<sup>134</sup>

The following three sections provide an overview, of the parameters and specific realisations of the anthropological research that guided the selection of the micro-sites and the conception and setting-up of the events/ workshops.

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<sup>132</sup> Mwon Kwon, *One Site After Another* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 141.

<sup>133</sup> Gerard Delanty, *Community* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 105-107.

<sup>134</sup> "Ethnography does not measure accomplishments in the hopes of improving the system. More to the point, its open minded and open ended procedures refer both to the manner in which observations are made and to the processes of compiling description... It has its own search engine in the form of a question: what connections are going to be useful? (...) That is simply because one cannot tell in advance; more strongly, it puts one into a situation of not wanting to tell in advance."

Marilyn Strathern, "Abstraction and Decontextualization: An Anthropological Comment," *Cambridge Anthropology* 22 (2001): 309.

## **Coochbehar: Patterns of Confinement**

The workshops in Coochbehar were pitched at the end of several research trips. On two of these, I was accompanied by the artist-collaborator. These trips were extremely educative, for, as relatively privileged city-dwellers and urban-educated university teachers, we had to face the challenge of interacting across the boundaries of a given civil society. The dynamics of difference became more defined as we travelled to the enclaves.

The workshops in this site provided the unique opportunity of studying the two different borderland syndromes of the stateless enclave dwellers and the citizen residents close to the border, on the same platform. The participants were a mix of local theatre members from Coochbehar town and non-state people from Poaturkuthi, *aka* Goyabari enclave close to Dinhata town. While playing the role of catalytic interlocutor in curatorial capacity, as well as in engaging with the participatory process, I came to recognise and appreciate the various and shifting dynamics that existed between the participants: between the non-citizens from the enclaves and the citizens, including the theatre group members, the artist-collaborator and me; between those whose lives were implicated in one way or the other by the border and the curator-coordinator duo from the mainland; between those with urban educational backgrounds – including the theatre group director and the two mainlanders – and the rest of the participants; between the small theatre group from Coochbehar town and the two participating observers with access to the big city. Many participatory methods were introduced in the workshop; affective themes were floated and choreographed moments were created to expose the participants to a stage of more spontaneous expressions where a new relation could emerge. The subtle differences and relative outsidednesses played out through the different stages of performance – in words, gestures, comments and during active knowledge production.

In this process, the concept of border underwent a performative act through words, gestures and various signifying devices and objects such as maps; an act that subverted the established meanings of the objects by destabilising their

constative or descriptive roles.<sup>135</sup> For instance, by making subjective maps out of an ordinary, descriptive and statist map of Coochbehar, we ended up mapping the terrain differently.

Coochbehar was the first of the three sites, where anthropological research could brush against the curatorial intervention, leading to the event of knowledge. It was also a site where an exceptional outlet of an interim kind emerged as an extension of a prospective activist idea; I tried to create a dialogic situation between the enclave communities and non-enclave people who are migrants but not particularly engaged with the entrenched enclave people or their concerns. Also growing out of the event of knowledge, was the possibility of the enclave dwellers building a creatively worked out cooperative, a cultural- economic commons, in a non-acquisitive mode.

However, when we moved to the rest of the sites, we encountered changes in the concept and the dynamics of border. For instance, in case of Assam, the ethnic contrasts are more pronounced and relate differently. Unlike Assam, Coochbehar is over and above a peaceful district despite the historical anomaly of the enclaves by which the urban population is largely unaffected. However, the dispersed enclave people are at present coming together, enthused by the hope of imminent freedom.

### **Sikkim: Counter-Mapping the Terrain**

In Sikkim the border spells two kinds of transnationalities, one of which is militaristic and threatening, i.e. China; the other consists of the less threatening neighbourhoods of Bhutan and Nepal. At the same time there are the Buddhist-Tibetan border crossers who transit to Tibet every now and then through here, though it is not the official route. Also, the passes that surround the capital city

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<sup>135</sup> This dynamics of performative utterance is elaborated and explained in a more relational mode by Peggy Phelan (derived from J.L Austin's famous *How to Do Things with Words*). Phelan elaborates on the presence of acquisitive mode of power- knowledge relation in the dominant western epistemology and politics. She suggests that this mode determines the encounter between self and the other, and "these encounters are the 'atoms' which constitute power-knowledge... To restage these performances it is necessary to turn more directly to the scenario of the classroom."

Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 173.

of Gangtok – once part of the famous ancient Silk Route, are still actively in use and presently form channels for inter-governmental transnational politics.

Sikkim was once a princely state that was governed by Buddhist rulers of Tibetan origin. The 1975 transition to a secular state of India did not radically alter its culture of faith and belief in ethnic legends (like origin stories, tales of superhuman heroes of mythic time or concepts of hidden paradise) that have been handed down the generations through traditional oral practices. This oral culture with its ambience of legends that addresses the living present in the form of the past, and the borderland product of transitional communities – including various categories of aliens – give rise to different temporalities and form interesting features of the state. These are usually characteristics of the closed communities of the mountains.<sup>136</sup>

Past attempts at historicising this site of powerful feudal and legend economy have met with difficulties. The famous Satyajit Ray suffered a jolt from the censor board only once in his career of 37 years, when his documentary on Sikkim was banned in 1971. In this film, which offers the perception of a cultural outsider, Ray captures the contrast of class cultures resulting from a monarchic and feudal ambience, very subtly, in an unhesitating, on the surface, untrammelled mise-en-scène. But, it seems, the message did get across.<sup>137</sup> It can be figured out in a statistical comparison of the budget allocations that, post the Ray film (which may have caused disturbances in the sphere of opinion and governance), there was an attempt at reform, even if very inadequate.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> This is seen in the contrast of Denizen and Citizens in an ambience of contested claim to authenticity, in Assam, Sikkim and all other North-eastern states. Baruah, *India Against Itself*, 28.

<sup>137</sup> 'Sikkim' was made in 1971; British Film Institute has a copy of it, one the very few copies in the entire world. The ban was removed and the film released at the Calcutta Film Festival in 2010. Then someone brought a writ to stop its screening, (the court ordered a stay, which still persists). One finds there is an even treatment given to most of the ethnicities in the film, and no obeisance is paid to the king. Ray had a free hand to shoot everything, even the festive day when the king with his celebrity American wife – Hope Cook – gave a public appearance. People of the elite clan and their guests were shown on the same plane as the local poor, being served two totally contrasting meals, on the same occasion.

<sup>138</sup> Before 1971, the budget gave priority to road building, perhaps to enable the transportation of essentials for the citizens and the military stationed at the border. Whereas, post-Ray's film, in the six-yearly budget announced after 1972, (which remained in effect till the annexation in 1975), this allocation had been diverted towards agriculture (presumably after the content of Ray's film was analysed in the inner circuit of courtly power). This conclusion seems plausible, because the

Available ethnographic documentaries on the state in the British Film Institute collection, including films from the mid and late-twentieth century, show Sikkim in its orientalist-civilisational light. Ray's film provides an unusual critical variation. A much later filmmaker Arghya Basu's – 'The Listener's Tale' (2007)<sup>139</sup> offers another outsider perspective; it shows how a persistent engagement with the slow economy can make one rediscover a different temporality, which is lost as one reaches the heart of urban activity. It also brings out through its mise-en-scène constructions, how the developmental processes are received in a slow economy. Sisir Thapa, a young Sikkimese artist with local and transnational associations (who assisted me in the field here), working on a research-based project, has attempted to trace the course of the Teesta River and the fates of the different settlements along its banks that are undergoing simultaneous changes under the impact of the developmental activity instituted by the government. This is a study done from a partially entrenched position.

Sikkim was not a part of India till 1975; the general rise of awareness about the feudal exploitation caused a revolt that toppled the ministry, controversially, and caused it to be annexed by the Government of India.<sup>140</sup> Thus, its recent history of transition from a princely state to a state of India is very short. Lately, the Union government has been making available a network of capital to the Northeast, through banks and other agencies like DONER, of which Sikkim could be part beneficiary. So far, riding on a not too certain tourism economy and a good contribution from the Union government, the state now seems drawn to the attention economy and is sensitising itself to human and democratic rights. It seems to be moving towards a liberal cultural order. The immediate result of this

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film, despite being commissioned by the king, reveals the huge agrarian exploitation in terms of taxes.

<sup>139</sup> Arghya Basu tries to capture the cultural history of Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim through the sacred dance theatre of 'Chham'. For him, Sikkim seems to represent a missing link between Tibetan Buddhism and the Indian Buddhist experience. The reading of Sikkim's history, Arghya observes, and the retelling of its past differ radically in these two cultures. His film attempts to understand the relationship between these different narratives. It is also a testimony to the silent but dramatic effects of development on such traditional practices. Chham is a kind of metaphor for the conflict between faith and reason, myth and history. The film interprets Chham as a complex composition emerging out of historic struggles between ideas and 'realities'. <https://iffr.com/en/2008/films/listeners-tale>.

<sup>140</sup> *Sikkim: Background Papers* no. 3, 4.

could be seen in the permission given for an art workshop organised by a group from outside the state, and subsequent displays in the MG Marg of Gangtok in December 2010 and March 2011, which I had a chance to witness.

However, the government's developmental projects have different connotations for the different communities of Sikkim. For instance, the big dam projects are seen by the Lepchas as an outsider intrusion. The transnational road construction project that is underway is another source of anxiety for the local Tibetan business community that fears the freer flow of Chinese goods will endanger the sustenance of its traditional crafts. Sikkim's tremendous variability of terrain relates to its ethnic complexity, as the different regions are associated with different ethnicities (e.g Dzongu relates mainly to Lepchas, while Lachen-Lachung to the Bhutias or Tibetans). Sometimes they live in contiguity, but are segregated by notions and predicaments associated with these recent developmental projections, that produce different dynamics of cultural mingling and/or resistance. Sikkim, thus, has a latent tension in its ethnic constitution and its future directions.

A multi-pronged curatorial approach was therefore thought apt here, in order to reveal the subtle layers of the locational identity of the site. This required the selection of more than one workshop location, for studying the various configurations of outsideness and alienation rising from the complex relations between the ethnicities. Three micro-sites were selected for their different relations with respect to the border; Rhenock for its contiguity to the border with Bhutan, Dzongu for its location on the passage to the China border and its exclusive cocooned quality as a Lepcha reserve, and Gangtok for being the main transit point to many borders. In Sikkim, culture and economy are governed by terrain; therefore the three locations were constituted differently. Gangtok was a cosmopolitan location where the participants were of mixed ethnicity, relatively urban and more exposed to the outside world. Dzongu was a geographical and political island of sorts, unified in terms of the ethnic community. But the location had become directly involved with the hydel projects and a section had become activists; they participated in the workshop. Rhenock-Aritar was, again, a place with mixed ethnic composition, on a transit route used for commercial rather than touristic purposes.

Prior to the workshops, during field research in Gangtok and in transit spaces like Aritar and Rhenock, I came across newly emergent groups, many of whom were professionals raring for a lucrative future. While engaging with these youngsters, I realised that there was a general feeling of being stuck in location, because of the irregular terrain. The more distant one is from the capital, more are the difficulties of getting openings and opportunities. The reaction to this is that of complaint directed at the internal authorities of Sikkim. In contrast to this, was my encounter with situated communities like the anti-dam Lepchas in Dzongu. Governed by the knowledge of these factors of relative entrenchment and/or alienation, I arrived at the curatorial events in Sikkim.

The introduction of the participatory exercises and the materials used were directed by these locational dynamics. Counter-mapping, as a defamiliarising approach, was introduced, as a lateral way of addressing the ethno face-offs. When these encounters were pitched together in the workshops in the different locations, they formed an atmosphere of conversation, debate and dialogue, rife with a question related to that particular site and the participants' situatedness.

### **Assam: The Distribution of Fragments**

In Assam, I encountered the problem of having to identify and trace the tracts of identity and difference, artificially separated from its imagined territorial expanse. Interestingly, this segregation now read as the source of ethno-nationalism, is a product of the divisions inside the territory by the 'Inner Line'<sup>141</sup> with a view to control capital and govern ethnicities. While this is seen as deterrence to progress, Sanjib Baruah sees a solution in Assam's becoming an economic zone, in contact with transnational entities. Though, he also perceives the danger of illicit and coercive processes prospectively draining the region – known for its biodiversity – of its natural resources.

One finds many contrary pulls in Assam, the geographical and cultural distinction between the Brahmaputra (Lower Assam) and the Barak River (Southern

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<sup>141</sup> Kar, "When Was Postcolonial," 51-52; *Baruah, Beyond Counter Insurgency*, 13-14.

Assam) Valleys, being one. Then there is the historically produced difference between the Bengali speaking (43.5%) and the dominant Assamese (52%) population of the Brahmaputra Valley. The anthropological entry is somewhat mediated by various questions of entanglement.

Assam has several transnational connections via its borders with Bhutan, and somewhat remotely, with Burma (Myanmar), but most importantly via exportable materials like tea and oil. In the recent years, a few artists have worked to trace their familial pasts through the parallel archives of the tea estates and their own memories of the old places of belonging. Such preoccupations might have sprung partly out of nostalgia, but in the process, have also involved devising ways of ethnographic befriending. In this context, I would like to mention Bruce Allan, an artist from Forest of Deans, UK, who I first met in Calcutta at a Khoj workshop in 2006. Bruce traces his past to the *Dhooli* tea estate in Dibrugarh, Assam. He is somewhat in the grip of nostalgia, whose analysis for him is honestly poetically cognitive and palpable. The difference between Bruce's observations and those of an ethnic Assamese growing up in the tea estates can be paralleled to that between the observations of immediately post-independence administrators who were responsible for resettlements in the border towns and those who were in commanding positions of governance during the Assam movement (1979–85). These can suggest the degrees of outsiderness in the so-called familiar or alien situations and places.<sup>142</sup> Tracking a part of Bruce's journey has proved a useful study for this project, since, as Marcus reminds us time and again, outsiders are often better observers and in ethnography, an outsider is mandatory.

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<sup>142</sup> The dynamics of relative distance between an observer and a site can be seen in the available archives from different periods, including local articulations in the vernacular as well as in English. All of these bring out the subjective aspects of the dynamics of a site and the angle of viewing, determined by the degrees of outsiderness and authority. (Writings by littérateur and ex DGP of Assam Police, Harekrishna Deka, [www.hkdeka.com](http://www.hkdeka.com); unpublished diaries of former Indian Civil Service officer Abani Bhushan Chatterjee, ICS, 1940s Bengal Cadre, reflecting personal experiences in Assam. He was posted in different parts of undivided Bengal, retired prematurely by six years in 1968 and died in 1988 – I had the privilege of studying one of these diaries in his daughter-in-law, Laxmi Chatterjee's collection).

For a cogent theory of the outsiderness in fieldwork, see George E. Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

While Assam is caught in the contra-directional pulls of culture, local initiatives like the Desire Machine Collective (DMC),<sup>143</sup> together with the Periferry Project<sup>144</sup> have organised and initiated several conferences and projects towards recording and analysing the experiences of the daily in the context of the state. These projects are propositionally complex as they might be seductive, invoking contemporary theories. Though Assam also has its more traditionally oriented art communities, the newer generation, trained in the audiovisual media, tends towards new media. This affinity for the new media is not completely hegemonic, but is steadily spreading. It is similar to the tendency in the aural world towards the formation of musical bands; though these use different platforms, enjoy different kinds of attention and aim at somewhat different goals, they can be seen as an instance of the late 90s inclination to group formation. These bands create an access for the participant musicians; they invite similar groups over and also travel out themselves, in order to create the sense of a new global community.

Contrary allegiances, denial of citizenship and aliens seem to produce the discourses of belonging in Assam.<sup>145</sup> Whereas, the new media affiliated Periferry follows certain models, which are translocal and somewhat more accessible than the protracted experiments in new media by groups like Raqs, Open Circle, Pad.ma and the more than a decade long experiment in public art, Khoj, which belong to another, more critical economy of attentions. Periferry arises out of the circumstances of 'agonistic' analysis of ethnicity in a somewhat reflexive manner, as is done by Sanjib Baruah; who may also be seen as a patron of such efforts. Baruah is often seen supporting and participating in these conferences related to the theme of borders, held by Periferry in collaboration with other organisations like Panos South Asia.

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<sup>143</sup> Operating since 2004 as DMC, Sonal Jain and Mriganka Madhukailya employ film, video, photography, space and multimedia installation in their works.  
<http://www.desiremachinecollective.in/information.htm>.

<sup>144</sup> Periferry works as a laboratory for people engaged in cross disciplinary practice. The project focuses on the creation of a network space for negotiating the challenge of contemporary cultural production. Located on a ferry on river Brahmaputra, Periferry aims to promote experimentation in art, ecology, technology, media and science and to create a public space and public domain, physical as well as virtual for critical reflections.  
<http://www.periferry.in/>, <http://www.desiremachinecollective.net/aboutus.htm>.

<sup>145</sup> "In that sense citizenship discourse is different from the homeland discourse of Northeast India that makes Denizens (and perpetual foreigners) out of ethnically defined outsiders and their descendants." Baruah, *Durable Disorder*, 205-206.

My entry point to similar multi-disciplinary workshops has been that of a person articulating the questions of immigration and of art in the public domain, as a critic, since 2003. I have personally been responsible for the launching of an international workshop platform in 2006; Khoj's Kolkata chapter.<sup>146</sup> What might be regarded as an extension to these efforts is my articulation – somewhat as a participant observer, in what I would like to call 'theories in participation' – on the possible prospective directions for Periferry, during its Two Rivers Conference in Guwahati in November 2009.<sup>147</sup>

There is a tendency in the new media genre to question the big constructs like nation, copyright regimes, regimes of law that prove draconian as in the north-eastern states; and more and more articulate voices are coming from Assam. But, as happens with projects that exist in territories governed by identity politics, or that at least have deep entrenchment, there are bound to be slippages, which can look acrimonious, e.g. the DMC's project on the Sacred Grove of Meghalaya. Sacred Groves in India refer to tracts of virgin forest that are communally protected and usually have a significant religious connotation for the protecting community. Biologically, they are rich patches of undisturbed forests and serve as a natural habitat for many endemic, rare, primitive and economically valuable plant species. The entry to the sacred grove of Meghalaya is thus restricted to those belonging to the Khasi community. DMC's project inevitably entails a symbolic trespassing, which got challenged when a student raised questions of appropriation during a public-art workshop in Santiniketan. The same material when drafted by them as a sound file at Unter Der Linden, Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, 2010, can be said to have formed a double entendre.

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<sup>146</sup> Khoj Kolkata was a chapter of Khoj, New Delhi. It was set up by me in 2005. I scouted around for art practitioners who were interested in working in the public domain. At the time, unlike Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, Calcutta didn't have any public art platform. The sporadic previous attempts made towards this had remained unconsolidated. Khoj could thus be considered the first successful attempt. It started with two workshops; a bonding workshop, followed by an international workshop – in which 12 national artists stayed at a location and worked alongside 12 transnational artists of Euro American, Asiatic and Middle Eastern origins, for three weeks. This particular project was site related. I remained the chairperson of the group from its inception, to September 2007. Afterwards, the group activities gave way to regular artists' residencies, with very few public projects.

<sup>147</sup> Two Rivers is a substantive practice-based research project that has been developed collaboratively between Periferry – an initiative between DMC and Khoj (New Delhi), Difference Exchange – a UK-based agency that places international artists in a variety of host contexts, Chelsea College of Art and Design, and the Transnational Arts Research Centre (TrAIN) at Chelsea and Camberwell Colleges of Art, London.

The southern part of Assam, in contrast, operates by a related but different logic. It never considers itself a part of the total territoriality called Assam, nor approves of its ethno-Assamese majoritarian monolinguality. The South's dominant argument is replete with the voice of deprivation. Southern Assam, by its own utterance has a different affiliation (that with neighbouring Sylhet) and affinity (with the centre of Bengali culture i.e. Kolkata). But, South Assam has another agenda of finding its own unique identity such as in terms of autonomous governance separate from Assam state, or a demand for a Union Territory.<sup>148</sup>

Thus, the two river valleys of Assam are distinct in their political and ethnic considerations. Against this background, I decided to make my curatorial intervention in the Barak Valley, not only because it is contiguous to the border and is totally a product of partitions, but also because its ethnic diversity is extreme, with migrant Bengalis forming the dominant section. These diverse groups sometimes amicably cohabit in the space, at other times, not so amicably. I wanted to study the intercultural tensions in this space, as well as the various projections of the desires for the future. The three micro-sites selected for the workshops here could be roughly called urban, transit and bang-on-the-border. These were, respectively, Silchar, which is a central hub of activity and a multi-ethnic business centre; Lakhipur – a suburban marketplace located on the transit to the Myanmar border and home to many ethnicities; and Karimgunj – adjacent to Sylhet in Bangladesh, separated only by the Barak River. In each of them, the modes of address differed in the workshops, according to the dynamics of the locality. The curatorial interest was to bring out the inter-ethnic relationships. I tested out the thematics of 'familiarity/unfamiliarity with spaces', 'anxiety of Others', 'anxiety of Others' spaces' and 'anxieties related to future'. The participatory mapmaking exercise was also used to register these anxieties.

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<sup>148</sup> This is a demand that has lasted for a rather long period together with the movement for linguistic sovereignty for the Barak Valley.  
<http://www.sentinelassam.com/cachar/story.php?sec=2&subsec=12&id=166783&dtP=2014-06-05&ppr=1>.

Some of these leads are threads of the weave that plot the space and live with their potential as spatial metaphor of crossroads and borders. It was planned that the local material, with its unpredictable dynamics of constant vexation and challenges, would be brought together to perform different roles in the workshop situations. Workshops organised in these spaces at this point in time – which may be called transitional, with the Indian government’s LEP finally directing itself towards the establishment of external road links with the neighbouring countries and the entire Northeast poised for change towards an unknown future of multiple directions – were expected to be very engaging. The subjective projections and daily sense-trace of a lived borderland can differentially attend to the terrain and produce an alternate scenography to the popular projection of the border spaces harnessed in official maps.<sup>149</sup>

The three sites researched in this project opened out the many borderlands in their aspects of porosity, blockage and foldedness. Though they may look like products of the same past, the sites were produced differently; the traces of these pasts come alive to the present differently. This could lead to a complex summation of the ethnographic process and anthropological inferences, where the participant observer engages in the liminality and the *communitas* in the performative of self-fashioning, through the stages of postponements as discussed by Victor Turner.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> The scenic build-up is suggested by Marcus in his collaborative curatorial-performative ‘The Market from Here’.

<sup>150</sup> Anthropologist Victor Turner in *From Ritual to Theatre*, shows that each social ‘system’ contains within itself hierarchical ‘orders’ (i.e. clans, families, religious or political parties, cults, castes craft based groups arranged with their followings). Each of these ‘orders’ or groups, in the effort to further its own interest, faces oppositions from the groups who find their interests hindered by the advancement of the former. These conflicts may be seen as an outcome of a clash of interest between indetermination (the wish, the possibility, that which could be, or should be) and ‘modes of determination’ (the normative structure that attempts to bind the society or parts thereof into a harmonious whole). Consequently, there ensue situations of conflict. Turner identifies these modes of conflicts and their resolution as ‘social dramas’. Michael Balfour and John Somers, *Drama as Social Intervention* (Canada: Captus University Publication, 2006). Liminality is a term Turner associates with the interruption in the process of life. It is a threshold situation as happens in an initiation rite– as interruption in the regular process of life– that initiates an identity change. *Communitas* is something that emerges from the liminality as a collective, which is not really a community, but a temporary community produced by a situation. In explaining the *communitas*, Turner writes, “I prefer the Latin term ‘communitas’ to ‘community’ to distinguish this modality of social relationship from an ‘area of common living’... We are presented, in such rites, with a moment ‘in and out of time’ and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition... of a generalised social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties”. Victor Turner, *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 96.

The relational dynamics between the anthropological observers and the participants in the field, become as important as the curatorial interventions, which modulate the process of an event and its observations. As Marcus says – “The inequality of the power relations, weighed in favour of the anthropologist, can no longer be presumed in this world of multi-sited ethnography... In contrast, complicity as a defining element of the multi-sited research is more generative and more ambiguous morally, it demands a mapping onto and the entry of the ethnographic project into a broader context that is neither so morally nor so cognitively determined as it appeared in the previous critiques of rapport.”<sup>151</sup> The difference between participant observation and complicity comes out in the research process where the participant inhabits the performative space and together with the outsider, shares or teases out the information, something which the notion of (self-conscious) complicity does not allow. The two positions are not contradictory, in certain circumstances they can work as complementary. Like the extreme cases of illicit discourses, of which Marcus gives an example, via Brian Holmes – who had to interview certain drug lords in Colombia, the moral authority of ethnographic knowledge is postponed for a while in order to tease out the adequate information for strategic understanding, without risking the fieldworker. During my site research trips, in many of the places I interacted with different ethnic groups that did not get along with each other. Especially in southern Assam where I encountered the most volatile of ethnic diversities, I often found myself unable to divulge even meeting with one group, to the other. I had to carefully negotiate through their mutual animosities. Several times it reached the consequentiality that I was left with opposing sets of information emanating from two different groups, one of them dangerously inaccurate and I was left to work out their authenticity. On one instance I was interested to travel up-river to visit a dam project and was informed by some that it was a possible proposal. On the eve of my departure however, I was dissuaded from attempting the trip by another ethnic group. I thought at the time that either they were being unnecessarily alarmist or were mistrustful of an outsider’s intentions. Yet, only a few days later several people were kidnapped from the location and suffered a two-month-long ransom travail. Thus, the environment of crisis that one may run

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<sup>151</sup> Marcus, *Ethnography*, 123-124.

into, Carolyn Nordstrom and Kathleen and Billie Dewalt warn us, forms the ethnographers' shield and ethnographic strategy.<sup>152</sup>

The differences in the locales subtly come out processually via the literary archives, in the oral archives of conversational methods and their various enactments in the workshop. The desires and masquerade dance in an uneven homily, producing meanings and alterity together.<sup>153</sup>

### **Research Timeline**

The research for Project Borderland happened in different stages. The library work began in 2007. The field trips were undertaken from 2009 onwards and continued intermittently till January 2013. Some of the trips were strategically planned to cover two states at the same time. The theoretical research also continued during this period. I travelled to Coochbehar and the enclaves for the first time in November 2009, then in January and April 2010. Subsequently there were several short trips between January and March 2011. I went again in January 2013. I covered more than 20 Bangladeshi enclaves in the district, including Poaturkuthi and Karala. There were two workshops in this site, held in January and March 2011. In Sikkim, the field research was carried out in December 2010, February and March 2011, October 2011 and May 2012. These expeditions were distributed over Gangtok and several other places, including Changu, Nathula, Aritar and Rhenock in East Sikkim, and Lachung, Lachen and Dzongu in North Sikkim. The shooting for the creative component film for this theory-practice PhD was done in Dzongu and Gangtok in December 2014. The workshops were conducted in Rhenock and Gangtok in May 2012, and in Dzongu in September 2012. In Assam, the field trips were made to Guwahati

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<sup>152</sup> Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C.G. Robben, *Fieldwork under Fire* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1995); Kathleen Dewalt and Billie Dewalt, *Participant Observation* (New York: Altamira Books, 2002).

<sup>153</sup> “[Identity] plays this trick of dancing between the very same and the very different. An impossible but necessary, indeed an everyday affair, mimesis registers both sameness and difference, of being like, and of being Other. Creating stability from this instability is no small task, yet all identity formation is engaged in this habitually bracing activity in which the issue is not so much staying the same, but maintaining sameness through alterity.” Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 129.

and different places in the Cachar, Karimgunj and Hylakandi districts of Southern Assam; Silchar, Lathitola, Latu, Karimgunj, Lakhipur and Banskandi among others. The trips were undertaken in September–November 2011, February–July 2012, December 2012 and February 2013. The workshops took place in Silchar in November 2011, in Lakhipur in March 2012 and in Karimgunj town in February 2013.

### **Collaborations in the Sites**

It may be relevant here to specify areas and scopes of involvement of my collaborators in the overall research. In each location, I identified the community and area of enquiry based on my previous ground and textual research. The dynamics (both historical and geographical) of the sites were discussed by me with the artist-collaborator and individual local assistants, before the workshops. This was followed by further travel in the identified sites, this time together with the local coordinators for working out the practical organisational possibilities and logistics leading up to the events of knowledge. The workshops were thus conducted only after I had completed a stage of research (in the locations and in libraries) and were guided by my theoretical inputs. The discussion sessions inside the workshops were free flowing where any one of the participants could voice opinion, raise question and answer anyone else's question in turn. The questions formulated by the artist-coordinator and me were not predetermined, but rose on the spot; though they did come out of our individual anxieties of mapping the situation, as well as the foreknowledge informally shared by me with the coordinator.

Sanchayan Ghosh, my colleague from the Department of Painting at the Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan was my artist-theatre-collaborator in a coordinating role during the workshops. Sanchayan is a visual artist with an involvement with theatre and the performative arts; his work has throughout involved community and participation. In the last ten years, he has moved from the urban networks of quasi-communities to collaborative projects involving suburban or even rural communities. As my theoretical engagements have progressively drawn me towards the public domain, I have used his work

occasionally as exemplars in my essays. In 1999, I did the camerawork for one of his projects in Santiniketan. We have also otherwise collaborated occasionally on site-related projects (as in Kokrajhar, Assam, 2004; Khoj International Artists Workshop, Kolkata, 2006 and Kala Bhavan Teachers' Workshop 2009).<sup>154</sup> He was, therefore, a natural choice as we have worked together before and are acquainted with each other's methods. Since both of us have had a stint with the Third Theatre, led by its now late guru, Badal Sircar, I was able to entrust him with the initial moves for building up an atmosphere of sociality in the workshops.<sup>155</sup> Having decided to incorporate theatre games as one of the interactive devices, I shared my idea of drawing from Augusto Boal and Sircar's concepts, with Sanchayan. Before every workshop, we discussed the details of the specific games and the sequences to be followed in the particular site. Our decisions were guided by the knowledge gathered about the site from my field research, as well as our combined experience of Boal and Sircar's theatre games. In the course of the workshops, we divided the responsibilities between ourselves; the theatre games were conducted by Sanchayan and the mapmaking was introduced and coordinated by me. Instructions for the other exercises were imparted by me. I communicated the conceptual ideas of the workshop to the participants and helped to situate the activities as and when they were introduced. I asked the initial key questions to provoke the discussions; Sanchayan contributed with his observations and queries to develop the dialogic situation. I was also engaged in documenting the process, as observer. Sanchayan supplemented the documentation, in places. Sometimes, the local coordinators also did their own documenting, that they willingly shared with me afterwards.

In Coochbehar, local theatre activist Debabrata Acharya was our collaborator. Arindam Sircar, who is a student in Santiniketan – also from Coochbehar – helped with the logistics and was my local guide during the solo trips before the workshop. Local non-governmental organisation (NGO) worker, 45-year-old

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<sup>154</sup> Many of these collaborative works are discussed in an interview in the Curation: And/In Contemporary Art issue of the Art & Deal journal, "Anshuman Dasgupta Interviewed by Sanchayan Ghosh," Art & Deal 7, no.2, issue no.32 (2010): 20-35.

<sup>155</sup> Badal Sircar helped found a theatre group among the students of Santiniketan, called *Sanko* (Bridge) in the early 1990s, of which Sanchayan – a student at the time – became a part.

Sahidul Bhai coordinated with us in the Coochbehar enclaves. He works for the Society for Participatory Action and Reflection involved in social developmental programmes and anti-trafficking work near the enclave neighbourhood. Poaturkuthi Enclave resident and activist, Mansoor Bhai became my insider contact for the later trips. In Sikkim, our local coordinator was a resident of Gangtok – Sisir Thapa, a sculptor, who is a former student. He has a post-graduate degree in Fine Arts from Santiniketan. Sisir was also my research assistant in this state and accompanied me in most of my field trips; he participated in all the workshops in Sikkim. During one of the field trips, Sisir's school friend Dorjee Lepcha (a civil contractor from Gangtok with broad social access), voluntarily drove us to Rhenock, Aritar and Changu and briefly participated in the local conversations. In Dzongu, Tenzing Lepcha joined in as guide, interpreter and local coordinator. During Sisir and my first visit, he also helped in procuring the special permits that allowed us entry into the Dzongu reserve. Tenzing is an ACT<sup>156</sup> activist, a sports-enthusiast, an ex-footballer and a cardamom farmer by tradition. He also runs a home-stay and hosted us during the field trips in 2011–12. I sought his collaboration again when I returned to Dzongu in 2014 to work on my film. In Assam, painter Pinak Pani Nath from Silchar was my research assistant and local guide. He also participated in the three workshops held there. Also, Sandipan Bhattacharya, a school teacher by profession and a self-taught artist and filmmaker from Karimgunj, helped with the local logistics and access in and around Karimgunj. In Lakhipur, where I held the final workshop of this project, local Manipuri girl, Neely Devi, a Fine Arts graduate from Silchar University assisted with the field research. She also acted as guide and translator, and helped with the logistics of setting up the workshop.

In the interest of both, the participants and the overall project, the names of the local participants and interviewees have been changed while writing the text. I have however, at their wish, used the original names of these key collaborators who have helped with logistics and travel, acted as local guides and interpreters and in some cases, taken part in the workshops as well. These are self-conscious volunteers to the project and wished their names revealed.

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<sup>156</sup> Affected Citizens of Teesta

Names also remain unchanged for the local theatre groups Compass that participated in the Coochbehar workshop and Extra Canvas, who helped with the logistics in Karimgunj. The name of British artist Bruce Allan, who was interviewed for the Assam chapter, also remains unchanged. Apart from this, barring the names of individual artists and art practitioner groups whose works have been cited/ discussed in the text in relevance to the sites, the names of the rest of the participants and people featuring in this thesis have been changed to protect their identities.

### **Methodological and Strategic Considerations**

The study of the selected sites unfolded in phases, involving research of available public and private archives, conversational exchanges with a wide intersection of people and the interactive workshop platforms conceived as events of knowledge. This culminated in the writing. This section elaborates on the methodologies and strategies adopted during the research, event of knowledge and writing stages of the project.

The project design mainly rested on two disciplines, the anthropological and the curatorial; the archival study and field research were largely implicated by the former, and the workshop events fell into the ambit of the curatorial. The research was, therefore, approached by means of multi-sited ethnography and interactive and performative curatorial strategies. The methods of collaboration and conversation, common to both these disciplines, have been useful in all the stages.

Enormous variability in terrain and unforeseen geographical circumstances, aspects of the specific borderlands researched, contingently affected the strategic and itinerary decisions at times. These are factors that do not render border research in Southeast Asia easy. For instance, there's a height difference of several thousand metres between Coochbehar – one of the sites in the plains and the highest point of my project visits – Nathula in Sikkim (26,000 m above sea level). Also, in the period of my research I had to negotiate two earthquakes in Sikkim, the seasonal floods in Assam and the monsoons in Coochbehar.

These changed my travel routes and sequences several times. More importantly, they affected the lives of those I did the research on.

## **Research**

### Archival

A qualitative method was adopted for the site research, though occasionally, quantitative material developed primarily around census and statistics, has also been referenced. This is in order to bring out the discursive atmosphere, which marks the circumstance of borderland, mired by debates of majority and minority.

The theoretical discourses which pervade the north-eastern borderlands are contingent formations, but are largely quasi-macro or overtly macro theories. Local texts of literary, fictive and cross-over genres (like memoirs and biographies), and films produced outside the institutional setups, therefore, proved to be useful in terms of how the borderland spaces internally organise themselves. Also, for micro level study, ethnographical texts originating from the sites have been significant in providing insight into local knowledge.

A site as vexed as Coochbehar had the least of local critical engagements; apart from a few memoirs it was not possible to engage with local textual material. The major theoretical studies were by external anthropologists and historians, like Whyte and Schendel, who concentrated on the border aspects and therefore, the enclaves. In Sikkim, the available material, at one level, comprised of official and unofficial discourses of power. This was supplemented by ethnographic writings of both local and global dimensions, belonging to Anna Balikci and Kerry Little, as well as by anthropological films. These addressed the peculiar overlap that exists, between the sacred and the secular, and translates into the power equations of the state. Also available was material reliant on very local patronage, but of transnational significance, like Satyajit Ray's film 'Sikkim'. In Assam, what looms large is the conflict of the micro-discourse of ethnicity/ community versus the nationalism of the macro-nation, India. Some of the available material comprised of centrist nationalist discourse. Others, rising mostly in the 80s and post 80s, veered around the question of Assamese self-

determination, dividing the intellectual world into entrenched and liberal points of view. Some of these discourses – such as those of Sanjib Baruah, Yasmin Saikia and Gail Omvedt – while transnationally situated, have implication for the local culture and politics. Among the local scholars, Udayan Mishra, Hiren Gohain, Amalendu Guha, Sanjib Deblaskar and Kamaluddin Ahmed are some who were consulted. Also, the memorial culture in Brahmaputra Valley produces one sense of time, while the Barak shows up another. In each case, there was some amount of literary support, including informal filmic records.

Some texts of interdisciplinary and anthropological theory have proved useful for my research. Marcus's writings on the reflexive anthropological school guided me in the field. The overlapping thematic of artists in the site is rekindled and helped by certain reference frames provided by the collaborative exercises between Marcus and Calzadilla in their Rice University project. Grant Kester's deliberations similarly rest on crossroads of disciplines where the author is an external observer to the scene of the entrenched happenings. Though there is hardly much theoretical observation on the critical aspects of participation itself, he addresses the aspects of community thinking – wherein the debate over the notion of cohesiveness against non-cohesiveness helps reframe the ideas of community. Erving Goffman's inter-subjective conversational method in micro-sociology and Marcus's anthropological notion of complicity have provided useful reference for my interactions with local scholars in the sites as well as in the workshops. Victor Turner's work on anthropology of performance and the concept of *communitas*, and J.L Austin's concept of performative utterance proved useful as research tools, though not as an overall research frame.

## Field

Fieldwork is no longer site-specific in literal sense. It has become multi-sited not only in the sense of making the Malinowskian scenes of encounters many times over but in a different sense of materializing the field of research in different locations – these are questions of scale making, a located, situated logic of juxtaposition in which the fieldwork, literally and imaginatively moves and is designed as such. The object of study is not a particular cultural structure or logic

to be described, analysed or modelled but the exploration of the anthropologist's relation to social actors who are both subjects and partners in research.<sup>157</sup>

My fieldwork was premised on the multi-sited anthropological method in order to address the diversity of the everyday aspects of borderland, and also to probe these aspects in a comparable, non-entrenched mode. According to Marcus, "This mobile ethnography can take unusual dimension by tracing cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity that destabilise the distinction, for example, between life world and system, by which much ethnography has been conceived."<sup>158</sup>

Anthropological debate in the 90s took a turn towards new and more reflexive readings of the situation, largely at the hands of Marcus, Fischer and Clifford. They noted the importance of the anthropological process of inquiry in the production of knowledge, thus, gradually the question of access and positioning with respect to the field and the subject studied, came to be included in the deliberations. Also it was felt necessary to theorise the anthropologist's self-positioning in relation to her/his informants; such as that of rapport or complicity – the two terms used by Marcus in his essay of 1997 and thereafter, in consideration of outsideness.<sup>159</sup>

Marcus describes a new trope introduced in multi-sited field research – that of "following".<sup>160</sup> The fieldwork can be conducted by 'following' a question, a metaphor, an event, a conflict, story or allegory, a biography and so on. Each 'following' produces different dynamics within the multi-sited research. Selection of the key term of reference is expectedly, determined by the concerned sites. Also, following a key word in different sites reveals different aspects of the concept metaphor, for example, following the narrative of development in the

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<sup>157</sup> George E. Marcus, "Contemporary Fieldwork Aesthetics in Art and Anthropology: Experiments in Collaborations and Intervention," in *Ethnographica Moralia: Experiments in Interpretive Anthropology*, eds. Neni Panourgia and George E. Marcus (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 219.

<sup>158</sup> Marcus, *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*, 80.

<sup>159</sup> George E. Marcus, "The Uses of Complicity in the Changing Mise en Scène of Anthropological Fieldwork," *Representations*, Special Issue (summer, 1997).

<sup>160</sup> Marcus, "Ethnography in/ of the World System," 106-110.

micro-sites, brought out different crises in the different sites. In one site in Sikkim, where there are opportunities and people of diverse ethnicities are bound by compulsion to cohabit, 'development' produced grievances about uneven and inadequate growth; whereas, in another micro-site, the 'following' revealed a community of single ethnicity, splintered by the developmental impositions. In a site in Assam, we found a community of mixed ethnicity living in tension about the uncertainties of projected development. Through multiple sites, Project Borderland attempted to 'follow' the metaphor of Border in its different geopolitical and temporal aspects that add complexities to the territorial identities and othernesses – producing different subject positions.

### Collaboration

According to Marcus, "Working amid and on collaborations significantly shifts the purposes of ethnography from description and analysis... to a deferral to subjects' modes of knowing, a function to which ethnography has long aspired. This act of deferral... is thus generative of different collaborative configurations by which, we believe, the architecture of a refunctioned ethnography gains coherence."<sup>161</sup>

Collaboration was used in varying degrees, in the field research and later in the curatorial platforms. During the travel and interactions, local assistants and coordinators extended logistical help and acted as guides and interpreters, providing the essential local support that is required while approaching sites with complex ethnic, language and cultural configurations. On several occasions they helped in identifying the possibilities of research; recognising areas of local significance, catching the local rumours, and uncovering the myths. Often, they created the required access to the different communities.

Another facet of collaboration with the local people that sometimes helped in establishing a relationship with the community involved, was identifying a mutual concern, or commonality of thinking about the future. As anthropologists Simon

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<sup>161</sup> Riles quoting Marcus in George E. Marcus, "Experimental Forms for the Expression of Norms in the Ethnography of the Contemporary," *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no.2 (2013): 208.

Coleman and Pauline Von Hellerman say, when speaking of collaboration in multi-sited ethnography, “The anthropology-other binary is challenged with subjects becoming counterparts of the researcher”.<sup>162</sup> They go on to quote Marcus on this, “The basic trope of fieldwork encounter shifts from say, apprentice, or basic learner of culture in community life to working with subjects of various situations in mutually interested concerns and projects with issues, ideas etc.”<sup>163</sup>

Further, Lind writes about collaboration in the context of art, community-based projects and the curatorial:

Collaborations – cases in which some form of conscious partnership takes place through interaction, participation, group activity or other kinds of intentional exchange through processes of “working together.”... These collaborations can occur between people who are often, but not always, artists, as well as between artists and other people from other fields altogether. The former suggests collaboration to have been consistently present in the art of the last twenty years, having only entered the mainstream fairly recently. The latter shows a pronounced affinity with activism and other ways of gathering together around shared concerns, as well as a marked interest in alternative ways of producing knowledge.<sup>164</sup>

She describes collaboration as a term applicable to diverse working methods, including “participation”– associated with “the creation of a context in which participants can take part in something that someone else has created, but where there are nevertheless opportunities to have an impact”.<sup>165</sup> By this definition, the participants in the workshops have also been collaborators to some degree, in this project.

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<sup>162</sup> Simon Coleman and Pauline Von Hellerman, *Multi-sited Ethnography: Problems and Possibilities in the Translocation of Research Methods* (London: Routledge, 2011), 5.

<sup>163</sup> Marcus, quoted in Coleman and Hellerman, *Multi-sited Ethnography*, 5.

<sup>164</sup> Lind, “The Collaborative Turn,” 183.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

The most consistent factor of collaboration was between the curator and the artist-theatre-coordinator in the workshops. This was a partnership of mutuality where the two functioned as sounding boards for each other in the planning of the specific theatre games and their sequence of introduction. Though the field studies were conducted by me primarily in the company of the local collaborators and research assistants, prior to at least some of the workshops, I was also able to visit the specific micro-sites together with the artist-collaborator. During the workshop, the curator-coordinator partnership was able to create the suitable dialogical atmosphere for engaging the participants in the process. Every workshop was followed by informal discussion on our personal observations and gleanings. It became clear in these conversations that our general approaches to the workshops differed, as they were guided through two separate perspectives – that of a public art practitioner with interest in theatre, and that of a curator working at a multi-disciplinary project. Sanchayan's takeaways from the knowledge events were mainly related to the aspects of performative dynamics and design. My engagements lay in identifying the intersections of knowledge, in observing whether or how knowledge was produced. For me, the process was important.

### Conversation

The conversational method enables one to measure social networks of a site, with the help of contextual mapping or background information, as well as through the performative aspects and circumstances of conversations. It was introduced by Harvey Sacks in the 1960s, and was influenced by Erving Goffman's inter-subjective conversational method in micro-sociology and the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkle.<sup>166</sup> It grew in importance and influenced many fields of study such as linguistics, anthropology, psychology and communications. This method stipulates that the conversation will be in a natural process and be recorded neutrally, and the interviewer will not instigate the process; the entire conversation will then be subjected to the researcher's

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<sup>166</sup> Conversational analysis is used by Harvey Sacks in the 1960s with Immanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, a method which is inspired by Irving Goffman's sociology and Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. Lisa M. Given, ed., *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Method* (London: Sage, 2008), 29-130.

analysis, called Conversational Analysis (CA). My method differed in that I used recordings of active conversations – such as interviews, in contrast to the ‘video recordings’ of interactions that are “naturally occurring” as in the original CA method. Also, in my case, the conversations were provoked/ initiated by me.

The dynamics of the conversational method involves an insider-outsider relationship, which is taken for granted in the traditional method in the form of a rapport between observer and informant. Marcus introduces the term ‘complicity’ (which he borrows from the study of coloniser-colonised relationship) as contrasted to rapport, to define the access to and relationships with participants and informants in ethnographic research. The ethical or moral component of this, he further states, dissipates to an extent in multi-sited ethnography, because there is no single position that the ethnographer holds. This articulation has an implication for the conversational method, because it suggests that a neutral conversation is never possible – the ethnographer can never have a completely neutral position in the field. For me, complicity provided a much useful tool in addressing the situations encountered in the complex border zones where insider-outsider relations are quite crucial to gaining access and understanding the community and society.<sup>167</sup>

Various nuances of conversation and dialogue are increasingly in use in contemporary practices. One such artist-curated work that comes to mind in the global context is Suzanne Lacy’s ‘The Crystal Quilt’ (1985–1987), in which she explored the experience of aging in a series of events, in collaboration with artists and volunteers. It involved a two-year process of interactivity in the form of events, lecture series, film screening and a mass media campaign. The conversation method in this public art project relied on empathetic listening; the concept having been derived, perhaps, from the idea that old people have memories and life experiences to share. Suzi Gablik writes on this work, “Empathetic listening makes room for the Other and decentralizes the ego self... Interaction becomes the medium of expression, an empathetic way of seeing

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<sup>167</sup> George E. Marcus, “The Uses of Complicity in the Changing Mise-en-scène of Anthropological Fieldwork,” *Representations*, Special Issue, (Summer, 1997), 95.

through another's eyes."<sup>168</sup> She goes on to quote Lacy, "Like a subjective anthropologist [the artist enters] the territory of the other, and becomes a conduit for [their] experience. The works become metaphor for relationship – which has a healing power." This works in lieu of any easy solution for our most pressing social problems. Lacy suggests that there may be only the artists' ability to witness and feel the reality taking place around them. She is further quoted – "This feelingness is a service that artists offer to the world."<sup>169</sup>

On the other hand, in his book, *The Power of Dialogue*, Kögler discusses how dialogue is a very useful method for reversing the role of insider "informant" and outsider "researcher", by drawing a contrast between the theoretical and the situated agent, by going against the fixities of social science.<sup>170</sup> As Kester (2004) suggests, if we explore the innate inter-subjectivities of the dialogue, both the power and agency involved in the dialogical situation can be explored, and perhaps reversed.

Against the available global ideas of dialogue and conversation, I see the engagements of this research as testing ground for insider-outsider relationships. The process of this project involved many occasions of conversation and dialogue, in the various stages. Interaction with the local collaborators, who included theatre activists, artists, environmental activists and NGO workers, formed an essential part of the exercise in knowing the place. Apart from this, there were interviews and conversations with other local people, including, political scientists, teachers, theatre persons, village headmen and farmers. These helped to determine the possibilities of access to the local culture and societies. For an outsider, several different entry points are required; talking to the local intellectuals many a time formed a very significant part of this exercise in all three sites, where different kinds of perspectives opened out. For instance, a voluntary theatre worker, a university teacher and a self-taught film maker, who

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<sup>168</sup> Suzi Gablik, "Connective Aesthetics: Art After Individualism," in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 82.

<sup>169</sup> Suzi Gablik quoting Suzanne Lacy in Gablik, "Connective Aesthetics," 82.

<sup>170</sup> Hans Herbert Kögler, *The Power of Dialogue: Critical Hermeneutics After Gadamer and Foucault*, trans. Paul Hendrickson (Cambridge: MIT, 1999), 262-263.

rely on different sources for livelihood, would possibly differ in their attitudes towards the same situation.

The conversations with the communities outside the workshops were lateral (non-confrontational) and everyday kind – their purposes were, mainly to track the social tensions of the sites and the anxieties about their futures. Conversation sessions were also an essential part of the workshops and the site dynamics were revealed better in these, as they were more pointedly locational, taking on a close-community dimension and intimacy.

In certain places, conversations that verged on local gossip or rumour, took place in local language, among the people or workshop participants; our (artist-coordinator and curator's) access to these determined our relative outsidership. As psychologist E. K. Foster says:

At the group level, Gluckman (1963) noted how outsiders simply cannot understand gossip, and at times it is deliberately used by insiders to exclude outsiders (Dunbar, 2004; Eckert, 1990; Loudon, 1961; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Newcomers find themselves struggling to stay up to speed in casual conversations, wherein meanings are firmly rooted in long and complicated histories. Yerkovich (1977) tracked how evaluations of discrete events gradually became categorized abstractions comprising “the store of shared knowledge that familiar individuals use when they interact with one another” (p. 194). Outsiders risk infringing on group values if they do not wait for the group to induct them (Abrahams, 1970).<sup>171</sup>

This gesture of ‘patient waiting’ to understand the others is also visited by Veena Das, “For me the love of anthropology has turned out to be an affair in which when I reach the bedrock I do not break through the resistance of the other, but in this gesture of waiting I allow the knowledge of the other to mark me.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Foster also demonstrates the increasing interdisciplinary interests in gossip and rumour as informal modes of communication among different groups. Eric K. Foster, “Research on Gossip, Taxonomy and Methods, and Future Directions,” *Review of General Psychology* 8, no.2 (2004):85-86.

<sup>172</sup> Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (California: University of California Press, 2007), 17.

There are some other aspects of conversation revealed in the situational dynamics of borderlands where the interviewee often falls silent, being conscious of the possible implication of revealing too much, or where there is planting of information to be transmitted. In such cases, especially in the cases of planting of information, the local collaborators usually helped to identify them, either because they were present at the time, or because they had already alerted me to the possibility so that I expected to face those moments in a particular situation and could anticipate them. This ploy, however indirectly, does contribute to the unfolding of the various layers of the site for the researcher. On occasion, the device of patient waiting had its rewards, where a subject would voluntarily revert to a topic to clarify some point that had been avoided or overlooked previously. There were also one or two instances where I realised the deliberate planting in retrospect, while attempting authentication from a more dependable source, or even came away with multiple, mismatched inputs. Thus, the conversational method of research offers up a rich weave of different kinds of information, sometimes even conflicting information; but it helps to reveal a site in its micro-social aspects.

### **Workshop as Event of Knowledge**

In keeping with the qualitative approach of the research, the workshop platform was designed for collating participatory and performative moments, from conversations and enactments of different thematics related to the everyday of the borderlands. The project as a whole was a multi-method approach to attend to multiple disciplinary engagements that met at this juncture to provide indices to knowledge formation. The workshop juncture was, similarly, a circumstance where many methods were used in a calibrated way that told of its eclectic quality. The intersection of these methods, as well as the quality of participations, produced a concussion and harmony, either alternately or together. This situation formed the core of the production of knowledge – which was not necessarily subject-centred but pertained to the site/ location and revealed the nature of the community relationship.

The workshop programme was designed to graduate from basic interactive exercises to activities of growing complexity. The methods involved theatre

games, word-association games, photography, video-making exercises, reflexive writing assignments and mapmaking exercises. The activities were introduced not necessarily in this order, nor were all the exercises tried in all the workshops. The inclusion of activities depended on the indications of the field research of a specific site, general logistics of the site, its participating members and finally, on the contingencies that developed in the course of the workshop. The most important of all the participatory devices – the theatre games and the mapping exercises were consistently adopted in all the sites. Apart from the regular flow of conversation that marked the progression of the activities, dedicated dialogic sessions formed an essential part of all the workshops.

Another ancillary device that was gradually evolved in Coochbehar and came to mark some of the other sites as well, was the setting up of a *mise-en-scène* as a secondary zone of interest during the workshop. This proved to be a provocative backdrop and often helped in enlivening the conversational exchanges. The *mise-en-scène* of a workshop was developed out of various combinations of material that included the growing contributions of the particular workshop's engagements, videos or sound bites of the participants' interactions, material collected from previous workshops, video recordings of site interviews etc. At the end of every workshop, other than in Coochbehar, the growing *mise-en-scène* was opened up to the public, leading to another level of interactivity. In one site in Assam, it was also possible to stage a public *mise-en-scène*. In each site, the aesthetics of the workshop was guided by the contingencies of the location and availability of material. The locations included ordinary places like classrooms, semi-urban marketplaces, an empty hall and a nascent community centre. The workshops happened mostly in closed door circumstances. Non-participants were discouraged entry so as to make the participants feel uninhibited and free to act and react in isolation. Though some venues like the common hall of a school, a law college classroom or a community club did prove porous at times.

## Theatre Tools

The theatre techniques used in the workshops were inspired by Badal Sircar's 'Third Theatre' and Brazilian theatre activist Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed'.

Third theatre, in its available form in India, differs from both, amateur and professional theatre in relinquishing the viewer-actor divide and in being performed in informal 'found' spaces or in open air with minimal use of props. It is largely premised on the contact points it establishes with the audience, since it effectively brings theatre down to the same physical plane as the audience and engages with it as part of the improvisatory schemes. Third theatre also dispenses with all elaborate paraphernalia, like sets, costumes and lighting, and uses the human body and its manoeuvres – movement, rhythm, mime, formations and contortions as the main tools of expression.<sup>173</sup> In this genre, theatre is regarded as a collective exercise to awaken and enhance the social consciousness of participants and audience. Sircar's Third Theatre has some conceptual link to the theatre thinking of Boal, and was developed over the late 1960s and early 1970s, almost around the same time as Boal was introducing the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). As already described, my first encounter with Third Theatre left a tremendous impression and constituted a formative influence for my thinking on public interactivity. Therefore, my quest for a performative mode of interaction that would lead to bonding and conviviality within a group of complete strangers entangled in the unusual circumstances of the borderland, first took me to Third Theatre, eventually directing me to Boal's TO games.

Boal developed TO as a method based on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.<sup>174</sup> It is a participatory theatre model that cultivates democratic and cooperative forms of interaction. Theatre is projected not as a spectacle, but as a language accessible to all. The act of theatre becomes a conscious

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<sup>173</sup> "Performance pedagogy takes advantage of the whole body to enhance learning." (Victor Turner, 1982) 89, quoted in Mark Pedelty, "Teaching Anthropology through Performance," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 32, no.2 (June 2001): 248.

<sup>174</sup> Educator Paulo Freire proposes a pedagogy with a new relationship between teacher, student, and society. It was first published in Portuguese in 1968, translated by Myra Ramos into English and published in 1970. The book is considered one of the foundational texts of critical pedagogy.

intervention, a “rehearsal” for social action rooted in a collective analysis of shared problems. Boal’s book, published in 1974, describes theatrical forms that he first elaborated in the 1960s, initially in Brazil and later in Europe.<sup>175</sup> Over the years, different techniques used in various workshops all over the world have eventually coalesced into other theatrical styles under TO. They use different processes to achieve different results; though there is a continuous “overlap and interplay” between all the forms. According to Boal, the choice of the particular form depends on the situation in which the work is being made and the goal of the theatrical event.<sup>176</sup>

Of these, Forum Theatre is the most common performative expression. In it, the performance is once completed by the actors to reveal the plot to the audience. Thereafter, it is repeated and the members of the audience have the power to halt the action at any point and replace any actor; they can assume the role of a protagonist, make choices in the action and thereby attempt to change the outcome of the play. Thus, the spectators participate in the performance; no longer passive spectators, but empowered “spect-actors” practising elements of both roles – actor and spectator, simultaneously:

The game is a form of contest between spect-actors trying to bring the play to a different end (in which the cycle of oppression is broken) and actors ostensibly making every possible effort to bring it to its original end (in which the oppressed is beaten and the oppressors are triumphant). The proceedings are presided over by a figure called the ‘Joker’... whose function is to ensure the smooth running of the game and teach the audience the rules; however, like all the participants in Forum Theatre, the Joker can be replaced if the spect-actors do not think he or she is doing a fair job, and virtually any of the ‘rules’ of the game can be changed if the audience wants. Many different solutions are enacted in

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<sup>175</sup> Boal developed TO over years of experimentation with participatory theatre; through the 1950s–60s while he was artistic director of the Arena Theatre in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and afterwards, when exiled in Europe by a dictatorial regime. The book *Theatre of the Oppressed* was originally published in Spanish as *Teatro del Oprimido* in 1974. The English translation came out in 1979.

<sup>176</sup> The translator’s introduction in Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non Actors*, trans. and ed. Adrian Jackson (London: Routledge, 2002), xxiii.

the course of a single forum – the result is a pooling of knowledge, tactics and experience, and at the same time what Boal calls a “rehearsal for reality”.<sup>177</sup>

The Joker, a role unique to TO, is an enabler who conducts the session, while occupying a neutral position. This resembles the curator and the artist-theatre-coordinator’s facilitator’s role in our workshops. The Joker is also the mediator between the characters and the audience, breaking the traditional divide between actors and audience. He or she is also an observer at the centre of proceedings, thus slipping into the role of a spectator – in a way fulfilling multiple roles – not unlike the curator with his shifting roles in Project Borderland.

The underlying purpose of Boal’s praxis is to create performance strategies that would empower participants to identify the conditions contributing to their oppression and collectively, explore workable solutions. In short, the approach of TO is to effect change, at social and/ or personal level. My engagement with Boal’s methods was not aimed at the construction of a theatrical event, neither was it to find therapeutic alleviation for a condition of oppression, nor was I attempting the working-out of solutions for any borderland grievances. My aim could be said to have been the “pooling of knowledge, tactics and experience” towards collective knowledge production on the micro-social aspects of the borderland sites and communities. Hence, this dimension of Boal’s theatre tools was not considered by me. I was interested in the possible applications of the various theatre games devised by him for TO in fostering interactivity and dialogue. For this, his ‘Games for Actors and Non-Actors’, which is a compendium of more than a hundred games, was consulted.<sup>178</sup> Boal refers to the games and exercises compiled in this book as “gamesercises”, as they combine the training and ‘introversion’ of exercises with the fun and ‘extroversion’ of games.<sup>179</sup>

Many of the key games and exercises used in my workshops were adapted from here. The sequence of these was planned in progression from simple bonding

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<sup>177</sup> The translator’s introduction in Boal, *Games for Actors and Non Actors*, xxiv.

<sup>178</sup> This book has been called an ‘arsenal’ of theatre techniques.

<sup>179</sup> Boal, *Games for Actors and Non Actors*, 48.

exercises, to games provoking self-expression, to those encouraging leadership qualities, moving finally to games that allowed the participants to break through personal inhibitions and interact freely. The games were selected according to the perceived requirements of a particular site and were freely modified accordingly, at times. The curatorial catalyst thus worked with the performative devices to initiate a dialogue with the participants, to tease out, to provoke, to eventually bring out their situatedness with respect to the sites. In short, the catalyst triggered a sequence of actions and reactions, which precipitated a knowledge situation generative of local knowledge. The performative tools were meant to be generative of meaning in a processual way, and not aimed at an ulterior staging. (Though, at times, the staging in a public place at the end of a workshop yielded a tertiary kind of circumstantial and site related meaning.)

The workshops started in all the sites with warm-up exercises, comprising simple physical arrangements and movements. For this, we devised a 'Game of Circles', a modified combination of Boal's 'In a Circle' and 'The Movement Comes Back'.<sup>180</sup> The participants stood in a circle with their eyes closed and the theatre-coordinator began by randomly tapping one of them on the shoulder, to appoint the trigger. The trigger transmitted a signal to the person immediately on the right by touching her/ him in a simple action like pressing this neighbour's hand. This person then performed the same action on the immediate right-hand neighbour. When the impulse returned to the originator, one cycle was completed. The exercise was repeated again with a different trigger. This continued till all the participants, by turn, got to be the trigger and initiate an action. In this way, they made an introductory connection with each other. According to Boal:

In all the forum shows I have taken part in, there has always been an element of 'warming-up' of the spect-actors. But, in reality the function of these exercises is not only warming up but forging a 'group' out of a bunch of people, a sort of a 'communion'— if we do something together we become a real group, rather than a mere juxtaposition of individuals.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Boal, *Games for Actors and Non Actors*, 75.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

'Game of Points', another game introduced, was an improvisation of Boal's 'Without Leaving a Single Space in the Room Empty',<sup>182</sup> a spatial challenge. The participants were spread out in a space so as to occupy positions equidistant from each other and from all neighbouring objects (e.g. walls). At a signal from the theatre-coordinator, they started moving together in coordination. In accordance with different instructions, they stopped or increased or decreased the speed of movement, always taking care to keep relative distances unchanged. Sometimes, the coordinator thematised the movements by qualifying them as 'morning walk', 'going to the market', 'going for work' etc. In the 'Plain Mirror' game,<sup>183</sup> the participants faced each other in pairs; one actor playing the 'real' figure and the other, the implied mirror image who had to simultaneously mimic all the gestures and expressions of the former. After a while, the roles were reversed. In both these cases the success of the games depended on the participants' being able to develop a certain reciprocity between themselves.

Another game which proved very useful to the process of knowledge generation was 'Follow the Leader'. This is a very popular Badal Sircar game that has an identifiable partial counterpart in Boal's 'Follow the Master'.<sup>184</sup> The participating members move together in a designated route, following a leader and imitating his/ her gestures, words or sentences. The gestures and utterances are related to a broader context selected by the curator or the coordinator. From time to time, these change, as the leadership changes; anyone can step up to claim the mantel as all the participants are empowered to do so. This game took on different significance in the different sites; in some cases the natures of the utterances very clearly brought out the subtleties of the border aspects. Follow the Leader was sometimes improvised to involve complicated movements over hurdles, along with the gestural and verbal elements. In this version, it took on combined dimensions of the original game and those of Boal's 'Movement with Over Premeditation'.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 69.

Some games were borrowed from Boal's Image theatre and modified according to our contexts in the workshops. Drawing from his 'Illustrating a Subject with your Body' series,<sup>186</sup> participants were asked to collectively create 'tableaux', which were like frozen moments of performance. They used their bodies to create interpretations of pre-decided themes, picked from possible encounters in their daily lives in the borders. Those who could not directly relate to the border, decided on associated themes. In Boal's game, the frozen model of the subject is gradually developed and made complex through first, second and third stages of 'dynamisation'; each participant first constructs his/ her image individually in front of only the Joker, then for everyone's viewing. Finally, all the participants strike their poses at once. In the Project Borderland workshops, the participants constructed their frozen moments simultaneously, forming an ensemble. In these tableaux, the existence or absence of inter-relation between the individual poses often revealed various levels of comfort with each other and mutual understanding, in some cases even foregrounding underlying community equations.

Another game adopted was 'Sculpture with Four or Five People'. In Boal's version, a designated 'sculptor' uses visual language to communicate with the other players and control their movements without touching them, step-by-step modelling a single multi-figure sculpture on a selected theme.<sup>187</sup> Boal cites the theme of 'family' in his examples of Image theatre, expanding on how hidden oppressions were exposed in the images formed. He writes, "This technique brings forth revealing, sometimes totally unexpected things."<sup>188</sup> In our workshops, the members were divided into groups and each group presented a sculpture on a self-selected theme, which was usually based on their life events. In our cases there were no fixed oppressions; the participant observers were outsiders trying to figure out the nature of the borderland dwellers' crises or

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<sup>186</sup>Ibid., 176-180.

<sup>187</sup> "Working with images, sculpting rather than talking, can be more democratic, as it does not privilege more verbally articulate people".  
URL:<https://www.umass.edu/resistancestudies/sites/default/files/syllabus-civil-resistance-and-the-everyday-2015.pdf>.

<sup>188</sup> Boal, *Games for Actors and Non Actors*, 188.

quality of living. At the same time, the still narrative episode that was built by one group was open to interpretation and discussion by the others. The natures of the complexities were different from those in the situations cited in Boal's studies.

### Critical Mapping

Maps are more than pieces of paper. They are stories, conversations, lives and songs lived out in a place and are inseparable from the political and cultural contexts in which they are used.<sup>189</sup>

In differentiating the function of traditional cartography from geographic visualisation, Jeremy Crampton, says, "Traditional cartography has emphasized public use, low interactivity and revealing knowns, while visualization emphasizes private use, high interactivity, and exploring unknowns."<sup>190</sup> J. B. Harley also presents a persistent argument against the instrumentalist-statist perspective on maps.<sup>191</sup> These revisions of the categories have, today, changed perceptions of cartography in use. Critical cartography offers a "Theoretical critique on the social relevance, politics and ethics of mapping." In short, critical cartography recognises the map as a strategic instrument by which power and governance manifest themselves, and it comes forth as a method by which, "Maps can be used to make counter-claims, to express competing interests, to make visible otherwise marginal experiences and hidden histories, to make practical plans for social change or to imagine utopian worlds."<sup>192</sup> In the context of the borders, critical mapping allows the incorporation of voices of disagreement, fear or unease as a lived experience of borderland situations. This methodological tool, as an extension of critical cartography, helps to situate the

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<sup>189</sup> A. Warren cited in Giacomo Rambaldi, "Who Owns the Map Legend?" [http://www.supras.biz/pdf/rambaldi\\_g\\_2005\\_maplegend.pdf](http://www.supras.biz/pdf/rambaldi_g_2005_maplegend.pdf).

<sup>190</sup> Jeremy Crampton, "Maps as Social Constructions: Power, Communication, and Visualization," in *Critical Geographies: A Collection of Readings*, eds. Harald Bauder and Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro (Kelowna: Praxis Press, 2008), 720.

<sup>191</sup> J. B. Harley, "Maps, Knowledge and Power," in *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the symbolic representation, design and use of past environments*, eds. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, *Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography 9* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 277-296.

<sup>192</sup> Rhiannon Firth, "Critical Cartography," *The Occupied Times of London*, no.27 (April 2015): 9.

borderland geography in contrast to the implied mainland and supplements the theoretical arguments of borders.

Most of our workshop sites were associated with issues of land, occupation or entrapment. All these border predicaments are, in a sense, linked with the map; the border is a product of mapmaking, from the point of view of the state. Therefore, it seemed fitting to utilise the interventionist opportunity offered by the exercise of critical mapping, as an interactive ploy. Mapping, as one of the most graphic tools available for registering any concept of inside-outside, seemed appropriate for uncovering detail on the border.

We introduced the participants to a form of critical mapping through the informal methods of participatory mapping. Participatory mapping is part of a larger suite of qualitative methods called participatory action research.<sup>193</sup> Also called community-based mapping, it is a general term for a set of approaches and techniques that combines the tools of cartography with participatory methods to represent the local knowledge of communities about their own space.<sup>194</sup> It is premised on the idea that maps created by the participation of local communities, best represent the place in which they live, revealing elements of physical and social geography that they themselves consider important. Participatory mapping allows the exploration of a wide variety of subjects such as changes that have occurred over time, residents' personal and collective experiences, their traditional natural resource management practices, their sacred areas, their attitudes and perspectives on their environment, and so on. As a research method, the advantage of participatory mapping is that it allows the different

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<sup>193</sup> "Participatory Action Research (PAR)" is an overall term for a variety of methods developed by researchers, beginning in the 1970s and inspired by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), the founder of social psychology. They are based on an understanding that social science research must be conducted in cooperation with the community and its representatives in order to achieve its goal of social and political change. The purpose of this method is to eliminate the distinction between "researcher" and "subject" and anchor research in the needs of the community as a whole and in the knowledge of the participant researchers. "Counter-Mapping Return," *Sedek (A Journal on the Ongoing Nakba)*, issue no. 6 (May 2011): 2.

<sup>194</sup> [http://www.mappingforrights.org/participatory\\_mapping](http://www.mappingforrights.org/participatory_mapping).

features of a particular place and the interplay between them to be studied simultaneously.<sup>195</sup>

This technique was used as an activity of conscious deliberation of identity and otherness. The mapmaking exercises included two kinds of engagements in each site. In the first, the participants made personal maps, tracing routes to their familiar places, marking out popular or important landmarks etc., with the help of a larger official map. They were free to use any methods for creating their personal maps and as a result, several different techniques were utilised, producing 'mappings' on various creative registers.<sup>196</sup> In the second, the participants intervened in the official map by marking their subjectivities and grievances on it; they identified their locations of alienation and wrote marginalia on the edges, changing the map in the process. This turned into a counter-mapping exercise. Counter-mapping is a technique of critical cartography that allows a community with grievances to engage against a hegemonic order of governance. The term was coined by Nancy Peluso in 1995 to describe the commissioning of maps by forest users in Kalimantan, Indonesia, as a means of contesting state maps of forest areas that typically undermined indigenous interests. The resultant counter-hegemonic maps had the ability to strengthen forest users' resource claims.<sup>197</sup>

As Rhiannon Firth puts it, "Critical cartography can be a process of knowledge production and transformation. It is not just the 'final product' maps that are important; the process itself can involve learning together and producing new knowledge by bringing together multiple perspectives, by connecting different personal maps, or by creating collective maps through rotation, negotiation or

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<sup>195</sup> [http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Using-participatory-mapping-to-explore-participation-in-three-communities\\_June-2010.pdf](http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Using-participatory-mapping-to-explore-participation-in-three-communities_June-2010.pdf).

<sup>196</sup> "Maps also project our desires onto the landscape, they can map our hopes for the future, what we desire to see and that which we wish to ignore or hide. The process of mapping can also bring new ways of being and relating into the world..." Firth, "Critical Cartography," 9.

<sup>197</sup> Nancy Lee Peluso, "Whose Woods are These? Counter-Mapping Forest Territories in Kalimantan, Indonesia," *Antipode* 27, issue 4 (October 1995), DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8330.1995.tb00286.x.

consensus. Collaborative mapmaking can be a way to democratise knowledge-production.”<sup>198</sup>

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I would like to touch upon the other interactive tools that were selectively used in some of the workshops. In the reflexive writing sessions, the participants were asked to write a few lines about themselves, their hopes and ambitions and neighbouring communities; they were asked to mention any significant neighbourhood changes over the years, particular points of liking or dislike about their locality and identify any areas/ situations of fear or mistrust. The word association game was introduced in a few micro-sites. The aim was to make a compilation of local words that the communities commonly associated with familiarity and alienation, words they used to denote their local Others and words they associated with their Others. My expectation was also that this would contribute towards a dictionary of borderland that I was conceiving as a future project. Participants were individually asked to write down these words and their meanings, if possible recollecting the sources from where they were first picked up. They were also asked to write the reciprocal references used by these Others to denote them. The writing was usually followed by an animated process of pooling together the individual lists. This game did not take off in the comparatively more cosmopolitan locations, but wherever it did appeal to the participants, it brought interesting observations. In one place in Assam, a phrase belonging to an ethnic community none of whose members were present among the participants, triggered immediate recognition in all of them as a familiar danger alert. This exercise was useful in gauging the inter-relations between the different communities. A lot of travel-related conversation in a few of the sites that were transit locations, led to the inclusion of photographs. Participants documented neighbouring places that they liked to visit, or places that were historically or personally memorable for them. Some participants shared photographs of favourite trips, favoured travel locations or locations of desire that belonged to a projected future. These pictures were converted to Power-Point slideshows and each participant shared their details with the workshop. Video-making was incorporated in a few workshops, but took on significance in only one site, which was a market location with a wide variety of ethnicities.

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<sup>198</sup> Firth, “Critical Cartography”, 9.

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The participants in the workshops were volunteers from different walks of life – a mixed group of genders and ethnicities, in the approximate age bracket of 18-30 years. The idea was to interact, in every site, with the section of the community that was poised at the juncture of new beginnings. They were mostly students or young professionals either connected with art, theatre, politics or journalism, or self-employed. The gain from the workshops was not a statistical derivation, but a mutual benefit for all concerned. As it turned out in the process, the system of even exchange of opinion and positions in the workshop situation was something the borderland participants did not enjoy in their regular lives. The mutual dependence established between the participants and the coordinators resulted in expectations of moral support from us – the outsiders or city-dwellers – in some crucial human situations, as in case of the enclave communities or the anti-dam activists. That the little moral support could expand was underscored when the workshops produced inventories of responses; inventories being promissory note towards possibilities of future action.

## **Documentation**

Experiential notes played an important role in the research project. These included field notes or personal observations made during travel in the selected areas, as well documentation of the workshop processes. There were three kinds of documentation – textual, photographic and short videos. Most of the documentation was done personally by me. But, I also had access to the documentation done by the artist-collaborator – both independently and at my specific request and direction.

## **Writing**

### Travelogue as Anthropological Writing

A major dimension of this multi-sited project was the extensive travel that it involved, which was in contrast to the characteristics of entrenched anthropological research that is essentially limited to a single defined territory. The whole research developed, from site to site and from one workshop

experience to the next, like an unfolding journey that seemed to demand a corresponding treatment in the writing style. The writing of the thesis required a strategy that would break the authoritative frames and objective formality of traditional ethnographic writing and reflect the processuality of the research. The attempt has been to construct the writing in such a way that the key elements of the research process are reflected through it – the performativity of the circumstances, the polyphony of voices, the interactivity and the intersections – all components also of travel. A lot of the writing has therefore been handled like a reflexive fieldwork account, interspersed with discourses – through dialogues and narratives of interpersonal confrontations, capturing the rhythm, flow and interruptions of a journey.

This can be referenced against the growing debate over writing culture that has taken ethnographic writing to another dimension, where “the literariness” breaks the standard modes of anthropological representation. Marcus and Clifford’s *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* changed the perception of the subjective-objective divide in anthropological research. The resultant new mode of writing anthropology brings in what was repressed, in recognition of the fact that “most discourses occupy an intermediate position along a continuum”. It brings in reflexivity and the use of the first-person singular – where the “rhetoric” of cultivated objectivity yields to that of “autobiography and ironic self-portrait”; emotions and attitudinal changes like confusion or struggles – topics previously considered irrelevant – are now registered; and dialogism and polyvocality are recognised as modes of textual production.<sup>199</sup>

As Clifford says, “In recent years what was kept out by distancing the travel writer is returning. This is not to say that anthropology is only travel (or evangelism or colonial power), but to say that the border is being renegotiated. In this perspective, *Writing Culture*, which involved bringing into view literary and rhetorical practices in ethnography, remakes the worldly border with travel and travel writing.”<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (London: University of California Press, 1986), 13-15.

<sup>200</sup> James Clifford, *On the Edges of Anthropology (Interviews)* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 12.

## Juxtaposition

The writing of Project Borderland involved the addressing of several fragments, which were often products of terrain differences and discontinuities in historical or ethnic patterns of a site. There were also many segments of conversation produced in the course of the interactions in the field and the workshops that were not always useful in separate interpretation, as this seemed to confine and contain them within the limited contexts of their origin in certain time and space. The general principal followed throughout the writing of the thesis, therefore, was that of juxtaposition. The juxtapositions were guided by thematic contiguities between terrains and genres of cultural productions (such as a film or a novel or memoirs). The writing also involved juxtapositions of material with appeal to the different temporal registers and spaces so as to provide a graspable weave that would pave the path to the event of knowledge in each site, following the key question asked at the beginning of each chapter. By the logic of the evolved multisited anthropological ethnography, it was thought that the principle of juxtaposition in the sense of an active collagist device would figure as a sign of translocality, which should suggest double registers of meaning – a global flow of signs, amid local engagements, approximating the thematic and predicament of borderland. Marcus and Fischer refer to this comparative ethnographic process as “de-familiarization via cross cultural juxtaposition”.<sup>201</sup> These, as would be obvious in case of a multi-sited ethnography, may result in what Marcus calls a “messy text”: a technique of writing ethnography by juxtaposing observations, quotes and reports and the emergent or potential knowledge forms.

## Tense Tools

Since the writing of Project Borderland put me in different spatio-temporal circumstances, figuring an order between the different moments was the primarily daunting task. In addressing this, a differentiated approach was introduced to the usage of tense in the writing. As a result, the workshops’

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<sup>201</sup> George Marcus and Michael Fischer, eds., *Anthropology as Culture Critique: An Experimental Moment in Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), 138.

circumstantial journeys and interviews are addressed in the present tense. This is so as to project the circumstances of interactions and events from their dispersed locations and time, to a contemporary discursive atmosphere. To the same purpose, the related material, such as the literary or cinematic texts are discussed using the present tense. Thus, in effect, all the three chapters of the thesis are written in the present, which will, it is hoped, transport the reader to the 'now' of the research through its unfolding. The Concluding Observations chapter, however, is written in the past tense in order to emphasise its retrospective, analytical mode.

### **In Summation**

One of the central questions that motivated Project Borderland was if and how the nature of anthropological (both social and visual) knowledge influenced the curatorial strategy. Also, what were the points of intersection between the conversational ethnography, the secondary or archival research and the mise-en-scène of the workshop with respect to the sites? Additionally and importantly, the motivation was to study, through the interactivity of the research and the workshop mise-en-scène, the emergence and the type of community in evidence in the sites.

From the numerous visits and conversations, there also arose an inevitable concern about the future of these sites and their predicaments. For a participant observer it is always a point of dilemma in a complex interactive situation to decide where to intervene and where not to. I, as a researcher, submitted at times to the outsider's predicament of complicity, at other moments was befriended into believing in a possible rapport, and on occasions helped to build connectivity between occupants of different zones, closely paralleling what is called circumstantial activism. Often, the predicament of the borderland residents; the geopolitical dynamics, the everyday struggles, the strategies of survival, and the anxieties of citizenship, which formed the basis of the self-organised movements for freedom, constituted a driving force during the research.

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The research design rested on the dynamics of the ruling metaphor, the border. The border in practice is a protean entity, though it is commonly seen as a product of the territorial sovereignty of the 'Westphalian state' and its accompanying paranoia.<sup>202</sup> In several places of South Asia, while the border lines drawn on the abstracted maps look very definite, the perception and usage of the spaces remain indeterminate. For instance, the enclaves in Coochbehar are trapped spaces, yet they wait in patience, bearing allegiance to the state of their contiguity and strategise for their possible freedom. The borders are also under pressure because of extraneous interventions in the form of developmental overdrives like the big dams in the mountains of Sikkim or Assam or the intercontinental highway programs such as envisaged by MDONER. The state initiatives of encroachment often create more alienation among the people living close to the borders, especially in the communities that like to live within their reserve zones. Within these zones in the geographically remote locations like northern Sikkim, the communities enjoy a particular freedom of mobility and access in their familiar mountain routes and shortcut trails that are overwritten and destroyed by the state's developmental juggernaut. The border is porous in places where familiarity and similarity of cultures create spaces of overlap, while the anxieties of the state create paper citizens – as in southern Assam.<sup>203</sup>

The border, thus, lives with the possibilities of unpacking structured entities like the state. Despite the fixed notion with which it is generally accepted in the field of social sciences,<sup>204</sup> at an experiential level, it seems to break the cartographic totality. From the statist point of view the border is seen as fixed and therefore,

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<sup>202</sup> Border as a transit space involves the key question and anxiety of the sovereign states- the question of migration. Aristide Zolberg states, "International migration is an essentially political process, which arises from the organization of the world into congeries of mutually exclusive sovereign states, commonly referred to as the 'Westphalian System'." Quoted from "Matters of State: Theorizing Immigration Policy" in *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States Borders, and Other Side of Globalization*, eds. Itty Abraham and Willem Van Schendel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>203</sup> For further information refer to Sadiq Kamal's study of illegal immigration in India Bangladesh and Malaysia. Sadiq Kamal, *Paper Citizens: How Illegal Immigrants Acquire Citizenship in Developing Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>204</sup> Zolberg criticizes the existing social sciences which concentrate on the flow of people without thinking about the 'gates' through which the movement occurs, hence implicating the states involved. Zolberg, *Matters of State*, 13.

a possible site of illicit flow, experientially it is a reorganised entity for the people who live its everyday.<sup>205</sup> The border is a site of constant shift and contradiction – in the simultaneous existence of porosity and archipelago conditions. This partly makes the South Asian borders non-totalisable, especially at a micro level. This is better realised if the project is multi-sited. The idea of shift is constancy in such a project.<sup>206</sup> As Marcus says, “In such research a certain valorized conception, of fieldwork and what it offers, wherever it is conducted, threatens to be qualified, displaced, or decentered in the conduct of multi-sited ethnography.”<sup>207</sup>

The trope of borderland – suggesting site of unsettlement, was transformed into a site of reflection by evoking a knowledge event through the discipline of the curatorial; this became the thesis in the process of realisation. The thesis emerged in the process of following the ruling metaphor through the interactive performative acts (in an expansive sense) in the chosen sites. The performative acts were only implicated by the theoretical contexts, not necessarily determined by them. Each site with its micro units gave rise to a question for each chapter; in Coochbehar, it was related to confinement and its patterns; Sikkim brought up the question of communities in relation to terrain differences; in Assam, the question was about locating community with relation to fragmented identities. These questions arising from the fieldwork were pitched in the workshop events and reworked through the process of knowledge formation. Thus, this project addressed a moment of experiment with the model of the curatorial.

The aim of the thesis was not to compile or capture data on the borderland, nor to do a sensory profile of its communities or society, but to follow the metaphor of the border and observe it from the crossroads of disciplines, as well as bring out the inflections of the sites. The final moments or occasions of synthesis or knowledge formation occurred in the events of knowledge, followed by the writing

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<sup>205</sup> “There are many ways that people gradually learnt to negotiate the potential violence of the borders. This happened via building houses on two sides, unless some parts of the house fell within both sides by chance. People learnt manoeuvring those loopholes as by defying the border, by owning properties in both the states and by crossing over through unmanned regions. Apart from transport of serious goods the goods of everyday use even cough syrups (a minor but harmful drug) were transported.” Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland*, 118-137.

<sup>206</sup> “Borderlands are... a vital and underappreciated ‘pivot’ between states and flows”, Abraham and Schendel, *Illicit Flows*, 29.

<sup>207</sup> Marcus, “Ethnography in / of the World System,” 95-117.

process. Hence, the attempt at synthesis is that of an outsider, an often hesitant and even multi-vocal attempt at registering the story of the ruling metaphor, at the moment of knowledge formation; a possibility of performative difference of subject-sites at the moment of change.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Kester figures out a position between risk and possibility, in the engaged and sited visual practices – risk of doubt and uncertainty and the possibility of an opening-out to the other, a movement away from self-assurance to the vulnerability of inter-subjective exchange, a possibility of discursivity. Grant H. Kester, “Conversation Pieces: the Role of Dialogue in Socially Engaged Art,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, eds. Zoya Kucor and Simon Leung (New York: Blackwell, 2005), 1-23.

## COOCHBEHAR: PATTERNS OF CONFINEMENT

*Coochbehar seems a passive location on initial approach, but opens up gradually to reveal the specific dynamics that prospectively transform it from a location to a place (a common and shared space) and into a site (a place of relative density of imagination).*

*Engagement with Coochbehar is a maverick proposal, as it is a project that lives with the possibility of meeting contradictory destinies – a deadlock or a release. This is because it covers spaces that are portent, as well as those that are ethically uncertain. There are spaces which are eager to be represented (such as the enclaves)<sup>209</sup>, spaces that have gone beneath the surface (such as the city and its past glories) and those that are nascent, but secretly marking the city and the district (in the form of violent demand/ desire for separate statehood – an agenda that remains legitimately unrepresentable).<sup>210</sup>*

*Potentially Coochbehar has always remained a site for projections, of the present into the past (passive), and also of the past into the future (activism); hence a prospectiveness or futurity prevails over it. The question that emerges from this is qualitative in nature; if a definite future emerges from the location, what will be*

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<sup>209</sup> "A Republic Day of the Stateless," *Uttarbango Sangbad*, January 26, 2014.

<sup>210</sup> Specifically, the recently revived Kamtapur movement – an early 1990s movement as far as its public notice is concerned – otherwise claimed to be as old as, or even older than the independence of India. Initiated by the Kamtapuris, (popularly known as Koch Rajbangshis, alternately accepted as a caste group of the Hindus and tribe by others), this is a movement for a separate state status for Coochbehar, which is currently a district of the state of West Bengal. The demand stems from the fact, among others, that Coochbehar was originally a state and its status was reduced to that of a district, after the Indian independence. Kamtapuris also resent being branded as tribals just because they share dialect with the Rajbangshi tribals of the region. They demand to be recognised as part of the developed Hindu religious order and as belonging to the warrior or *Ksatria* caste in that order. The accrued frustration and grievances of language and territory and deprivation have led this movement to take a violent turn in recent times. As a result, the Kamtapur Peoples Party (KPP) has metamorphosed into the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), following the lead of the rest of Northeast India. The state of West Bengal has started a process for banning the KLO. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, Kolkata, January 20, 2014. Further reference: Nalini Ranjan Ray, *The Truth Unveiled: Koch Rajbangshi and Kamtapuri* (Guwahati: Vicky Publishers, 2007); Debaprasad Bandopadhyay, *Linguistic Terrorism: An Interruption into the Kamtapuri Language Movement* (Occasional Publication, Kolkata: Department of Political Science, Rabindra Bharati University, 2001).

*its constituents? Or, whether one can expect a cohesive community to emerge from a site or location which is torn in different directions? And in the process of the emergence of any possible future space, what can be the form of mediation?*

*My specific area of travel and research into Coochbehar is however limited; I have engaged with two sections of people – the citizens who are active participants in the cultural processes of the town of Coochbehar and residents of a section of the peripheral enclaves, whose predicament I am interested to study for a better understanding of the split in the consciousness of habitation, belonging and territories in communities in contiguous locations of this borderland. This is a choice necessitated by the ongoing issues of the enclaves, and is limited by the restrictions of movement on the dwellers – the non-citizens, as well as on us – the citizens.*

I have been discussing with Sanchayan the idea of a workshop in Coochbehar since September 2009, unsuccessfully, due to various logistic difficulties. Finally, in January 2011, we are at the threshold of the first workshop. This is the one event which could prospectively glue together my entire research and interaction at the borders. It could help to bring out the possibilities of inter-community transactions and register the process of it. The concept note for the workshop has already been supplied by me to the theatre group participants and Sanchayan; it is understood that the theatre group members will have discussed it among themselves so that our joint deliberations can begin as soon as we meet.

While I reach Coochbehar from Gangtok, the evening before the assigned date, to oversee organisational aspects, Sanchayan and Arindam travel from Santiniketan. Debabrata Acharya – Director of the local theatre group ‘Compass’, known for its commitment to socially generative theatre themes and applied theatre related to issues – is already in Coochbehar. We meet at the lobby of the guest house, before starting on our way to the workshop venue, at a walking distance from there.

[In the following conversation and henceforth throughout the thesis: theatre person Debabrata Acharya is denoted as **DA**; artist collaborator Sanchayan Ghose as **SG**; I, Anshuman Dasgupta as **ADG**.]

**ADG**: I hope you have got the concept note? I kept it sketchy since it is to be modified in the process.

**SG**: Yes. I guessed as much – though we have been discussing theatre philosophy at length, I thought you might settle for something more immediately accessible in a sparse atmosphere (of theatre knowledge). How we interpret the ideas of Boal will have to be sorted in the process...<sup>211</sup>

**DA**: Anshuman-da's initial idea matches our perspective. Our guys are very interested, especially since there will be interaction with non-theatre people, whom we generally consider the lay public, on the same plane as the theatre educated, it's a challenge.

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On a winter afternoon in November 2009, we start out for the first time for Coochbehar. I am waiting at the Bolpur railway station; the arrival of the North Bengal Express has been announced. Two of my teammates come at the last moment; Sanchayan and a student friend Arindam Sircar who is also assisting in this project. The train arrives almost immediately, and we board. After we have settled in for the journey, a conversation breaks out between the three of us.

[In the following conversation, Arindam Sircar is denoted as **AS** and the rest of the individuals by the previously indicated acronyms]

**SG**: [to me] This is your first journey to Coochbehar?

**ADG**: Yes. I have always had secondary information about the place from books and reports in the print media.

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<sup>211</sup> Boal's TO has influenced some of the Indian theatrical practices, 1970s onward.

**SG:** But how did you decide over Coochbehar as such, since there are other borders as well?

**ADG:** Yes, there were multiple choices, but most of the places of South Bengal's borders, which are close to Kolkata, are somewhat entangled in the public memory of Bengal. Those spaces are entangled...<sup>212</sup> Coochbehar has got two points to it, for me. As a site it is the most inconspicuous, the least covered by literature; there is almost no dominant nostalgia about it in the mainland literary practices. Though, of late, a few sporadic memories and a few very personal narratives have surfaced, which form exceptions. So, overall, it has a geographic potential as a site. Secondly, I see how the trapped spaces exist amid the erstwhile known porosity of notional borders.

**SG:** And national borders as well?

**ADG:** Of course, since you raise this question. These spaces – the enclaves – are by implication transnational entities, pieces of foreign land inside your own country, historically produced geographies that have been relegated to oblivion.

**AS:** [to me]: Sorry, to be naively interrupting, but is this the first time you have been interested in borders?

**ADG:** No, perhaps Sanchayan can tell you better – about our earlier engagement with a site related project, which was a chance encounter with a certain borderland space in Bodoland in Assam...

**SG:** Yes, I think it was in the year of the Tsunami, coeval with it.

**ADG:** That's right, it was in 2004, when the Tsunami happened; in December, when we went there, Kokrajhar had just got the status of a tribal council in Assam and they invited us...

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<sup>212</sup> The locations of South Bengal have been most widely talked about in Bengali literature and cinema, as popular spots for border crossing, during the period following the partition of India, or afterwards, during the war of 1971.

**SG:** Yes, it was a workshop cum seminar. I was to do some public art project and Anshuman-da<sup>213</sup> was to speak on contemporary art. The art school, where the workshop was taking place, was next to a CRPF<sup>214</sup> camp. Kokrajhar had begun to get peaceful just two years before that – well, somewhat peaceful... But traces of the past violence were noticeable. There was an abandoned military tent inside the campus of the college, I got permission to use it. I studied the locality and scouted around for material from the surroundings, accompanied by some student volunteers who were assisting us. They were from the local Bodo community and knew where to take me. In one of the houses I visited with them, and later again with you [pointing at me], I found a discarded loom. And afterwards, during my discussion with you at the camp, it struck me that it would be interesting to activate this loom inside the abandoned military camp, which you were utilising in your performance.

**ADG:** Yes, meanwhile, I was generally observing the proceedings, collecting data about the surroundings... And even before the seminar had begun, I started thinking of a site related performance, a sort of extension of site-specificity; a possibility whose full potential we had been unable to measure then.

After our discussion, I decided to use a poem entitled 'The Child'.<sup>215</sup> This was the only poem by Tagore to have been written originally in English and later translated into Bengali by himself, as *Sisutirtha*. It is a long poem, which is an allegory of history with destruction as its central theme. It was composed during his last visit to Germany, in the wake of the devastating war of 1939. When this war began, he wrote *Crisis in Civilisation* almost eight years after Freud wrote *Civilisation and its Discontents*. They died one after the other – Freud in 1939 and Tagore in 1941.

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<sup>213</sup> The suffix 'da' is used in many parts of eastern India to address a senior; it is specially a convention in Santiniketan, where all seniors, including teachers, are addressed as 'da'.

<sup>214</sup> Central Reserve Police Force.

<sup>215</sup> This poem is mentioned on the internet as 'The Child', the longest poem that Tagore wrote in 1930 (first published by Allen and Unwin, London, in 1931), inspired by the Passion play he watched in Oberammergau, near Munich in Germany. The Bengali translation was 'Sisutirtha' (Child's Pilgrimage). The Bengali poem's orchestrated movements begin with a turbulent rhythm, reach a crescendo of fury and violence and then gently expand, resolving into serene and tender notes. Sisir Kumar Das, *Introduction to English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Poems* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2004).

Anyway, I was to lecture on postmodernism and I was wondering what the purpose of the lecture would be without trying to find some connectivity with the location. I wanted to turn the lecture into a performance piece incorporating a selective reading from the Bengali *Sisutirtha*, with a selection from *The Crisis in Civilization*. This was my attempt to reinvoked the war-like situation this land had gone through, the losses that it had sustained, and scars it still had, as well as the war that was still on elsewhere in the world; a recounting of modernist humanism in its last breath, before the lecture on postmodernism. It was perhaps an unexpected act. I got in touch with Sushil Brahmo, the veteran literary figure and a Chair of the local Bodo Literary Council who agreed to translate the text of the Bengali version of 'The Child' for me. Maneshwar – a local, an ex-student of the art school and an enthusiastic teacher in his alma mater at the time – agreed to recite the Bodo translation, while I interjected with recitation from the original Bengali text. That is where it all started.

**AS:** After that?

**SG:** Anshuman-da did the performance keeping my piece as a part of it.

**ADG:** Yes, somewhat appropriating it – you might say, but all in all, it turned out to be a collaborative effort at many levels.

After the lecture I was free. There were eight more days of stay left. I was trying to think up more participatory ways of activating the site, while Sanchayan kept wondering whether to undertake the performance on a larger scale. I thought of using the complete site of the camp, with the college on one side and the road on the other (with occasional Border Security traffic marching through). The tent would be one accent of the performance, where I would then sit and recite the poem after a bit of weaving was done on the loom. I planned to do an approximately 40 minutes performance in the evening... There are so many details to it...

**SG and AS:** [in unison] please go on, we are yet to be served dinner... [Everyone laughs]

[I went on to describe in detail for the benefit of Anirban who had not been present during the Kokrajhar project].

**ADG:** There was a 100 ft-long banner, depicting the last 40 years of the Bodo struggle for the right to self-rule. This banner was open to all, and over a seven day period, all the participants contributed a bit of their own imagery to it.

Then I did a bit of oral research and took the help of the college students to choreograph a dance composition. I also practised the dance movements to find out how to activate the space better. Then, I combined all the elements in a processual improvisation; the cloud dance *Bagurumba* – suggesting distant thunders of imminent danger in the Bodo language – was followed by the dance of war, *Bardisclai*, which was followed by *Musanglangnai* – the dance of union, and then again *Bagurumba*, this time as a generative cloud dance, invoking harvest and regeneration. The process was envisaged as a push and pull between death and regeneration, a theme that I found abundant in Bodo myths. Personally, at that time, in the climate of imminent violence this theme seemed to temporarily overpower. What was a mere foreboding then, came true soon afterwards, sadly an immediate reality of the site. The person responsible for organising the workshop was shot dead shortly afterwards, by the extreme faction of the militant organisation that controlled the Bodo territory at that time...

We used material sourced from the site, and made use of the local tradition, together with texts of disjunctions, rejoinders, complaints. Afterwards, in reflecting on the circumstances of the performance, I thought of the circumstantial factors that influence a performance whose purpose is interactive; even with all the arguments around and against spectacle, we may have incorporated it probably because it was offset against the monotony of the landscape and the dreariness of the college campus. The festive ambience created for the occasion of our group's visit (the entire village dines together during festivities), further heightened the feeling.

This was a superb, even if temporary interaction with a living community, which scamped for resources and managed enough to pull off one such international conference from the fringe of the urban mainstream. It was a proper borderland project; a project in cohabitation with the space of the 'other' and in contrast to our familiar everyday. Thereafter, I made a collaborative attempt at articulating the aspect of borderland in the Two Rivers conference by Periphery in 2009.

**SG:** Yes, it was quite a memorable experience. And apart from that we also did a few more collaborations together, at the Khoj Kolkata workshop in Baruipur, for instance...

**ADG:** Yes of course, at Khoj... I remember you also did a project in the locality of your home in Calcutta, where old buildings were being replaced by new constructions... Can you recount that?

**SG:** Yes. My theatre friends who had got together first for the Badal Sircar workshop, way back in the early nineties, were with me in this venture. At the time, all over Bengal and especially in Calcutta, old buildings were suddenly being destroyed to give passage to new apartments. Today, it is a common occurrence and taken as such, but then it felt like a cultural invasion, under the sign of money. We waited till a portion of the house was demolished, before our intervention. We couldn't prevent anything as the builders had the landowner's consent. On speaking with him, though, we realised that there were all kinds of external and internal pressures working on him. We took permission to photograph the semi-demolished structure, then set up a sort of kiosk near the electrical distribution units in the still-to-be-demolished part, and gift-wrapped that portion with translucent papers.

**ADG:** Was the wrapped 'gift' huge in size?

**SG:** It was fairly large, about 12 feet in height and a foot in width... After this, I did my intervention in the Santiniketan landscape, which was originally to have taken place in Baharampur – again a place close to the border. But it didn't work out, due to rain. Remember, you did the video documentation for that?

**ADG:** Yes. Maybe we can say our motivations for doing site-specific works come from the theatre of intervention. I have another slightly contaminated source of inspiration though – Artaud, and may be the theatre of cruelty, both of which use ethnography and ritual as sources. You too have similar directions, I gather, but may be from different sources...what do you say?

**SG:** Yes, and it was while doing these workshops with Badal-da that I hit upon the ideas for the works around community and site, because they gave us enormous openings; opened channels for understanding ourselves and each other. I was of course, working with different theatre groups as a scenic designer...

**ADG:** But do the theatre people understand your other works – your engagements with site and community?

**SG:** No, often not, they have to be told about what I am doing. Once it links up with the theatre world, they get the cue...

[After a period of silence]

**ADG:** Is Debabrata informed? Did you tell him our purpose as well?

**SG:** Yes he knows, but have you called him too?

**ADG:** Yes, he was very polite, said we should call him upon arrival and he will take it up from there. Do you know him long? How is the theatre group? Where did you meet?

**SG:** Not very long. The theatre group is small; it has members from both the genders and mixed communities. He was mentioning the tribulations of having to run a theatre group from a small provincial town. May be, it's pure passion, it demands a lot of commitment. I think we met at a workshop somewhere in the north of Bengal... I recall him having requested me to do his set design once. He will come...

[Sanchayan smiles and gives me a reassuring look and we disperse for the night]

Next morning when we get up, the soundscape has changed. There are new passengers speaking what seems our mother tongue (Bengali), in a completely unknown dialect and accent, only a few of whose sound units carry some sense for us. As we await our station, to our surprise Arindam, who is from the locality and familiar with the dialect, exclaims, "See, even the language has changed, we are approaching the border!"

## 1.1 Interactivity: Geo-sociality

From the metropolitan location, the new Coochbehar railway station is an overnight journey. After which, the journey further into the town is definitely a special experience. As one moves in, gradually, the sparseness is replaced by density, the sound and the traffic also grow and after a 20 minute short ride by public transport, one hits the heart of the town. Coochbehar is a fairly well-known princely state of India (eighteenth to mid-twentieth century). Today, it is the district headquarters of West Bengal. Princely and colonial architecture, monuments, schools and colleges line both sides of the road. The city squares, several memorial columns, a big central lake, a huge palace in the style of a sixteenth-century Italian Palazzo and a few grand-looking, well-kept, traditional Hindu temples, including one named after a queen of this erstwhile princely domain (*Suniti Bhavan*, after Suniti Devi, the daughter of Keshav Sen – the founder of the *Brahmo Samaj*) – all remnants of old times, embed the place in history. In contrast, wires criss-cross overhead to make a network of communicative links. There are numerous wayside cyber zones, though many of them often lie idle due to inadequate network connection. Slowly paddling rickshaws, cyclists and pushcarts dot the streets. There are a few hotels, some of them big for a small town, and multi-cuisine restaurants, as well as shopping plazas announcing the advent of the twenty-first century. Earlier visitors to Coochbehar, like the ethnographer Whyte from New Zealand, who visited between 1999 and 2000, certainly had not seen these changes. One realises this is a site that can be called close to the centre, with respect to some of the remotest possible peripheries we are about to venture into. (ILL.1.1 – 1.5)

As one exits the town and moves further inside, the density and bustle is quickly replaced by open spaces. Widening fields full of either paddy, vegetables or jute stretch out on two sides, to a distant bluish horizon, which is often obstructed by barbed wire fences about three metres high, as the road moves close to the international border. This is the standard experience whether one is going towards Dinhata in the north-eastern side of Coochbehar and from there onto the borders, or to the north-west, which takes one to Mathabhanga in the south-eastern side; 45 to 55 km each way from the town.

There are several different spaces in the borders, which are not simply the dividing lines between two countries. They are sites of memory, clogged positions for certain people, and a continuous line of escape for some others. Above all, they are potentially dramatic; though in appearance static, they are relationally dynamic spaces. These sites form what is the most intriguing feature of the South Asian region, shared between the two neighbours, India and Bangladesh – the blind spots in the official maps of the region – their enclaves and exclaves. These are pieces of land legally belonging to one country, trapped within another country – an anomaly of parting of spaces.

There is a discursive unevenness, yet contiguity of theoretical material about these spaces. In Coochbehar, there are places where one can have an intimate encounter with these abstract entities, which is what brought me to the district that borders Bangladesh in different places of its over 1,400 km of length. It has about 47 enclaves out of a total of 51 Bangladeshi enclaves inside India. (ILL.1.7)

On this first encounter in 2009, I visit four enclaves distributed over a space of approx. 150 km. These are Karala, Gobrachora, and the Goyabari East and West, of the Dinhata subdivision (the area that has the most enclaves). Sanchayan, Arindam and I are accompanied by a local NGO activist, Sahidul, who was introduced to us by our cultural informant Debabrata. During this visit we develop a general rapport with the people, thanks to our mediator's presence; we are also inaccurately credited with the very powerful role of 'journalist-rescuers' who have come to report on the trapped people's predicament. Sahidul introduces us to Mansoor Bhai (a septuagenarian enclave dweller and activist working for the absorption of the Bangladeshi enclaves in India into the Indian side)

In the next two years, I visit a few of these enclaves (*Chhit* in local language) several times with my local collaborators. During one of these trips, I also visit a *chhit* 40 km south of the Mathabhanga subdivision on the other side of Coochbehar. The first few encounters with the people of the enclaves are just familiarising exercises, during which we hear what turns out to be the most obvious and expected complaints of the people deprived of citizenship, health,

education and hence, a normal civil life, including marriage outside the enclosed spaces.(ILL.1.9 – 1.13)

### **1.1.1 Three Days in the Enclaves**

#### First Arrival in Karala Chhit with Sahidul, November 2009

When Sanchayan and I arrive in Karala *Chhit* on a wintry afternoon, the people are at work in the fields; it is the reaping season for rice, and sowing time for fresh vegetables and maize. Soon they start gathering around us, we talk and generally ask about the local situation. They want to know from us if the situation will improve or not.

I respond, vaguely, that since dialogues are on between the two countries, they will probably yield result in time. The more informed elders in the gathering immediately retort that there have been several dialogues in the past between different leaders – leaving them hopeful everytime – but no solution has resulted. The youngsters also show signs of frustration. Nevertheless, people gather on calling, as they see this interaction with ‘outsiders’ as an opportunity. Subsequent meetings have also shown this strategic willingness in the residents of the enclaves to engage with visitors, since it is through these meetings that they can connect with the world of information. The frustration comes out in different voices in different forms; elderly people are more tolerant and less belligerent than the younger ones. The younger generations are difficult to make conversation with. The absence of access, the barred aspects trouble them more acutely.(ILL.1.13)

On enquiring about the health and education situation, I get a bitter out-pouring. I am told, there is no access to health care; the people have to rely on local quacks who substitute for doctors.(ILL.1.11) For access to education the *chhit* residents have to fake parental identities and addresses. With their real identities, they would not be allowed to enroll in the Indian schools and colleges, which are the only ones within their physical reach. At my request, a boy called Mahabub shows me his school leaving certificate, dated 2006.

We shift our location to another part of the enclave, generally used as the meeting spot. Sahidul introduces me to a new group and we converse:

[**KER**= Karala Enclave Residents (with names in brackets wherever known); Mansoor Mia/ Bhai= **MM**]

**KER**: So, what do you think will happen to us? Do you visualise any changes?

**ADG**: I can only state what is dear to my heart, that I wish it had happened about 60 years ago, nonetheless, it should happen at some point soon. We can only demand, dream and wish.

**KER** (Mustaq): We have also had hopes, several times since 1958, Nehru signed a pact then it didn't materialise, war broke out. [He is referring to the India-Pakistan War of 1965]

Then there was a silence; again after 1971 there was hope, Indira Gandhi signed a pact with Mujib and then it broke down. So what will happen now? We are sitting hopelessly! (ILL.1.7)

**KERs**: [Desperate chorus] We are stuck here like some animals; even animals have more dignity than us. Even animals live a better life, and are taken care of, in the zoo they feed the animals; there are doctors in the jail too! We don't have any jurisdiction. Anybody can come and harm us, we can't complain.

**SG**: Why can't you complain to the local police?

**KER**: They won't take our complaint, we don't have any rights. We are not citizens.

[This kind of talk continues throughout on the way back, with more complaints pouring in about unavailability of electricity, clean water, doctors, medicine, access road etc. A man in his early sixties, who was working in the field, comes up onto the road suddenly from the field, turns towards us and says]

**KER:** If you are reporting to the paper, please say that we are a bunch of bastards!

**ADG:** Why do you say that?

**KER:** [angrily] Because, our children cannot get admission in schools without faking their identities. They can't mention us as parents.

**ADG:** Why is that?

**KER:** For then they have to provide the proof of address, which involves, a valid voter ID card or a ration card, a valid proof of citizenship. And we don't have that, so our children are bastards, passed off as somebody else's offsprings.

#### Visit to Karala *Chhit* in January 2011

Sanchayan and I are visiting the enclaves. I have come after a gap of eight to nine months; I had last come in summer and it is now January. We have arranged to meet with Sahidul Bhai, he is at home today; it is Sunday.

The mood is unusually happy in the enclaves, since, throughout the last few months, the news or rumour has been doing the rounds that India is going to exchange its enclaves with Bangladesh; an MoU has already been signed at the secretarial level and the issue is now reaching the ministerial level, prior to the Parliament for legislation.

Karala *Chhit*, which we are visiting first, welcomes us. [Sahidul is saying that they are happy, I don't know]. People are absent from the village because of the sowing season. The fields are nearby and it is with an amazing quickness that they congregate. But Sahidul takes us to the house of Irfan, who is a distant relative of his. He introduces us and makes us sit in a room on one side of a courtyard. They seem to be slightly better off, they have four rooms, including kitchen, distributed on the four sides of the yard. They also have electric connection. When I ask Sahidul how an enclave dweller can access electricity, the answer is very puzzling for me. He says that though this is just next to the

enclave, and all the other houses nearby are within the enclave, this particular house falls within the Indian territory, which gives it access to electricity.

Just then, a new entrant to the room – an enclave dweller, catching this last part of the exchange, breaks into the conversation. Endorsing Sahidul's view, he says, "We are so close and yet so far from each other."

#### In Poaturkuthi Enclave, Jan 2011

Yesterday, I fixed a meeting with Mansoor Bhai for today, but now he seems to be in doubt, he needs to go to a religious conference. Without wanting to offend any religious sentiments, I protest mildly that he had agreed to this meeting. Finally he decides to meet me, but I have a tyre puncture and arrive late at his house. Mansoor Bhai has met us on several occasions before; he is always open and generous in his gestures. In his conversations though, he lets out his anxiety about the future of the enclaves in general and in particular, his own, Poaturkuthi enclave.

**MM:** What will happen to us? Do you have a clue?

**ADG:** We have been following the newspapers and the television. Though television is silent about it, the print media is reporting quite frequently about the enclaves these days. You must be following them... What are your leaders saying?

**MM:** Yes, I am following the local newspapers everyday. Some are talking positive... The only leader who has been consistently in support is the Forward Block leader Dipak Sengupta, who stays in Dinhat. He has been fighting for us, a long time now; He made the local MLAs raise the issue in the assembly.<sup>216</sup>

**ADG:** Assembly won't do. Since it is a subject for the Centre, for the Home and Foreign Ministry. So may be a Member of Parliament or a central minister can help.

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<sup>216</sup> MLA- Member of Legislative Assembly.

**MM:** Yes, Pranab Mukherjee (the Finance Minister) and the PM seem to be showing interest, the Secretary is to visit Bangladesh in connection, it seems. Now, it all depends on whether they agree. Earlier also there were several attempts, which just didn't work out. This time it seems a bit positive.

**ADG:** Have they conducted any census survey or made any maps yet?

**MM:** Here they haven't come. On the Bangladesh side it seems they are taking initiatives in remapping and also taking census data.

In the car, conversation continues on the future of the enclaves. (ILL.1.14) I have a suggestion to make; while travelling together to Dinhata town – to the house of the Sengupta's, the activists – I tell Mansoor, "When you merge with the Indian citizenry, you merge as equals, and in the process give a special space to the gendered relations – women should enjoy all priorities too, in education, health and control of the society. Only then can one develop from a clogged minority to the social mainstream."<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> This was meant to be an ethical suggestion, considering that the enclave people are the most wretched of the minority communities. To begin with, there is a tradition of conservatism, which would be difficult to break if the enclave people were a settled community. Here, the residents have the possibility and could reorganise their public social life, I felt, because they are confined and struggling for freedom – for transition from community to society. My suggestion had some consequences it seems, because Mansoor Bhai and the others pitched a woman from the enclaves as candidate for election (though this seemed an ambiguity at the time, since enclave people were not part of the electorate. But, it turned out, the lady was part citizen because she had married someone from mainland India.



1.13 Coochbehar, Poaturkuthi: Gathering in Front of Masoor Bhai's House, Nov. 2009.  
(Sahidul Bhai sitting on the right, Mansoor in the Centre).



1.14 Coochbehar: With Mansoor Bhai in a Taxi, Leaving Poaturkuthi, Jan. 2011.

## 1.2 Through the Passages: The Rites of Border Crossing

### 1.2.1 Location: The Teen Bigha Corridor

(January 2010)

I am at the Teen Bigha corridor with Sahidul, the site which was the eye of the storm during the 1980s when the central government considered leasing a passage to Bangladesh to allow it access to its Dahagram enclave. Dahagram remains the largest Bangladeshi enclave inside India; the space that cuts it off from the mainland is only 85 m<sup>2</sup> of Indian territory (a space equivalent to an acre or *Teen Bigha*, in vernacular Bengali). Since 1953 the two countries have struggled to figure out a solution of passage. Only in 1992, by mutual agreement, a deal for the Bangladeshi passageway was signed and limited passage given to the mainland people to visit the enclave; and, a time-bound passage (from 6am to 6pm) given to the enclave dwellers, with a limited permit to carry goods for survival. This is why, if the Bangladeshi mainland people (from Patgram) are going to the enclave, they can only go along a straight road to Dahagram, but can't turn right or left; same is true for the enclave people.

On one side of the crossing, within the Indian territory, is a stone memorial with a marble plaque. We remember that the names on the plaque are the signs of the long struggle to free a passage for the enclave people. But it is almost hidden by wild vegetation. As the evening sets in and the bugle announces the time, the guards manning the gates grow restive, for they know that they have to stand in the same position for the next 15 minutes as the people begin to cross. They will be relieved when the ritual is over. It is almost winter. The flood lights are switched on. The great ritual of border crossing begins. This is a four-point crossing; on the two opposite sides of the shorter arm of the cross, are the two gates leading to mainland Bangladesh and Dahagram – the Bangladeshi enclave trapped within India. This is the corridor. The remaining arm of the cross leads towards Mekhligunj and the residual borderland space of India on one side, and hits a small habitation called Kuchlibari on the other. Kuchlibari is the end of the Indian road on this side.

Time for the gates to be closed now, the last lot of people on rickshaws and on foot, carrying goods on their heads or shoulders are crossing over quickly. As the final bugle sounds, we get up, almost in a knee jerk reaction to the alarming sound and turn to see what is happening. The border guards march to the gate shout slogans, do a wild performance of mildly abusive gestures (which can be a really funny spectacle and is done with much more aggression and comic virulence along the Indo-Pakistan border at Wagah). The flags of both the countries, India and Bangladesh are lowered as the Border Security Force (BSF) salutes. Then it is folded to the size of a handkerchief and handed over to a Havildar, who takes it away and locks it up till the dawn of the next day. The flag will now sleep.

Before sundown, we have to reach the other side from the Mekhligunj side of India, cutting across the Teen Bigha, to Kuchlibari, and return. We start walking to the end of the road, towards Kuchlibari where we can see a village, some schools and a women's college in the distance. Beyond Kuchlibari, it is again Bangladesh. We stop by a lake and then turn back. At the crossing of the Patgram-Dahagram-Angarpota corridor between the Bangladesh mainland and the Dahagram enclave, there is no permission for Indians to turn left or right, while the gates are open. When the gates are closed, we can walk right upto them. Similarly, during the crossing, the less fortunate non-citizens of Dahagram have no permission to face the Indian sides of the road. Whyte's additional notes on the passage and on access in his published dissertation, where he addresses the enclaves, show the corridor's dimension from a different perspective, for he is studying the border from the other side, while we are situated on the Indian side of the border. When he crossed the *Teen Bigha* corridor, he encountered a set of difficulties which are faced by the residents of the enclaves of Dahagram. Whyte writes:

When crossing to Dahagram, the Bangladesh guards warn travellers not to dawdle. There are no passport or customs checks, nor any paperwork for those crossing, as the Corridor is for transit to and from Dahagram only. There is no provision for entering or leaving India proper at the corridor, and a sign in Bengali at the actual intersection warns Bangladeshis not to turn left or right but to proceed straight through. On the Dahagram side, the road continues to the

northern end of Angarpota, from where Mekhligunj town is visible, but no longer legally accessible. A side road loops around the south-west of the enclave. Thirty-eight watchtowers, common along the entire Indo-Bangladesh boundary, surround the enclave on three sides not guarded by the Tista River. There is no border fence except that at the Tin Bigha itself, and the enclave is demarcated with the same modern concrete dragon's teeth as the main boundary.<sup>218</sup>

About access, Whyte writes:

Access is not only a problem of the residents of these enclaves, official access also remains difficult, with none of the officials spoken to in this area having made official visits to the enclaves in the other country. But at least officials are not subjected to the overt exploitation and corruption by the border guards. Despite lobbying India, Bangladesh was unable to obtain permission to access its enclaves to conduct 2001 census. Newspapers noted that some five lacs people in 51 enclaves in Karigram and Lalmonirhat Dists were unable to be counted. Residents of 12 out of 51 enclaves were enrolled to vote in 1990, but when fresh lists were prepared in 2000, India denied access to the electoral officials.<sup>219</sup>

### 1.2.2 Tales of a Revisit

Teen Bigha corridor has become a neutral space for display of both, interstate amity and the resolution of a long-standing border dispute. Jyoti Basu, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal said in a televised interview with the New Delhi Television chief Pronnoy Roy, at the time of the transfer:

It was suggested during the movements around *Teen Bigha* that we will resist the lease of the *Teen Bigha* land, and won't let it go. It turned out to be fine and quiet after the actual transfers were done.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Brendan Whyte, "Waiting for the Esquimo: an historical and documentary study of the Coochbehar enclaves of India and Bangladesh" (Research Paper, University of Melbourne, 2004), 162. <https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/34051>.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>220</sup> Ref: NDTV, 1992; URL: <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/the-world-this-week/the-world-this-week-tin-bigha-zameen-aired-may-1992/287889>, accessed on 14/12/ 2013

This is an opinion shared by only a small section of liberal intelligentsia, politicians, administrators and middleclass citizens of India.

Sheela Dam and Gargi Sanyal, in their jointly written book on Coochbehar – *Coochbehar Ebong* – betray similar feelings when they come to revisit Teen Bigha after the settlement of the corridor issue. There is more than a streak of romanticism in Sanyal's voice, which is steeped in reference of William Wordsworth's 'Yarrow Visited' and 'Yarrow Revisited'. But the violence of the moments of transfer comes through in a letter she quotes in the book.<sup>221</sup> The apprehensions in the minds of the local people are voiced in this letter, written to Sanyal by Mr Dam – her co-author Sheela Dam's husband, who, as the Chief Engineer of Coochbehar in 1992, was one of the planners of the Teen Bigha corridor. The letter brings out the different stages of the crisis that was brewing since the time of the Indira Gandhi-Mujibur Rahman pact of 1974, or from even before that, since the Feroz Khan Noon and Nehru pact of 1958. According to this 1958 India-Pakistan pact, one portion of the Berubari South area of India and four East Pakistan chhitis lying within Coochbehar (totalling around 18.13 km<sup>2</sup>) were to be handed over to Pakistan, in exchange for the East Pakistan Dahagram-Angarpota chhit (18.63 km<sup>2</sup> area). The people of Berubari rose up in arms against this proposed transfer of land. They did not want to go with East Pakistan. Also, the local logic, steered by both, left-wing democrats like the Forward Block and extreme-right like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was that the Indians are going to lose out since the Indian section of Kuchlibari would become a new Indian enclave surrounded by Pakistan. Post 1971, this objection remained; only Kuchlibari would now, supposedly, become an enclave trapped in the newly formed republic of Bangladesh.

However, the result of the pact between Indira Gandhi and Mujibur Rahman in 1974 was that South Berubari with the subjacent enclaves remained within India. Dahagram-Angarpota was kept with Bangladesh, but, it was proposed, would be connected with a section of mainland Bangladesh called Panbari Mouja, by a piece of lease land called Teen Bigha corridor. The Berubari problem was thus solved, but this last adage of the pact created fresh problem. There were series

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<sup>221</sup> Sheela Dam and Gargi Sanyal, *Coochbehar Ebong (Coochbehar And)* (Calcutta: Banipith Granthalay, 2002), 46- 51.

of petitions made in court by both, the moderate and the militant activists in favour of and against this pact. Finally, this was cleared by the apex court in 1990, paving the way for the implementation of the Teen Bigha corridor pact. Dam's letter gives an eyewitness account of the actual handing over of the land:

You were absent during the handing over of the Teen Bigha, hence as you wished, I am giving you a detailed report... On 26<sup>th</sup> June 1992, at morning ten o'clock, the Three Bigha Corridor is given as a lease for a token one hour to Bangladesh... There was a mixed feeling... one section was blown away by the sheer emotional impact of the symbolic unity of the two parts of Bengal, while the other section which rose in arms against the lease pact, actively tried to resist the process. As a result, under the government's efforts to control the situation, 50-60 people suffered injury and two deaths were caused. Those who died were ordinary citizens – a sharecropper and a rickshaw puller – Jiten Roy and Khiten Adhikari.<sup>222</sup>

Dam's letter suggests the absence of a proper campaign on the part of the government. He insists that if there had been a greater effort at awareness generation and assurances given that Kuchlibari would not turn into another enclave, the violent situation could have been avoided. Dam and Sanyal write that during their visit after the creation of the passage, they had seen, close to the corridor, the commemorative plaque for those who had laid down their lives in the movement against the corridor. The book also describes the drastic transformation the space had undergone as a result of the transfer of passage, which explains the unkempt condition in which we find the plaque when we are there. According to the duo, the developmental activities that had taken place in Kuchlibari, had resulted in change in the pattern of conversation in the tea shop close to the corridor. Whereas, prior to the opening of the corridor, the conversation had centred on the anxiety over the lease of the corridor to Bangladesh, when they revisited the space, they found people discussing television shows and film actresses from Mumbai/ Bombay. However, in a different voice, Chief Engineer Dam's letter recounts the prologue to the violence that he witnessed after the opening:

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<sup>222</sup> Dam and Sanyal, *Coochbehar*, 47, 51.

Two and two do not add up to the figure four all the time. The police and the reserve police force crossed their limits of surveillance in the places close to the border... and I saw several hundred families migrate under the impact of such emergencies, and the impact of sheer rumour and apprehension. I have seen, in miniature, the refugees who crossed the borders after the partition of India... While doing my work in the open veranda of the bungalow of Mekhligunj, I saw families running away with their skimpy belongings on their bicycles. We had to open rehab shelters in Mekhligunj to shelter refugees.<sup>223</sup>

### 1.3 Boundedness and Flow in the Borderland: The Event of Knowledge

In culture, outsidership is the most powerful tool of understanding. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise for itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths.<sup>224</sup>

We organise a workshop comprising multi-disciplinary activities in the heart of Coochbehar. The workshop is housed in Suniti Bhavan – a modernist reformist *Brahmo Samaj* temple founded by Nripendranarayan, the king of Coochbehar – now turned into a school.(ILL.1.5- 1.6) The participants are members of the local theatre group Compass, its leader Debabrata as one of the coordinators and some young people from the Poaturkuthi and Karala enclaves. Of the twelve participants, six are from Coochbehar and six from the enclaves. The Compass members join in because they are interested; through Debabrata – who was sent my concept note – they are already aware of the performative orientation the workshop is expected to have. The enclave people join the workshop at their own urgency. Due to their trapped predicament, they do not have any public life at all. The workshop is a means to some sort of public exchange. There unfortunately are no women participants from the enclaves because of logistical reasons; we are unable to arrange their night-stay in the town due to shortage of suitable space.

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>224</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin in *Speech Genres and other Essays*, quoted in Paul Willemann, *Looks and Frictions* (Bloomington, 1994) [Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin*, 117.]

The enclave participants have basic secondary school education (surreptitiously acquired from local schools in Coochbehar). The town participants are Bachelor degree holders from local colleges. Apart from Debabrata who is somewhat older, the rest of them belong to the age group of 20–30 years. Debabrata has done a short-term course in theatre from the National School of Drama in Delhi; the other Compass members have been trained by him. The enclave members have no theatre exposure. None of the participants have any formal training in photography, videography or mapmaking. My colleague Sanchayan Ghosh is participating as a collaborator, and I, in a curatorial capacity, as a participant observer.

[In all the following conversations: participants from the Bangladeshi enclaves of Poaturkuthi and Karala are denoted as **BEP** (Bangladesh Enclave Participants), the Compass Theatre Group as **CTG** and individuals by previously indicated acronyms.]

Chorus: A map!

**BEP:** What is this? [As the flex is unrolled] (ILL.1.8)

**CTG:** A big map – map of Coochbehar! [All go close, bend over it] Where are we?

**CTG** (Bimal): [pointing at a spot] Here is the city... the lake, the playground, college... my house! Or, close to my house...

**SG:** And where are the enclaves? Are they visible?

**ADG:** Should start from close to the border, for that, instead you are starting from the city

**DA:** Yes, but right now we are in the city.

**BEP** (Saddam): Let's try to figure out... here is Dinhat; we are close to the border... Bamunhat, after this, somewhere here ... this dot, this spot.

**BEP** (Burman): No, no... that spot might be [a bit puzzled]... it doesn't show the lake.

**CTG** (Ananta): My house... this is the treasury, this turn... where is the cinema? This is the school, no road... there should be a road from behind my house... no, this is a bad map!

**ADG**: Why? What did you expect?

**Ananta**: There are no details, the distances are not correct... my house is not figuring in!

### **1.3.1 Dialogue on the Evolving Theme of Barredness**

(Workshop Venue: Suniti Bhavan, Coochbehar, 12-13 January 2011)

While surveying the workshop venue, Sanchayan and I discover some classroom furniture and tools – including a blackboard and some wooden alphabet blocks, lying around. We plan to incorporate this material in improvising the theatre activities. On the first day of the workshop, we engage the participants in contributing certain terms related to the border, through the scheme of performative participation. I hope to bring out the crisis of confinement that has built up over the years in the enclaves – living without access to basic human facilities. Another reason why I have planned to bring together the enclave and non-enclave people in the workshop is because I want to place their two conditions together – to get the two neighbouring human predicaments into a dialogue with each other. They have been informed that the words that grow out of today's exercise are going to form a part of a 'dictionary' of borders. I frame a question for the participants:

Some of us here today are outsiders and unfamiliar with the different aspects of the border, especially its restrictive aspects that you have repeatedly suggested in your conversations with us. Could you please write down on the blackboard, the aspects that seem most problematic and restrictive to each of you in your situations? Please write only one word each.

The participants all go to the blackboard in turn and write down their selected word. The whole process works through intermittent dialogues and exchanges among the participants themselves and with us; there are thoughtful pauses, glances exchanged, cheeky interjections... At the end, we have a list of words on the board. (ILL.1.22) Each participant has also written a brief note individually in her/ his notebook. The list of 'bars' comes out as:

1. Religious
2. Economic
3. Cultural
4. Gender
5. Generation
6. Political
7. Border
8. Language
9. Identity

The selected words are then taken through a performative process, involving exchanges of information and action; the participants also use the kindergarten alphabet blocks to build their lists into structures. Through the whole process of the performative workshop, through innumerable dialogues and later, through perusing the note books of the participants, our team gleans interesting observations on each of these words and the participants' relation to it:

Religious Bar– This occupies the topmost position of the list, probably because most of the participants are below 30 years of age and in the crucial mode of 'crossing over' the religious restrictions, which may, for some, have been the chief source of knowledge (via Islamic education) so far. Religion is seen as one of those barriers which are not easily crossed in the common civil life. More so, for the confined people in the enclaves perhaps, who are left with only the injunctions and restrictive instructions from their religious teachers, in the absence of a secular state and its laws. This comes out in the words and the gestures that they construct in the form of a tableau. Among the Compass participants we have Ayesha, who is a married Muslim woman, from a liberal background with a Left orientation. This allows her to be a member of a theatre group with male members, who are not necessarily all from her religious

community. Along with her, also participating in the workshop is her teenage daughter Nilofer. Ayesha is the most forthcoming in terms of volunteering gestures in the bar enactments. In Religious Bar, she strikes the first gesture – the pose of trying to feebly and hopelessly strain against blocks hemming her in. Immediately, the others spontaneously gather around her in various restrictive and ritualistic gestures, forming an ensemble. (ILL.1.25)

Economic Bar– Both categories of participants in the workshop share the reality of being marginal, in different senses. Coochbehar is considered to be a peripheral location with a non-industrial and slow agrarian economy, and an avowedly provincial culture with relatively slow access to the world of information. Despite this commonly shared aspect of marginality in economy and culture, a stark economic difference exists between the enclave and the CTG participants. Enclave dwellers do not have any access to legal economic channels, unlike the Coochbehar residents, who mostly belong to the middle-classes. This difference gets translated into gestures quite spontaneously and reflexively; the enclave dwellers position themselves as subalterns – receivers, beggars, muggers and so on – while it comes quite naturally to the CTG participants to posture as buyers, donors, givers. Interestingly, what comes through, is a sense of easy collaboration and a sense of humorous acceptance of their less fortunate status by the enclave participants. The enclave, being a non-state place, is governed by illegal economy, which comes through in their gestures. For the CTG members, despite their Left-leanings, aspects of the economic bar are a theoretical construct and their gestures proliferate along those lines. On the other hand, for the enclave people who are completely denied access to regular economic opportunities, their gestures express their harsh reality. What I feel from my overall interactions in the enclaves, is that, with them, two kinds of affiliations come through – the natural one rising from their stark predicament, which is expressed in their stances in the workshop, and the Left-affiliation that is a constructed one, from the fact that the Left parties are the only ones sympathetic towards their cause. Numerous conversations with these border people have made it clear that the only political organisation that most consistently represents the enclaves is the non-hegemonic All India Forward Bloc (AIFB), definitely a Left party with limited spread, but with an ideological stance in favour of the underclasses. (ILL.1.23–1.24)



1.23 – 1.24 Coochbehar Workshop: Staging the Economic Bar, Jan. 2011.  
(Photos 1.23 – 1.24 by Arindam Sircar)

Cultural Bar– This comprises questions of cultural participation, which start with certain access to education. The barrier, according to the CTG, is general access to culture as such, where power dominates. So, there is a sense of power associated with culture. In case of the enclave participants, culture translates more into the basics like education. They translate this idea into various stances of what they think are either political or civic power, or via their daily experiences of religiosity – into expressions of supplication. The entire mise-en-scène is choreographed with its threads pulling in various directions. A clenched fist on one side and a supplicant gesture on the other. It becomes a site where daily life in a civil society meets its double in the political gestures. (ILL.1.26)

Gender Bar– The gender question is raised by a woman participant from the CTG. The participants come up with overt gestures, in which women take the lead to the extent of wishing the gender barrier away. Hence they coin the barredness as ‘Gender no Bar’. Gender is a crucial question where it links with daily life of transactions of various kinds, from social to domestic labour, and as our discussions proceed, we figure out that it is intimately connected with the symbolic empowerment of the social groups. There is a tendency for the melodramatic in this enactment; Ayesha poses as a victim and Saddam poses as the attacker, while the rest of the team congregates around her in various rescuing and resisting actions. (ILL.1.27 – 1.28)

Generation Bar– This seems to be premised on the very basic notions of underprivileged cultures, where norms are simply imposed on the younger people by their elders. This opinion is present among both categories of participants. This could, at first, be a surprising discovery for people from outside the situation, but any provincial Bengali would know that in a closely-knit society, generational dictates prevail, and it is close to the hearts of the younger generations to violate these and ‘be themselves’. During the performative, the interpretation turns out somewhat comic, with the players mocking the generational rule in a very basic and rudimentary way; Ayesha reprimanding Saddam for smoking, an ensemble where everyone figures in a role of either indulging or stopping. (ILL.1.33 – 1.34)



1.27 – 1.28 Coochbehar Workshop: The Gender Bar is Staged, Jan. 2011.  
(Photos 1.27 – 1.28 by Arindam Sircar)

Political Bar– The workshop has been started with the elections imminent in the state of West Bengal. We have thus, been asking to address politics, even if we do not actively think we have a stake in it. We are implicated as a distant relative of the events. However, otherwise, in the north of Bengal one does not have to struggle too hard to find a politics, it is the general politics of exclusion that dominates the imaginary. While the enclave people are somewhat frustrated with the real politic, the CTG has a Left leaning – the dominant politics that has ruled West Bengal for last 34 years. Cutting across their different leanings, they find gestures and expressions reflecting the felt aspects of the term. But the gestures betray hesitancy, and not affirmation, which exposes the nervous state of the moment. (ILL.1.35)

Border Bar– For most of the local participants of the workshop, border is a special, prevailing ‘condition’ that immediately brackets them off from us – we who have come from the ‘south’ to conduct the workshop. There is a dynamics of the borderland that, I suspect, plays out in the minutiae, in details of actions, gestures, anxieties (expressed or unexpressed), in the processes of interaction. The general perception among the people of the north of Bengal is that the south – the region around Kolkata/ Calcutta – is the centre of all activity. Hence, we are probably the most privileged (in terms of culture, education and finance) who can be an immediate model worthy of emulation. The CTG members come second as worthy model, for the enclave participants, by virtue of being free citizens of a democratic country. Although, the mutually agreed upon actions and responses partially help to loosen up the players in the workshop, the very basic differences between ‘them’ and ‘us’ cannot be completely removed even in the multi-pronged workshop. The enclave participants are in the driver’s seat in this performance; they attempt to illustrate the border with a military gesture – some sort of a frozen melodrama of the brutality of ‘shooting at sight’, which the Indian BSF is supposed to be doing according to press reports.<sup>225</sup> The crisis of the border crossers and shootouts and killings associated with illegal immigration and breach of the borders, frequently comes through as news stories or rumours.

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<sup>225</sup> News about BSF atrocities have been reported at different stages; there have been stories from before 2009 – when I began my research in Coochbehar. Later, in 2013, the Felani murder case surfaced in Bangladesh news media, such as The Daily Tribune, Sept 6, 2013. <http://www.dhakatribune.com/law-amp-rights/2013/sep/06/bsf-man-acquitted-felani-killing-case>.

The enclave dwellers are indirectly implicated in the trauma of this border violence – for them, the whole association of the border is with the question of their non-citizen identity, their lack of legality. Hence, ‘border bar’ turns into a vivid re-enactment of a shootout at the border. The enclave participants, for the moment, enjoy the alterity of performing the border guards, who form the source of trauma on a daily basis, especially in certain enclaves. (ILL.1.29)

Language Bar– This is the most readily accepted barrier, which most of them seem to share. Though it is presumably, mainly the anxiety of the marginal people of the border, even the graduate CTG members, despite the kind of theatre they do, bear deep-seated anxiety over their linguistic skills. The anxiety exists equally, over their skill in ‘proper Bengali’ speech – by which they mean Calcutta Bengali pattern of speech, as it is extended to ‘foreign’ tongues such as English, or Hindi – not spoken so often in these parts. So, in the language bar performance, they resort to a frozen moment of mimetic exchange – the language of deaf and mute people. It is hilarious and pathetic at the same time; one mourns their lack of resources to enact ‘lack’. They forget for the moment that in their mother tongue, they are almost as skilful as anyone else in the gathering. So, it seems to me that it is not the language, spoken or written, per se which is in question here, it is the abstract and imaginary symbolic power associated with the language that is the concern here. (ILL.1.31 – 1.32)

ID Bar– Most of us who live in our safe homes, in the metropolis or even in small towns or villages, do not have to think of our ID cards separately on an everyday basis, but it is so vitally important for the people who are immediately close to the borders, especially those who live near the crisis ridden borders. The ID bar works as some kind of a consciousness raising device; it rings an alarm in some of us, for it is the electoral ID cards, which are the guarantee of citizenship for most of the people. The performance for this is simple; the hands rise in gesture of flashing the ID cards. For some others, it is the pathetic gesture of raising hands in surrender, a routine gesture during security checks. The gesture is so embedded in the daily lives of the border people that its mimicry here is a telling sign of the psyche of the space. (ILL.1.30)

### **1.3.2 From the Human Movement to Mapping**

(Workshop Venue: Suniti Bhavan, Coochbehar, 26-29 March 2011)

The second workshop is a derivation from the physical predicament of the border. (ILL1.36 – 1.40) Sanchayan outlines the activity 'Game of Points'. It is a game where an individual has to be aware of his surroundings and alert to be able to move in space in a collective way. In introducing this, I want to counter the romanticism of the previous game. For here, unlike the readily available mapped projection of the previous game, one has to physically figure out a way of adjusting one's own location with respect to the others. Though these actions primarily involve motor reflexes, as a pattern emerges from the actions, the participants start reflecting in terms of ideas or concepts.

The players are asked to imagine a blank square space and all are points in it, positioned equidistant from each other and also from the boundary of the square. The rule of the game is that no one individual can break this equidistant position and come close to anyone else. Maintaining this strict rule, each individual has to move to the opposite end from where she/ he is starting. The coordinator has the power to stop the game at any point. Initially, all are confused about how to move while keeping relative distances fixed – it feels like an impossible situation. But the trick is to start moving all together. Therefore, it is about understanding individual positions with respect to that of the neighbours', about responding to surroundings; a synchronicity has to be achieved in order to successfully operate together.

After sometime, when the movements become easy, Arindam and Sanchayan discuss how to make the game more interesting and come up with the idea of using colourful markers to record the positions of all the players. Using a different colour for each person, Arindam starts to mark their positions as points on the white tiled floor. Sanchayan joins him from the other end of the square. Every time the movement is paused, the players' new positions are marked with their designated colours. Thus is introduced a system of mapping one's journey in space. When each of the participants has moved to her/ his opposite end, the individual coloured points are traced and joined with specific coloured lines. Soon

the square space becomes filled with different coloured lines crossing each other in multiple layers. In this way, a generative idea that comes up from a dialogue, forms the contingent aesthetics of the organic workshop. Later, we also erase the marks, which becomes an activity of 'erasing one's own journey'. (ILL.1.55)

Next, we introduce a game of hurdles that I derive from the follow-the-leader format – where each player, in turn, takes on the role of leader and initiates some action or dialogue that is replicated by the rest. I want to use the available school-room furniture to build barricades – symbolic of the 'barredness' of the border, but I am not sure if the participants will be able to cross them. I share my dilemma with Sanchayan and we put our heads together to come up with the idea of stacking the benches and tables to create split-level paths for the participants; in this way, creating an environment where the different elements are substitutes for certain other things. The benches substitute for the '*Aals*' (narrow raised divides) that criss-cross between fields and double as pathways – at once connectives and hurdles – that need to be carefully negotiated. The participants have to engage in a verbal game in the follow-the-leader mode, where the articulation is expected to be based on the theme of the border, while moving over the obstacle-paths. Each participant has to select her/ his individual route of movement and stay with it throughout the game. The activity starts in silence, then once the various intersecting circuits of movement have gained momentum, Sanchayan begins to introduce his border-related words that the participants repeat, while walking the narrow routes. Soon, taking his cue, they begin to articulate and improvise, spontaneously introducing their ideas on the border. The words and sentences they utter, invariably come out of the circumstances and often the conscious positions or roles taken by them. The process produces an assemblage of expressions, in different intonations, ranging between polite appeals, statements of concern, and angry rejoinders. The Coochbehar boys initiate with statements about their daily disadvantages of living away from a central location and close to the border, referring to lack of opportunities and inconveniences for theatre practitioners. The women immediately speak out about the enormous scepticism and opposition they face from a conservative society, towards their theatrical practices. But, then the enclave participants begin to verbalise their predicaments as stateless people, their lack of basic human rights and access. And, the general tone of articulation immediately

changes. The town participants start speaking sympathetically about their 'neighbours from the *Chhits*', who they 'are meeting for the first time', who they 'have only known before remotely through newspapers', who they 'wish to know better' and so on. Debabrata also joins in with vociferous general rhetoric in favour of human liberation. Gradually, the statements start moving away from the subject of borders and the enclave participants start vocalising about the current workshop experience and how it has helped them. From here, they move to recounting personal anecdotes. At some point, everybody starts speaking simultaneously and the process becomes a series of disconnected rantings. (ILL.1.58 – 1.60)

Later, commenting on this exercise, Sanchayan says, "Another thing that was happening was, some of them were coming out of the designated theme and slipping into personal narratives. Different tracks of vocalisation were running parallelly. And, because they were also simultaneously in the process of walking – in the mode of action and recollection – the two layers were working in disjuncture and after some time, the walking process was producing an alienation..." [He is reacting from the angle of theatre]

At the end of these movements in space and mapping games, Sanchayan observes, "The multiple entry and exit points of the borders, often follow their own local logic, which makes travel and interpretation of these spaces interesting, when viewed with reference to national self-interest. This is truer between two South Asian neighbours, than anywhere else in the world. The distribution of spaces defies any logic of mapping; it only creates a new logic of space." This observation is resonated in Whyte's dissertation, where he 'concretises' the apprehensions of the borderland living, with lived-in as well as statistical accounts:

The Fences are 150 yards back from the boundary itself, in line with the bipartisan agreements to construct no defence works within a total 300 yard buffer on the boundaries... Not unexpectedly, it proved impossible to find a map of the current extent of Indian Border fencing. However, statistics are occasionally released in the Bangladeshi media. Of 4156 km border India has so far fenced 542 km in 1999, including 9 km at Rangpur (presumably Nilphamari



1.55 Coochbehar Workshop: Mapping One's Journey – Supervising the Points Game, March 2011.



1.56 Mise-en-scène of the Coochbehar Workshop, March 2011.



1.59 – 1.60 Coochbehar Workshop: Hurdles Games – Following the Leader.  
March 2011

in the vicinity of Chilahat- haldibari crossing), 23 km at Lalmonirhat and 102.5 km at Kurigram (Daily Star, 1999, C). Local resistance, difficulties in land acquisition or the lie of the ground have prevented erection in some places. (Chakraborty, 1997) The boundary has never been a no man's land, with villages divided by it, or expanding to meet it.<sup>226</sup>

### **1.3.3 The Map is Enlarged**

(Workshop Day 2, Suniti Bhavan)

Though access has a barred aspect the moment the enclaves are invoked, there are also other facets that are revealed during a journey to the border; spaces, which were open before the partition and people could travel to, via regular railway routes or roads passing through districts that now fall on different sides of the border. Routes produce maps; routes are also witness to erased maps, as there are absent maps, and maps full of anomalies. The appearance of a place turns into dots in a map, but the abstraction produced in the official map has no reference to the real space as it is known to its inhabitants. While for outsiders, unfamiliar with this space, the real space could well be merely a blown up version of the dots in the map. This observation comes up during the mapmaking exercise; Subho and Ayesha make the statement with regard to the enclaves indicated on the map. (ILL.1.7)

We consider a standard map of Coochbehar, used as a teaching aid in schools as a starting point for piecing together the visual imagination of the participant's spaces. This is a district map, so there is no discrimination between the people closer to the city and the people of the enclaves. An enlarged map – 8ft x 12 ft – is brought to be explored. The process that starts almost immediately and spontaneously, springs from the participants' curiosity and eagerness for locating their places in the map. Because it is much enlarged, the anomalies are also visible. The CTG members have to make effort to locate the directions to their homes. 'Home' is not overtly suggested, but we soon realise that it is the common psychological drive to seek out the most comfortable locations in a map, the most familiar and the most reassuring. But, I am also surprised that most of them do

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<sup>226</sup> Whyte, "Waiting for the Esquimo," 191.

not try to figure out a secondary location apart from home. So, they are allowed to draw maps of their homes from the nearest points they can identify in the Coochbehar map. There is a distinct difference, however, in the manner in which the town and the enclave participants address their personal maps; most of the Coochbehar participants draw in their homes elaborately with only the very basic reference to immediately close landmarks, while the boys from the enclaves address the maps topographically and draw in aerial views of alternate routes to the enclaves. Some of them also depict the enclaves in a Venn-diagrammatic manner, showing them as closed entities. (ILL.1.45 – 1.46) This exercise seems to be morally dominated by the enclave dwellers, the comparatively privileged CTG people slip into the role of outsiders. (ILL.1.41 – 1.48)

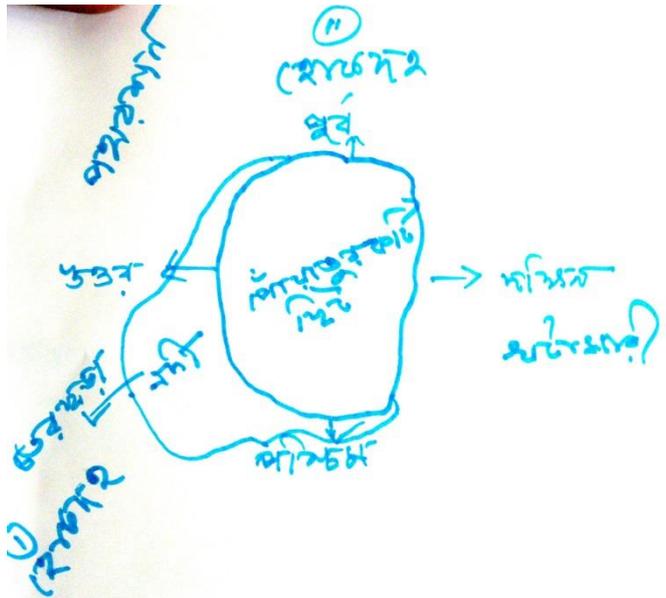
Some of the participants today are first timers in workshop situations and they cannot be interrupted for instructions without stalling the flow altogether. I, however, venture to make a suggestion – I suggest the obvious that the top of the map should be pointing north. [Suddenly, Sanchayan laughs out loud.

**ADG:** Why are you laughing?

**SG:** No... nothing... I thought you are to give them freedom to do as they liked.

**DA:** Yes, maybe they should do the maps the way they think is possible for them.

**ADG:** Yes, maybe that is one possibility. I am thinking in a different direction, not around what you call freedom of expression, creative freedom etc. I was thinking that these people, well most of them, don't have a notion of freedom that way. The projection is that of boundedness. In such situations there is a lot of dos and don'ts, so parameter comes before you start moving, like in a map. Hence I was trying to figure out a movement that is in consonance with a mapmaking process; so that the feeling is that they are participating in a mapmaking, or unmaking-remaking process of something that is already given to them and us, by the state – the larger map. The smaller map is thus, in any case, their little subjective subterfuge, their tiny subversion, without naming it, in a very intimate way. The thesis I thought was to be counter-violent, for the maps indicating borders are violent.



**পটভূমি - ভৌগোলিক অবস্থা**

পটভূমি নামক স্থানের এলাকা স্থানীয়  
 জনগণের দ্বারা প্রস্তুত করা হয়েছে। এখানে  
 প্রধান প্রধান কৃষকদের বাড়ি, চাষ  
 ক্ষেত্র এবং অন্যান্য স্থানীয় স্থাপত্য রয়েছে।

1.45 Coochbehar Workshop: Ersajul Mia's Depiction of Poaturkuthi, March 2011.



1.46 Coochbehar Workshop: Meher Sultana Ankhi's Notebook – Personal Map to Home, March.2011.



1.49 Coochbehar Workshop: Studying the Enlarged Map of Coochbehar.  
March 2011



1.50 Coochbehar Workshop: Activity – Mapmaking, March 2011.  
(Photo 1.50 by Arindam Sircar)

**DA:** Yes, the maps... the borders are a violent concept.

**SG:** Yes, I didn't think so deeply about it, I thought spontaneity could be harnessed.

**ADG:** May be, yes. But I thought it could come in stages, when we don't have to generalise.

**SG:** Could it be any map then?

**ADG:** Yes, any map, with a common dynamics.

The interesting thing is that we can talk about the deterrence, together with the positive elements or potentials of the emergent situation. (ILL.1.49- 1.54)

## 1.4 Signs of Change

In the recent year between my last visits to these enclaves, there have been changes in their state, resulting in corresponding shifts in our dialogues in the different encounters:

[The following conversation takes place in Dinhata town and in Poaturkuthi Enclave in January 2011]

**MM:** Do you tune in to the changes now? The talks are on, our leader (Sengupta) is in Bangladesh, meeting officials, talking of exchanges.

**ADG:** How come you didn't go? You should have gone too!

**MM:** I had a visa problem, I would have had to go via Calcutta, which involves two to three days of waiting and by that time the day of appointment would have passed and we would have had to come back. [He looks resigned.]

**ADG:** But, you said in case of emergency, you could, or anyone could cross over. Oh, no! I forgot... [I make a gesture of apology]. This is to be an official meeting

between the representative of Home Department of Bangladesh and a delegation from the Indian enclaves. So you, I suppose could not possibly sneak in and then surface at the meeting!

[We both laugh, considering the cheekiness of my suggesting an illegal entry for a very serious meeting of international consequence]

**MM:** That could have happened for an ordinary visit though! However, it is a very serious meeting. What do you think will happen?

**ADG:** I don't want to spell it out, but the feeling seems to be positive in the press. Kolkata is also covering it, these days.

**MM:** Did you notice the news in day before yesterday's *Uttarbanga Sambad* (North Bengal News)? And also yesterday's *Anandabazar*!

**ADG:** No, probably because the North Bengal News doesn't reach us and the *Anandabazar Patrika* (the most popular and probably the highest selling Bengali daily, with transnational circulation running into a billion or so) has its separate North Bengal edition, which again, doesn't reach us. Just like the Calcutta edition that doesn't reach you... However, two features by noted journalist Debdoot Ghosthakur got published in the editorial feature page of this issue. It's gaining in importance.

**MM:** [nods in approval] OK, then, you are saying there is some reason for hope?

**ADG:** I think so, as far as the news media and the rumours indicate. But one thing is for sure, you can't be in a rush now, elections are coming, nothing is happening in West Bengal, or even in India, in general, before the end of it all.

**MM:** That is till June or July then. First, Manmohan (the PM) and then Sonia (leader of the ruling Congress party at the centre) are visiting Bangladesh in August and September.

**ADG:** Before that there are a couple of secretarial level discussions, in June. If those happen alright and there is no complication in the middle phase then the

papers are likely to be signed by the end of October. But then, the parliamentary process has to begin, the bill will be brought to the committee for voting in the house, to be ratified etc.

**MM:** You mean then also there is some complication?

**ADG:** I don't imagine a complication unless the ruling party loses all its support and opposition suddenly becomes very powerful... But in either case, there is an elaborate parliamentary process after signing the MoU, a mandatory process.

**MM:** And what do you think of our state? Of West Bengal, I mean. Assembly election is also knocking at its door?

**ADG:** Yes, what about it?

**MM:** Will there be a change of power? I mean, will the lady (Mamata Banerjee) topple the Left in power? And will it then impact our fate, the transfer of enclaves?

**ADG:** The chances, so far as the readings in the press and emotion of the people are concerned, are an even 50/50. Let's see, the election is coming in a month and the result will be out by the end of May. But then that is not likely to change the fate of the enclaves. What determines their fate is largely, the change of guard in the current Union government of India, or similarly, the staying in power of its counterpart (the Hasina government) in Bangladesh.

But, may be this is my subjective reading that Mamata (the prospective future Chief Minister of West Bengal)<sup>227</sup> is not too well disposed towards the enclave exchange issue. In any case, the Union government would not be disposed to take a decision on such a sensitive issue before the election, considering their election alliance is with Mamata. But otherwise, she, or anybody in the state assembly doesn't have a direct ratifying or veto power to this move. They can only indirectly try to press for or derail it.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> This apprehension of mine came true. Mamata Banerjee became the CM of West Bengal in May 2011 and opposed the Land Border Agreement, (under which enclaves were to be discussed, tabled and ratified in Parliament), at every stage. In February 2014, she was continuing to do so.

[Our walk ends as we arrive at Mansoor's house, which is at the entry point of this village. He is one of the oldest residents and perhaps also the most enthusiastic about the enclave exchange. We see a gathering in front of his house... not the usual one that greets me whenever I announce my coming.]

**ADG:** Mansoor Bhai, there seems to be a special gathering today... Is there something official about it? I mean, am I intruding? Should I wait somewhere else for the meeting to finish?

**MM:** No, no, you can sit with us. We will be through in a few minutes. There is an official from the local council visiting us; we can resume our talk after he is gone.

[I wait, under a tree where Mansoor's son lays out a separate set of chairs for me and a few visitors; while he, along with a few village elders, converses with the politico from the local council. After the meeting, the politico is introduced to me – he is Chowdhury. He does not reveal his purpose, instead asks for the purpose of my visit. I am introduced as an academic from Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan, which is famous for Tagore. He exchanges courteous notes and leaves in a few minutes. My dialogue with Mansoor Bhai resumes]

**ADG:** Is he a guy higher up in the council? Do they come to check on you often, or is it a recent phenomenon?

**MM:** A somewhat middle-rung official... He came about the request we made a few years ago for the improvement of the roads approaching our *chhit*. [Mansoor, like almost everyone here, uses the vernacular term *chhit*, for –enclave, in place of *Gram* – village] And, today he agreed to our demand for some concrete tunnels to mend the road before the monsoon sets in – it makes commuting difficult.

**ADG:** Such was the demand! And what was the delay for? You said you'd placed the request much earlier... Why the wait?

**MM:** As they always do, he attached a clause, in the form of a polite request, of course. He asked for our vote.

**ADG:** But, that is simply ridiculous, isn't it? For you are demanding a merger of the enclaves with India, because the enclaves are cut off, politically, economically, legally isn't that so? And you are generally stateless, aren't you? You have no vote!

**MM:** Yes, but some of us have procured voter ID cards by furnishing false addresses, and thus have voting rights. He knows that the village elders have a say in moulding opinion on who to vote for, hence... Additionally, of course they have an increasing interest in us. Since, like most of us here in the enclave, people in the immediate ambience also are expecting a sea change soon in the situation, and they are counting on the votes trapped inside the enclaves, which may be altogether no fewer than 200,000 (out of them, approximately 50,000 belong to Bangladeshi enclave dwellers in India).

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Another day, in February 2011, I call Mansoor Bhai on the phone, after arriving in Coochbehar. He sounds rushed when I ask for an appointment. He says he will have to go to a religious conference (a gathering arranged to coincide with the holy Haj to Mecca in the month of February. The exact time differs according to the Muslim Hizri calendar. It seems to me that the conference is considered a close substitute for the actual journey, which costs money and requires a legal document of citizenship. I ask Mansoor about the agenda for the meeting. He says – largely religious talks and prayers, nothing much. I ask whether there is any political agenda regarding the enclaves. To this he hesitantly says – may be, only informally, if the topic comes up.

The question that bothers me is – how do the enclaves know about each other if they don't move out, cannot officially come out? There must be some unofficial channel so widely available that all the enclaves can access them.

**ADG:** But, are the enclaves connected somehow? Do you have a communication channel distributed over the several kilometres of Coochbehar and the bit of Dinajpur district on the Indian side?

**MM:** Not all of them were connected earlier. But, over the last few years, thanks to the mobile phones in the vicinity, we are connected.

**ADG:** Are mobiles widely available among the enclave dwellers?

**MM:** Yes, some have mobiles. [He does not explain how.]

This is my sixth visit to the six or seven enclaves that we have sought access to. So, most of the people who were once faceless to me – as I was to them – are now known to me by their first names. And, they know me enough to recognise and greet me everytime I visit. Also the lingering cynicism is somewhat receding. But, the distance between a common conversationalist-well-wisher and a partner in strategies, which differentiates the insider from the outsiders for any enclave, I can see, still exists. The hazy explanations, strategic silences on certain questions seem to me to be pointers in that direction. For, until recently, Mansoor used to ring me up from different mobile phones, never from the same number twice. I suppose so as not to be detected, may be by Indian authorities. But of course we managed to turn that into common knowledge and a joke. I am learning to cope with a person, his age, the collective dream of freedom and the question of strategies, and sometimes necessary secrecy – probably as a safeguard from squealers.

I know by now that not only do many have mobiles, many have multiple SIM cards and they swap them constantly. I see kids do it, and when, during the workshop, we interact with the younger people for days together each time in a semi-urban atmosphere, I realise that the enclaves' new generations are desperate; they are clever enough to bypass laws and have mobiles equipped with cameras. Some of them have internet and basic IT knowledge as well. I realise they know the new job market.

## **1.5 Enclaves: Barredness of Imagination and Continuity of the Predicament**

There are 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India with a cumulative population of over 51,000. Over the past 64 years, several proposals, about handing over the enclaves on both sides of the border to the respective countries of their physical situation have been initiated. The issue embroils those who have ideological or political stake in these spaces. On one side, there are voluntary organisations and individuals like Diptiman Sengupta, the coordinator of the Bharat Bangladesh Enclave Exchange Coordination Committee (BBEECC), who are pitching the demand for freeing the enclaves from their trapped situations and trying to negotiate with the political authorities.<sup>(ILL.1.19)</sup> On the other hand, there are the respective national governments and the state government of West Bengal. A battle line is always drawn whenever the issue comes up. Very recently, it has come up in the form of a bill tabled in the Indian Parliament; the following citations published in the national newspapers bring out the conflicting positions.

Diptiman Sengupta states:

We welcome the tabling of the bill as Parliament will debate about the rights of enclave dwellers for the first time since independence. The move vindicates our long-standing fight for the rights of the people.

And, for the current government of West Bengal, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee says:

We are not accepting. The state government will not implement it. Not an inch of land of our state should be given away. Together, we will fight a public battle for West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and north-eastern region, including other parts.

[West Bengal will get only about 7,000 acres, while having to secede nearly 17,000 acres to Bangladesh if the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) is implemented.]

Diptiman reponds:

The issue is not about politics, rather concerning the rights of 51,000 stateless people who have historically been denied basic rights and amenities.

Local legislator from the Dinhata subdivision of Coochbehar- Udayan Guha of the Forward Bloc, also welcomes the move:

There is a ray of hope for the stateless people. Their situation is so abysmal that even a pregnant woman living in an enclave is denied medical facilities because she is not an Indian citizen. The chief minister is not aware of these issues as she expresses her opposition.<sup>229</sup>

From the said origin of the current Indo-Bangladesh enclaves as spaces demarcated as tax regimes in C. 1713, to their genesis and survival under several rulers, beginning from the Coochbehar Kings, to the Mughals and then the British, through presently to the republics of India or Bangladesh (as the case might be), it is a long story of stasis. It is said that the enclaves themselves are not the source of the border tensions, but are rather, decoy focus for other kinds of cross-border disputes.<sup>230</sup>

India's inability to implement a 1958 treaty with (East) Pakistan and a delay in ratifying a 1974 treaty is highlighted as the major factor impeding resolution of the enclave dispute.

The interactions between the different political quarters regarding the enclave exchange are somewhat well known by now, in 2014, when the bill is finally tabled at the lower house of the Indian Parliament:

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<sup>229</sup> <http://freepressjournal.in/bangladesh-boundary-bill-gives-hope-to-enclave-dwellers/#sthash.atS15pHF.dpuf>.  
Similar news came out in The Hindu,  
<http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-bangladesh-boundary-agr...>

<sup>230</sup> Whyte, "Waiting for the Esquimo," 31.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1993, the Minister of State for External Affairs – R.L. Bhatia was asked in the Rajya Sabha about the action taken with regard to the enclave issue. His reply was glib – “Necessary action has been taken.”<sup>231</sup>

On 19<sup>th</sup> March 1994, Member Parliament Amar Ray Pradhan – a leader of the AIFB – part of the ruling Left coalition government of Bengal at the time – enquired about the dateline for ratification of the Indira-Mujib (1974) treaty. The External Affairs Minister answered that it was impossible to indicate a definite time frame since it involved legal, constitutional and administrative procedures.

On 16<sup>th</sup> April 1999, Amar Roy Pradhan raised the question once again, calling the then Home Minister – Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP – a nationalist pro-Hindu majority party) leader L.K Advani – a hypocrite. He went so far as to say that the minister who was ‘shedding crocodile tears’ over the question of the predicament of the enclaves while in opposition, was now silent while in power.<sup>232</sup>

On 27<sup>th</sup> July, 1999, Jyoti Basu, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal’s ruling Left, talked favourably of an expeditious transfer of enclaves, which the caretaker government did not heed, since elections were to take place in September.

Quite a few barriers also vex the enclave issue. The deterrence to mapping and other necessary activities is the apprehension or assumption of consequential loss of land, change of identity etc. In August 1999, people in the south of Jalpaiguri resisted the measurement for fencing. There are four mouzas of land, which are said to be in the illegal possession of India and if fencing is done, they will go into Bangladesh, which the residents do not want. Many political parties with contrary ideological stance, like the Forward Bloc and the BJP, supported the villagers’ demands; while the Left supported them openly, BJP maintained a distance.

There were amendments made in the constitution of Bangladesh, post the Indira-Mujib Pact of 1974. Article 2 of the constitution discussing the territorial aspects, originally had stated:

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<sup>231</sup> Amar Ray Pradhan asked the question at the Upper House of Indian Parliament, to which R.L Bhatia the minister of External affairs of India replied on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1993. Whyte, “Waiting For the Esquimo,” 149.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 152.

The territory of the republic shall comprise –

- a) The territories which immediately before the proclamation of independence on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of March 1971 constituted East Pakistan, and
- b) Such other territories as may become included in Bangladesh.

The amended version states:

- a) The territories which immediately before the proclamation of independence... East Pakistan **and the territories referred to as included territories in the constitution (3<sup>rd</sup> amendment) Act, 1974, but excluding the territories referred to as excluded territories in that act,** and... <sup>233</sup> [Emphasis mine]
- b) [Clause 'b' remains the same as above]

It is thus evident that Bangladesh is willing to take appropriate steps towards the merger of enclaves. What is notable is that there has been no corresponding change in the Indian constitution. On the contrary, strange objections and unwarranted clauses rising from different political sources have, time and again, interrupted the process. In the least, there have been instances that have shown a lack of political will. India shares 700 km of boundary with Bangladesh, out of which 124 km are in West Bengal. Narasimha Rao, who was Foreign Minister during the 1984–89 Congress rule in the centre, suggested in a note to Rajya Sabha, there should be a demarcation before ratification of the enclave exchange bill. This was in direct contradiction to the 1958 Nehru-Noon agreement, which states that the demarcation could follow the exchange. The reason for this new clause is never explained.

When the Bangladesh border force, Bangla Desh Rifles (BDR, now called Border Guards Bangladesh BGB) and the Indian counterpart BSF met to discuss the possibility of a census in 2010, the former suggested that there was no need for a census as there was going to be a referendum. In fact, the census for the Bangladesh enclaves in India was done by the Indian government only in recent

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<sup>233</sup> Whyte, "Waiting For Esquimo", 130.

times, in 2011, prior to which it was attempted privately, by BBEECC and Sengupta.<sup>234</sup>(ILL.1.15 – 1.16)

### **1.6 Deviancies: Signs of Porosity in the Border**

The complexities of the borders, though often trauma to the dwellers, make them interesting sites for the explorer. In its current visage, thus, the South Asian borderland that I am studying, and its aspects are continuously taking me by surprise. Inside an enclave, one needs a resident as a guide to tell one where it begins and where it ends; the ‘elephant tusk pillars’ (a local coinage for the concrete pillars used to demarcate land borders; Whyte’s favourite) are only sometimes visible on the surface. Most of them are either broken or buried. The abstract line (of the map) that attempts to differentiate the inside and the outside are many-folded, and when transposed on the physical terrain, comes close to the effect of confusing the inside and the outside. As the circumference which defines the Other, becomes part of the self.

There are riverine borders between India and Bangladesh, which are common in the south of Bengal. The Mathabhanga River in the Nadia district, bordering Bangladesh, had a border charted through its middle at the time of partition. The abstract map remains in status quo, while the river has changed its course several times, leaving behind a lot of human habitation and economic content undefined in the abstract lines of the clinical map.

As has already emerged from my research trips and interactions in Coochbehar, there are identities with entanglements, as well as deviations from norms of citizenship. I have come across enclave dwellers with Indian voter ID cards and mobile phone connections, and enclave dwellers with educational qualifications acquired in Indian institutions – possible only on falsification of parental information (ironically, these qualifications cannot be used to secure them jobs in India). As previously mentioned, in Schendel’s sociological description of borderlands, there are three, increasingly fragile and vulnerable categories;

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<sup>234</sup> The privately taken census has greater inclusion of social factors like occupation and gender, to the governmental one.

citizens, proxy citizens and enclave dwellers.<sup>235</sup> All of these categories are relative, and there is no guarantor for any; a predicament of uncertainty that is shared by not only the enclave dwellers, but people in the adjacent localities also. In a way, a space has been created that is beyond the reach of the mainland's judicial system, which makes it open to all possible unlawful activities. Stories frequently surface in the news media of both the countries that raise issues of the vulnerability of the enclaves and adjacent spaces, their potential for sheltering antisocial elements, from the gun-toting underworld to anti-state actors and gunrunners. On this subject, Whyte elaborates that there are rumours that Indian separatists like the KLO have camps inside the Indian enclaves in Bangladesh. Bangladesh says that this phenomenon is nothing new, as it has been on since the eighteenth century – from the era of the Sanyasi Rebellion. Access to their own country now depends on the kind of negotiations demanded by the arbitrary forces.<sup>236</sup>

A recent event in one of the enclaves close to those I usually visit, demonstrates the situation. Someone disposed off the body of a murdered woman, in Gobrachora *chhit*. Since the enclave is outside the jurisdiction of the Indian police, no one came to investigate, nor was the body sent for postmortem. It took three days of process for the Indian BSF to enter the space and carry away the body.

When I visit Coochbehar in 2013, I am warned by my acquaintances against visiting the enclaves as the law and order situation is uncertain. I learn later from my phone conversation with Mansoor Bhai that some of the enclaves have had a confrontation among themselves with regard to the secret plantation of banned cannabis. Mansoor Bhai's enclave is seeking intervention of the Indian government to eradicate cannabis planting.

In the Chilarhat and the Changrabandha rail junctions of Coochbehar border, the railroads are remnants of travel stories belonging to the first half of the twentieth century. The current out-of-service line stops short of crossing the international

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<sup>235</sup> Schendel, Willem Van, "Stateless in South Asia: The Making of the India Bangladesh Enclaves," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no.1 (2002): 115-147.

<sup>236</sup> Whyte, "Waiting for the Esquimo," 180.

border. There the rail lines halt their progress for a short passage, and then continue on their way, on the other side of the non-fenced border, creating brief disruption to the continuity of space. Unlike the India-Pakistan scenario, India and Bangladesh have at least ten border-crossing zones, not all of them are legal crossing points. Among the several examples, the one in Gitaldaha is interesting. Over the Dharala River in Gitaldaha, there is a bridge that used to connect up with Bangladesh via Coochbehar district. For some time now, it is lying broken. There are repeated appeals from the local citizens, for its repair, but the government representative objects to it citing the relatively minor significance of such a bridge for the local farmers. He says that the bridge would help only big businessmen in transporting goods across the border and not be of any use to the local farmers. The farmers themselves feel that the restoration of the bridge could help in the improvement of their economic situation. This ambiguity of demand based on perceptions, remains, while a certain amount of transaction and traffic goes on across the river, despite debilities, I am told.

I find porosities and deviancies rampant and manifold in the practices of the borders, although security is the theme in these sites, where nation states demonstrate their might, like in the Teen Bigha passage. The large and increasing numbers of smugglers transport materials of everyday use, electronic items and contraband via different routes. There are different routes for smuggling cattle for regular consumption and for festivities. As a study reveals:

Smuggling remains rife throughout the entire border, not just the enclaves and the environs. Items smuggled from India into Bangladesh are fertilizers, bicycle, and salt. Cattle eaten by the Muslims, but not the Hindus are also rustled, much to the chagrin of the Hindu politicians. The BJP in fact looks at Teen Bigha as a conduit to Bangladesh for Indian cattle smuggled into Dahagram.<sup>237</sup>

Surrogate narcotic transactions, such as of branded cough syrups, are rampant from India to Bangladesh. With a widespread and uncontrolled demand-supply relation, I have been told there are fakes in this sector as well.

The dominant model of state tends to overlook the non-administered inhabited territories, because, according to Schendel, they shake up the concept of the

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<sup>237</sup> (Sikdar); (Dasgupta 2000, Dutta, 2000), in Whyte, "Waiting for Esquimo," 179.

state at the root and point out the loopholes in the post-Westphalia concept that dominates the world notion of territory. Schendel lists a set of spaces such as no-man's land, frontier societies and war zones, the high seas, disputed islands; they also include unreachable spaces like high mountains, mangrove forests and marshlands, all of which to an extent are challenges to the complacent territorialities of the states.

### 1.7 The Interim: A Conclusion

In Coochbehar, I seek to study the situation as a circumstantial evidentiary archive of senses via an art-led ethnographic method; on site, as well as through the restricted but porous spaces of a workshop, where young students and dropouts from the enclaves interact with a suburban theatre group that has a history of awareness of form. In the shape of the workshop, I stage an event to explore the relationships between the particular spatial construct of borderland and its various features; its inhabitants and their relationships with and states of belonging to, the space.

The field research in the enclaves introduces me to communities marked by what may be called a postponement of regularity – what Victor Turner and Pierre Bourdieu would call a liminal situation.<sup>238</sup> The concept of liminality refers to a ritual interruption in the normal course of life. It was observed by anthropologists that in certain ritual processes – like that of initiation rites, people live in an in-between, limbo state, between two stages of life. Liminality is used as a metaphor for any transitional stage that involves an interrupted existence of some sort. In contrast to this as it were, the performative event of knowledge, at an ethical level, simulates the democratic process of social participation. Inequalities or unevennesses can only speak on a platform where there is a feeling of equal standing. We discover this to be true. We realise that the emotions and the differences revealed in the dialogues, provoked during the theatre exercises, enable us to tease out the barred as well as the open aspects of the borders.

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<sup>238</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publication, 1982); Pierre Bourdieu, *An Outline of Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 130.

Our local participant-collaborators Debabrata and his theatre group too, gradually discard their preliminary doubts about a workshop with different, seemingly incompatible social groups interacting on the same plane.

Initially, though, the workshop process starts with an inhibition between the Compass participants and the enclave residents. Both the sections clamour to express their particular predicaments. The Coochbehar residents emphasise their disadvantageous placement in comparison to a more central or urban location – in this case, presumably, the artist-coordinator and curator's, in other words, Sanchayan and my location. On the other hand, the sense of being underprivileged is distinct in the behaviour and voices of the enclave participants, who are non-citizens. In the course of the workshop, however, these differences seem to partially merge and the theatre group ends up showing an alignment of sympathy with their distant collaborators. Considering my respective position in the workshop, on the surface, I share more commonality with the members of the theatre group as an Indian, than with the stateless enclave participants. Yet, unexpectedly, my feeling of otherness is more pronounced with regard to the former. The enclave participants seem to rely on me as a potentially beneficial outsider, as someone who is going to uphold their cause. Also, due to my several preceding field trips to their locations, there is a strange mixture of complicity and rapport in this relationship.

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Coochbehar being the first site where I implement the curatorial idea of the event of knowledge, the beginning is a bit tentative. The project inspires, along with enthusiasm, its share of anxieties about possibilities. Many factors have to be considered such as of legal and social accessibility and agreement on the part of the participants. Some unusual deterrence has to be bypassed before the workshop can begin, especially due to the abnormal status of the enclave participants. At first, when it becomes evident that they have to stay back in town for the duration of the workshop because of the unfeasibility of daily commute between the venue and their distant locations, they are reluctant. If identified, they face the possibility of being jailed under the Foreigner Encroachment Act. However, encouraged by a recent laxation of strictness by the local authorities due to the current District Magistrate who is sympathetic to the enclave issues,

we manage to solve this problem. They are booked in the Government Guest House, and the participants are advised not to disclose details of their origin; if asked, they should broadly say they belong to the Dinhata area.

As the workshop progresses, we learn to negotiate contingencies and introduce and improvise activities in accordance with the situation. The decision to activate the performances of the border bars with the teaching aids – the alphabet boxes discovered on the venue of the kindergarten school – proves very successful. Additionally, in the second workshop, we use live video streaming of the ongoing process to enliven the *mise-en-scène*.(ILL.1.56 – 1.58, 1.60) Adjacent to this, video recordings of the site interviews taken by me during the field research are projected; in this manner, the workshop participants become a party to the site research. A secondary interest zone is created with this device, which I think very important, because it kindles added interest and curiosity among the participants. The conversation method, the writing exercises and the ‘movements and mappings in space’ games work very well to bring out the dynamics of living in the border. Besides this, the mapmaking exercise that allows the participants to symbolically appropriate the statist territory, further reveals the different attitudes of the two participating communities to the site. The town participants are eager to identify familiar landmarks and individual homes on the map of Coochbehar, while, the non-citizens are anxious to trace and assess the accuracy of routes to their enclave locations.(ILL.1.54) Their approaches to the personal maps also differ, with the enclave residents’ maps containing intimate markers of their belonging.

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In assessing the personal consolidations from the Coochbehar site, both Sanchayan and I see it as a unique experience; the project is groundbreaking for us. Sanchayan is struck by the topicality of the location, freshness of the devices planned in the workshop and the responses elicited. He says it has added a dimension to his notion of community interaction.

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Perhaps, the workshop has not ended for us; perhaps there are many more miles to cover, though the news of imminent freedom of the enclaves is doing the rounds. Hence, my team’s future approach to the folded spaces in the borders

could perhaps be two-pronged; one directed to the indefinite future – the long term goal, and the other towards short term achievement.

The long term goal would of course be the long awaited freedom for the enclaves. But one has seen in the past that signing of documents mean nothing, as long as the governments involved do not ratify them and there is no implementation.(ILL.1.17, 1.20) Also, even if the governments of India and Bangladesh implement the new pact for freeing the enclaves, they would want to do it in stages (for fear of repercussions).<sup>239</sup>(ILL.1.18) The committee which leads this movement for freedom, the BBEECC, has done its own survey, following the Govt. of India census format (annexure 2). In the first stage, thus, the agenda is for releasing only 30 enclaves on the Indian side and 20 on the Bangladeshi side. The rest of the enclaves have to wait for fresh deals, as those currently on the list bide the duration between the promised and the realised.

Our intervention could be to seek for them, non-governmental support:

- 1) To set up cooperatives of different kinds mainly for economic activities
- 2) To have resources ready to respond via mobile devices in case of emergencies
- 3) To have volunteers to educate them in different skills
- 4) To have them trained in web communication skills so that they have increased access to the world and to information, ideas and visuals
- 5) To motivate those who will be free first, to set up centres of education and training for those who are missing the first phase of transfer
- 6) To coordinate all these, have them build a cultural platform that performs at various levels – visual and aural; possibly in the form of a journal, which will be in circulation and finally be put up on the internet as a cultural platform.

Keeping in mind the ground realities, I would consider ourselves fortunate even if some of these ideas can be partially implemented. The main motive for the

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<sup>239</sup> There was rioting in Bangladesh by the anti-exchange factions in August 2011. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, Bengali, (Calcutta), web version, August 19, 2011.

efforts will be to render the struggle visible, to lend “eyes and ears” to the movement<sup>240</sup>

Some of the enclave dwellers and participants have come up with proposals for schools and related cooperatives. Presently, I am trying to set up a platform called ‘The Interim’. Interim here signifies the period of wait between the LBA and the time of declaration of freedom of the enclaves. We have had a couple of sessions to discuss the concept and the prospective agenda of The Interim, which would include preparing the people of the enclaves for their future situation as free citizens of India. Most of the entrenched actors of the enclave have expressed cynicism, for they have seen the changing states of discourse over the last 30 years.<sup>241</sup>

Without the goodwill of the elected governments of the two democratic countries, to seek the intervention of any international body like United Nations Commission on Human Rights, becomes a process of pleading to the same masters via a distant neighbour. The unattended records of such pleas are historic in time and mammoth in proportion, as the tribulations are immeasurable. In the face of duress, thus, the curatorial task, apart from opening up multiple channels of communicative directions, could be to yield to this ethical calling, in registering participatory solidarity. (ILL. 1.61)

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<sup>240</sup> Mc Kee, quoting Foucault, writes, “The duty of these unauthorized non-governmental citizenry was ‘always to make an issue of people’s misfortune, to keep it in the eyes and ears of governments...’ While Foucault affirmed, what he called in an earlier discussion of the Polish solidarity movement ‘the importance of political affect’ suggesting that ‘the role of the governed is to take offence and to put passion into their actions’.” Yates McKee, “Eyes and Ears: Aesthetics, Visual Cultures and the Claims of Nongovernmental Politics”, *Non-governmental Politics* (London: Zone Books, 2006), 328.

<sup>241</sup> Diptiman Sengupta, in a personal conversation in Jan, 2013.

## SIKKIM: COUNTER-MAPPING THE TERRAIN

*The entry gate to Sikkim from the three-point junction of the Coronation Bridge comes as a bit of a surprise, after the vast number of buildings belonging to the makeshift working-class architecture of avowedly secular, public or military typology that one has passed enroute. The signs on both the walls leading to the gate will seem esoteric to eyes unaccustomed to the mountain Buddhist cults and their symbols. We are intercepted at the gate by the well-mannered Sikkim Border Guards. Forces guarding the inner borders of the states are a rather common sight in north-eastern India, though rare in the rest of the country. But the handsomely dressed, special Sikkim Border Guards are a conspicuous feature of this state only – reminiscent of the royal times; and, a reminder that Sikkim is not a part of the seven-state conglomerate that constitutes the North-eastern Council.<sup>242</sup> I am told by the bus conductor that they are looking for Bangladeshis or Nigerians. This is an absurdity since neither Bangladesh nor Nigeria features close to Sikkim's borders. Later, in a private conversation, a journalist reveals this paranoia to be linked to drug trafficking. Like most sites, which are contested over territory and ethnic constituency, Sikkim too has its own stereotypes about outsiders. In the context of a geographically uneven, ethnically diverse and geo-politically vulnerable state like Sikkim, the question that arises is how the communities and the outsiders exist.*

I meet Sisir Thapa at the main square in Gangtok, nearly a month after the devastating 18<sup>th</sup> September 2011 earthquake. (ILL.2.68- 2.69) A significant period of Sisir's life has been spent outside Sikkim; seven years in Santiniketan as a student, two years in China on a fellowship. He is now helping as a local coordinator in the Sikkim chapter of Project Borderland. I have already visited Sikkim twice before, once with Sanchayan (December 2010) and a second time (February 2011) on a lecture trip that overlapped with a public art project. Recently, on his return from China, I decided to involve Sisir. We visit Sonam

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<sup>242</sup> Sikkim was not a part of the 'seven sisters conglomerate'- the NE Council that defined the Northeast until 2012.

Dorzi Lachenpa, the Secretary of the Transport Association of Sikkim, in order to ascertain the possibility of travel to parts of North Sikkim, which might still be inaccessible after the earthquake. The following conversation takes place in his office, on a rainy October day – unusual for Sikkim.

[In the following conversation and henceforth throughout the thesis: Sisir Thapa is denoted as **ST**, Sonam Dorzi Lachenpa as **SDL**]

**ADG:** Do local people visit Nathula?<sup>243</sup>

**SDL:** They go up to Yungthung; they go more to the Valley of Flowers. Tourism is trying to organise a festival in North Sikkim...and of course on the eastern side Nathula is popular. (ILL. 2.1)

**ST:** Are most of the routes to border areas motorable or do people trek?

**SDL:** Both. Among the Indian Tourists, there is a craze for going to borders. Foreigners are not permitted after a point. They go mostly to the eastern border that is accessible – like Nathula. Three to four hundred vehicles go there between April – May and October – December, which are considered the peak seasons in Sikkim.

**ADG:** How far are outsiders allowed?

**SDL:** Places like Songdong are open borders. Tourists are allowed up to Gurudongmer Lake in the north. There are places like Chollung, Laten and Olo, extreme north. Then there is a difficult trek to the Green Lake, permits are difficult to get. Otherwise in West Sikkim, beyond Yuksum is Dzongri, which is popular, but that is also close to Nepal border. To the east, at different points there are Bhutan and China on the other side, but apart from Nathula everything is inaccessible. [Addressing me] Is this your first time?

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<sup>243</sup> Nathula Pass is at the eastern Indo-China border on the ancient Silk Route.

**ADG:** No, I have been here twice before. I've been as far as the Nathula Pass. This year I wanted to go to the far north and the western side, but this disastrous quake happened. (ILL. 2.2)

**ST:** Can one go on one's own to the north?

**SDL:** No, it's always a two to three-day package tour; everyone has to carry his/her ration. The rest-houses are only in touch with the tour operators, so they don't have provision for many, unless informed beforehand.

**ADG:** Do the tour operators carry satellite phones... in case of an earthquake like what happened now?

**SDL:** No, they don't, but there is the guide who is a local, he knows all the routes and he can use emergency services to organise alternative routes for rescue.

**ST:** These days the forest department has satellite phones, my sister works there, so I got to know. This time, last month when helicopters came for rescue, they could not track the exact spots, and the forest department had to coordinate it. Because, in case of disaster they can either get stuck or come towards India, as moving towards the other side is impossible. So you need help to figure out exact locations, you are surrounded by peaks or forests depending on the altitude. And the borders are always blocked these days.

**ADG:** But, yesterday I met a journalist of Sikkimese-Bhutia origin. In a general context, he suggested that earlier the borders were porous so the yak traders and the villagers could easily escape the cold and save the livestock. Also, more importantly, the yaks used to breed across, expanding the gene pool. This has now become impossible because of strictures and protocols. [I am referring to the interview I conducted the previous day (16<sup>th</sup> October, 2011) with Pema Wangchuk Dorzi, the Editor of the daily, 'Sikkim Now'. During a lively conversation, he spoke on different aspects of culture and politics. He recognised that the borderland aspect marks Sikkim as a whole; the terrain-guided internal divisions that exist, along with administrative landlockings and prohibitions, as

well as its ostensible segregation from the rest of India – turns Sikkim into a zone of multiple borders.]

**SDL:** In Lachung and Lachen, people don't cross the borders you know. But in Nathula, ever since it has opened up as a trade route, a lot of Sikkimese are taking interest. But like tourism, this is seasonal; it is closed during monsoon and winter, when it is inaccessible due to landslide or snowfall. I don't know the details, but I heard you need a special trade permit and a ticket to go to China. During the trading season the security is very tight and we heard, a few years back, some people were caught while trying to escape from China, on its Tibetan frontier. But, you can understand the desperation, considering the difficult terrain; it is 17,000 ft, the second highest motorable route up to Chollung. So, it is risky, but some Tibetan people still try even these days.

**ST:** My father, who was in the army, said that beggars from Tibet try to cross over to this side, in search of better occupation.

**SDL:** This road that you see, (pointing at the glass front and the street beyond) is the Tibet road, a remnant of the old Silk Route. There were strange businesses conducted across. I heard jeeps were popular in Tibet. So they dismantled jeeps on this side, carried parts on mule back and after crossing the border re-assembled them. In the process, the mechanics made a lot of money.<sup>244</sup>

## 2.1 In a Discontinuous Terrain

On starting out for Sikkim from Siliguri, one moves away from the tortuous crowded alleys of the city and hits the highway at Sevok, which is a straight 20 km drive till the Teesta River (Coronation) Bridge.<sup>(ILL. 2.3)</sup> Across this, lies the trifurcation leading to Darjeeling, places like Gangtok and Kalimpong, and

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<sup>244</sup> A.C Sinha, in discussing the future of Sikkim's present democracy, states how the local elites, even while being gleeful of the prospect of transaction in the opening of the border routes for trade, caution that the authorities have to be careful of the Bhutia habit of indulging in barter across the border; this may still cause certain problems in the process of trade. Sinha, however does not elaborate on the pros and cons. A.C. Sinha, *Sikkim: Feudal and Democratic* (New Delhi: Indus Publications, 2008), 78.

Assam. This is the spot which comes up as an argument for the geographical isolation of the entire north-eastern people; their only direct connectivity with the rest of India by land being through this constriction, popularly known as the 'Chicken Neck'.

In Sikkim, the territory is not always indicative of the terrain. Measuring 70 x 40 miles across its axes, it is a relatively small state. The smallness is a result of warfare, land donations (e.g. ceding to the then ruling British power the entirety of Darjeeling<sup>245</sup> and a part of Kurseong district in exchange for protection) and repeated encroachments by Nepal and Bhutan from the two sides (tales of which form the oral literature of Sikkim's residents). Geologically, it is part of the eastern Himalayan region, whose constitution is still fragile, a characteristic feature of a young mountain. The territory is divided into north and south, not only by the gradation of terrain, with altitude ascending towards the north, but also by the river and drainage systems and the turns and thrust of the mountain range. These factors of wide variation in altitude and presence of many natural divides, have greatly determined the region's settlement and culture, contributed to its biodiversity and to an extent, its physical discontinuity.<sup>246</sup>

There are also deep-set divides within the communities in Sikkim, which are not generally perceived by the historians of political processes, but are open to

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<sup>245</sup> Darjeeling was an administrative centre and a resting place for the British, and a coveted transit point, through which business could be conducted with Tibet and Mongolia. The resident officer Coleman McCauley in his mission statement explains the importance of the Tibetan passage, "The two great pontiffs of the Buddhist Church- [Dalai Lama and the Karmapa] who exercise boundless influence over the wild tribes of central Asia." And, "Their influence is so great that the present dynasty of China has had to conciliate it in order to secure its own existence." P.R. Rao, *Sikkim* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1972), 68, 70.

<sup>246</sup> "The variation includes the lesser and greater Himalayan regions with an elevation ranging from 65m (around Dudhia, Darjeeling District) through 800-1200m around Ranipol, Mangan, 1400m around Darjeeling, 1800-2200m around Gangtok, Pelling, Ravangla, to 2800-3200m around Kyangsla (near Nathula). Numerous streams and rivulets flow along the depression and finally join the trunk stream. In the higher Himalayan terrain topography is highly rugged, characterized by steep slopes and prominent gully erosion. The Teesta Rangeet water divide is the major water divide within Sikkim Himalayas. Another north-south water divide is between the Lachen Chu and Lachung Chu which starts at about 3000 meters and slowly increases upto 6700 meters... On the western part long ridges are present, but they are Talang Chu and Zemu Chu, water divide. The Sikkim Darjeeling Himalayas are part of the active Himalayan Fold Thrust belt (FTB), which is geologically and structurally complex... Pelitic and Psammitic rocks over Mesozoic foreland rocks composed of tertiary sediments on the south." Indranil Chakraborty et al., "Earthquake induced landslides in the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalayas- An aftermath of the 18th September 2011 Sikkim earthquake," in *Engineering Geology Division Report* (Kolkata: Geological Survey of India, Eastern Region, 2011), 1.

anthropological enquiry. The communities are mainly three; Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha. The Nepali community has different castes and tribes, such as Limbus, Sherpas and Mangars. Among the Lepchas and Bhutias, the Kaziis were the collaborators of the ruling clans (who belonged to the Bhutia community). As Melanie Vandenhelsken's study of the Pemyangtse Monastery and its relational aspects with the temporal authority, expounds, there are deep divisions of status inside the Bhutia community. Then there are classes that exist within the Lamaist monastic order, thus establishing a parallel with the temporal authorities. The two hierarchies are perceived as buttressing each other for institutional benefits.

But, when we move away from the cities and administrative centres, we often find, depending on the location, the institutional religious order having to contend with and settle into cohabitation with local Bon religion (whose priests – *Bongthings* – are from the Lepcha community). Many entrenched anthropological works (G. Gorer, 1938, H.Siiger, 1967, and more crucially A. Balikci, 2008)<sup>247</sup> show how there is a collaborative spirit in most of the ritual practices of villages, which merge the borders of Shamanism and Buddhism and make a mixed practice that Balikci terms 'village religion'. Orality and mythic memory often influence the everyday practices of 'village religion' – like praying for greater farm yield, curing cough, cold and diarrhea; from things like getting success in life to the taking of public decisions like modifying the calendar, or cancelling out a dam project also come under the ambit of the village religion.<sup>248</sup> The institutional religion of Buddhism is also divided; while a section of the lamas belong to the monastic orthodoxy, the classical question of renunciation does not bind another section of noncelibate lamas. They freely participate in acquisitive ventures after their training period, as is testified by several studies (Balikci, 2008; Vandenhelsken, 2009)<sup>249</sup>.

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<sup>247</sup> Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village: An Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim* (London: Michael Joseph, 1938); Halfden Siiger, *Lepchas: Culture and Religion of Himalayan People, Part I and II* (Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark, 1967); Anna Balikci, *Lamas Shamans and Ancestors: the Village Religion of Sikkim* (Netherlands: Brill, 2008).

<sup>248</sup> Balikci, *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors*, 30, 84.

<sup>249</sup> Anna Balikci and Melanie Vandenhelsken, "Secularism and the Buddhist Monastery of Pemyangse," *Bulletin of Tibetology* (2008).  
<http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collection/journals/bot/pdf/bot.2003-01-05.pdf>.

Beneath the surface of the rational and linear order of the everyday – harnessed by the modern system of governance – there lurks another sense of time informed by mythic or semi-mythic tales. This is a time governed by nature and its spirits, and ancestors who are believed to be residents of nature and can be communicated with. When this relation is disturbed, the traditional Lepchas get agitated. According to Kerry Little:

They (the Lepcha tales) are tales set in ancient landscapes, hidden places, and sacred spaces. Before long I discovered other, contemporary Lepcha stories; protest narratives linked to the traditional stories by an ecological thread, for the new narratives are also about Lepcha landscapes. They are stories of hope, despair and conflict and move forward and backwards, coursing through the past, present, and future... Nature plays a leading role in these stories. In particular, the Teesta River, which originates from the Zemu glacier and flows throughout Sikkim, where at the West Bengal border it meets the Rangit River, then continues down to the plains.<sup>250 251</sup>(ILL. 2.4)

She further says about the Lepchas and what The Foundation for Deep Ecology promotes:

Recognition of the inherent value of all living beings and the use of this view in shaping environmental policies. Those who work for social changes based on this recognition are motivated by love of nature as well as for humans... The Lepchas' knowledge of nature is vast and personal, and their connection to their land and everything that comes from it is a deeply held belief. Before Buddhism came to Sikkim from Tibet, the Lepchas were nature worshippers and this spiritual history remains at the heart of Lepcha culture. They are 'part of the ecosphere' just as intimately as part of their own society.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Kerry Little, "Deep Ecology, Dams, and Dzonguland, Lepchas Protest Narratives about their Threatened Land," *The Trumpeter* 25, no.1 (2009): 40.

<sup>251</sup> The Sikkim government's attempt to build a Hydro-Electric Power project in the heart of Demojong, on the sacred Rathong Chu River [a tributary of Rongnu (Teesta)] at Yuksum in West Sikkim is probably the most important and explicit example of 'wrong doing' performed against the sacred land to have occurred in Sikkim's most recent history. Balikci, *Lamas Shamans*, 234.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Apart from what appears in the official maps of Sikkim, another set of spatial relations seems to exist, common to both Bhutias and Lepchas. Real and imagined spaces cohabit as residences of various nature spirits; imaginary sites open up the gateway to the hidden land or *Beyul*, the five caves – of happiness, wealth, birth and knowledge and the final abode of Mount Kanchenjunga. This is further complicated by territorially driven spirits who have control over the spaces. This is the inner life of villages, while the city runs on a different, utilitarian fuel, if outwardly.

This establishes different communicative surfaces in a culture which is represented as homogeneous in official narratives. What actually exists is a different temporality that is not reflected in official discourses like the census of 2011, or the Sikkim government interim social survey in 2008.<sup>253</sup>

## 2.2 Rhetoric of Power: Narratives of Transition

Sikkim has also suffered a number of breaks in her superficially placid timeline. There have been different phases in Sikkim's history, where the old power struggle between ethnicities has continued in newer garb. According to Sinha,<sup>254</sup> Sikkim was a Lamaist state of a theocratic kind – claimed to be ruled by a monk incarnate ruler, the Chogyal, by the tenets of '*Chhos*' (righteousness).

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<sup>253</sup> It seems relevant to mention that statistics was a medium, at times, of covert manipulation and at others, of gross obfuscation as in the monarchy's last phase; and, as is often revealed on careful enquiry, also in Pawan Chamling's current government. The anachronism pronounces itself in the language of the social survey report of 2006 and the subsequent moves made by the leadership. These include, bringing in the big dam project and industries, intensified building activities and artificial pilgrimages (such as Char Dham), while advertising the green face of organic Sikkim, for which the government, specifically Chamling has earned accolades. Chamling is said to be the single voice of the government. The Chief Minister declares himself to be a believer of August Comte (The French philosopher known for positivism). He has already served almost four terms in office. In the context of big dam issues many angry voices against this regime were heard charging them of repression, embezzlement and corruption, both in writing and verbally. (Prashant Resailly, a young film maker expressed his anger in a personal interview; *Sikkim Now* in 2006 brought out a compilation in print discussing the accumulated frustration over governance. Further, 'Talk Sikkim', a monthly journal closed down after October 2011, right after they had brought out a few critical issues).

<sup>254</sup> Sinha, *Sikkim: Feudal and Democratic*, 52.

On 24<sup>th</sup> October 1975, an official communication reached the Union Government of India from the Chogyal of Sikkim. This paper is a Background Paper for the protest of the Joint Action Committee against the Sikkim Bill – brought in the Indian Parliament in response to the appeal of the House of Ministers of the Sikkim assembly, for the annexation of Sikkim. This paper is divided into many parts and its part C is in response to the representation of Sikkim in the UN by the permanent representative of India (following the statement made there by the Chinese representative). It claims to set out the ‘true facts relating to the Indo Sikkim relations’, which was based on treaties. It packs facts and summations together into a four point rejoinder which states:<sup>255</sup>

- Sikkim’s relations with Britain were formalized for the first time in 1817 under a treaty entered into with the Hon’ble East India Company on 10.2.1817. The said treaty made over ‘in full sovereignty’ to the Ruler of Sikkim ‘all the hilly or mountainous country situated to the eastward of Mechi River and westward of the Teesta River’.<sup>256</sup>
- The Hon’ble East India Company had given place to the British Crown in India, and in 1861 Sikkim entered into a treaty of ‘friendship and alliance with the British Government’. Article 2 of the 1861 treaty states, ‘The whole of Sikkim territory now in occupation of the British forces, is restored to the Maharaja of Sikkim, and there shall henceforth be peace and amity between the two states.’ This treaty continued in full force until 1947.<sup>257</sup>
- A perusal of the treaties of 1861 clearly indicates that Sikkim retained her sovereign and independent status, neither did she entrust the responsibility of her Defence and External relations to the British Government.

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<sup>255</sup> *Sikkim: Background Papers* no. 4.

<sup>256</sup> The Treaty of Titalia (named after a place on the Bengal-Bihar border) was signed in 1817 [at the end of the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814–1816)], between the Chogyal of Sikkim and the British East India Company (EIC). It guaranteed security of Sikkim by the British and returned Sikkimese land annexed by the Nepalese over the centuries.

<sup>257</sup> This treaty is a follow up of the war of 1849, between the British and Sikkim. The signature of the Treaty of Tumlong in 1861 effectively made Sikkim a de facto protectorate of the British government (though the sovereignty issues remained ambiguous). <http://www.britannica.com/place/Sikkim#ref486945>.

- Sikkim had never been a part of India, geographically, ethnically or racially<sup>258</sup>

The Sikkim controversy over sovereignty, or interdependence, almost always reminds us of its geographic situatedness – of its being sandwiched between four different transnational entities – Nepal, China/Tibet, Bhutan and India. The passage to China/Tibet has always been a coveted passage and also a bone of contention during different phases on record from the time of British governance to the transfer of power to India. This has been compounded by the strategic territorial interest that the other neighbours have had in this land, which has led to its gradual territorial shrinkage in the past. The situation of its internal population cannot be overlooked if the predicament of Sikkim is to be understood. In 1975, a whopping 68% of its population was Nepali (considered migrants) and the indigenous Lepchas and Bhutias (variously called Tibetans, and Lhopos in scholarly discussion) formed only one third of its meagre population of 300,000.

The following was quoted from the Hindustan Times of April 12, 1975 in the Background Paper, because it seemed more favourable to the monarchists (for, according to the same submission, the rest of the Indian press had reported the events with bias in favour of India):

Sikkim saw dramatic changes in 1974, variously described as “a series of democratic reforms” (by Moscow), and as “Gross trampling on Sikkim’s sovereignty” (Peking). The facts are that Sikkim held for the first time a one man one vote election, adopted a constitution that effectively ended Chogyal’s feudal rule and was taken further under India’s wings as an associate state. In 1947, India nipped democracy in the bud by handing over power to the ruling family. Doubtless, India felt that the maharaja, dependent on New Delhi for his authority, would remain loyal, or at least more trustworthy than the popular forces. But the

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<sup>258</sup> This seems to be a gross obfuscation. Since, all the available documents and discussions on Sikkim’s politics and the transcripts of all the treaties between the Monarchic Sikkim and the British government till 1947, or after 1949 with India, state otherwise. Following the abolition of the feudal system (by a law in the Indian Parliament, in 1949) Sikkim entered into a democratic treaty with the Indian government in 1950. The fact that Sikkim was a ‘protectorate’ of Colonial British government as well as the Union Government of India is stated everywhere in unambiguous terms.

Sinha, *Sikkim: Feudal and Democratic*; Madhumita Bhadra, *Sikkim: Democracy and Social Change* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1992); P.R. Rao, *India and Sikkim (1814–1970)* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1972).

maharaja changed his title, which unduly stressed Sikkim's minority protectorate status, to 'Chogyal', the ancient Tibetan word for ruler and began emphasizing the separate identity of Sikkim, its language, tradition and culture, his royalist ambition and opposition to reform.

In 1973 popular demonstration flared up in the capital Gangtok. Disillusioned and demanding democratic government, the demonstrators may also have been encouraged by the provocateurs from across the border. Two parties which eventually merged into the pro India Sikkim Congress denounced the previous polls as rigged. The Chogyal had to ask India for police and the troops to restore order, and soon afterwards a tripartite agreement was signed between the Chogyal and India and the leaders of the three major political parties, which reduced the Chogyal to a figure-head constitutional monarch and increased India's authority. The agreement also prescribed election on a one man one vote basis, with a provision that this was not a conflict with "ethnic parity" between Bhutia-Lepcha minority and the Nepalese majority (78% of 300,000).

Voting took place in April, 1974. Seventy two-year-old Kazi Lendrup Dorji of Sikkim Congress won a sweeping victory by a 31:1 margin. Sikkim National Congress, backed by the palace got only one seat. When the assembly was in session, on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1974, Chogyal changed his position on reform and deterred the elected members from entering the assembly by using force. Indian police was summoned, the Political Officer appointed by India urged the Chogyal for restraining his people. Quoting the Hindustan Times:

Amid reports that some members may have been hijacked by the palace guards, the pro Indian dominated assembly passed the constitution bill by a huge majority possibly as a reaction to the Chogyal's negative attitude, the assembly passed a second resolution seeking closer ties with India. It specifically demanded that planning of Sikkim should be dovetailed into India's five years plan and that the Sikkim minister in charge of planning should attend the National Development Council of India.

If this rhetoric of power seems transitional narrative, its cause is deep-seated in the psyche of the Sikkimese society, which as most observers have noted, is deeply divided along communal lines.<sup>259</sup>

After the initial merger with India in 1950, the most interesting thing was the churning going on among the dominant Sikkimese ethnic groups. Ethnic parity was formally established by a bill, by which the minority positions such as Lepchas, Bhutias and in a small way, the Lamas were to have seats reserved for them, while the open positions of the assembly were to be contested by all. Firstly, the majority Nepali community felt cheated when this concept of 'ethnic parity' was invoked; while, the ruler felt his absolute power endangered with an open electorate having an equal right to citizenship.

The demand for equality had several afterlives in the decade of 1980s, often leading to confused demands such as 'Sikkim for the Sikkimese' on the one hand, and a complete Nepalese reservation of open assembly seats on the other. The Mandal Commission recommendation, proposed in 1990 and implemented from 1994 (which bases reservation for the lower castes and scheduled tribes in jobs and education mandatory), according to political analyst A.C. Sinha, brought about another phase in Sikkim's politics. The old slogan of Nepali solidarity was now replaced by a new slogan – more pragmatic (if not pedantic) – 'Bhasha na Bhat', meaning – it is food that unites, not language. A new casteism begins from here. Some of the Nepalese caste groups, sensing privileges, staked claim to being of tribal origin (e.g. the Kiratis and the Limbus). This has an implication for Sikkim's future, for having joined the North Eastern Council; it may now have to count on, along with the financial privileges, the possibilities of ethnic resurgence that haunt almost the whole of Northeast. Though when Sinha asked the

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<sup>259</sup> Madhumita Bhadra, *Sikkim: From Feudalism to Democracy* (Calcutta: Bhattacharya, 1989); B.S Das, *Sikkim: The Tale of its Transition* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978).

B.S. Das has a more personal angle to the predicament of transitional Sikkim, having served the state as a special officer on behalf of Government of India. He observes that Sikkim is so small that everyone knows about everyone else, making the daily life difficult for an outsider like him. He also observed that Sikkim's politics through its transition period was governed by the desire of the three women who mattered: the then queen Hope Cook – the king's American socialite wife; the wife of Kazi Lehndrup Dorzi; the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi. All of them coveted the complete control of the state in different forms.

'elites'<sup>260</sup> what, according to them would be the impact of the events in the neighbourhood, he says, "The responses were apprehensive. They felt that Sikkim would face instability, influx of immigrants and induction of a culture of crimes, work strikes, *bandhs* (closure) and cross-border terrorism. Another apprehension is that the neighbouring Darjeeling would try to dominate small Sikkim economically and demographically."

On a happier note, they suggested that the production of hydroelectricity would make the state abound in power; tourism and environmental management could make it a model for the neighbours, being the only Nepali-speaking state in India.

This is a diametrically opposite position to that of the people affected by the big dam and hydroelectric project, an indication that suggests a division along the line of social privilege, apart from the possible ethnic dimension. To an outsider, as to the people affected, these claims made in the expectation that the River Teesta can be harnessed by the big dam and Sikkim can still be a verdure place, would seem somewhat optimistic and untenable.<sup>261</sup>

### 2.3 Travelling to: Places

At the conclusion of the exploratory travel undertaken in Gangtok, East and North Sikkim, I select three different sites for interactivity; these are Rhenock (jointly with Aritar), Dzongu and Gangtok. Aritar and Rhenock are largely Nepali dominated zones. Dzongu, in the north of Sikkim, is a Lepcha reserve, hence exclusive. Gangtok is a cosmopolitan site. (ILL.2.70, 2.71)

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<sup>260</sup> Sikkim's 'elites', today seem to be an ambiguous admixture of the power lobby, big businessmen, representative of political organisations and bureaucrats. A.C. Sinha mentions them repeatedly without fleshing out the term.

<sup>261</sup> This complacency, to an extent is shattered after the September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011 quake that many, especially the nature worshipper Lepchas, now believe to be a consequence of the tunnels dug and mountain blasted for the big dam. A.C. Sinha too points at the possible geological implications of the developmental project. Sinha, *Sikkim: Feudal and Democratic*, 75.

### 2.3.1 Rhenock and Aritar

Sikkim is internally segregated by four administrative districts. The east, north and west are surrounded by international borders. There is generally more than one route to reach most of the places in the eastern, western and southern districts, but in the north, options shrink due the steepness of the terrain.

In the March 2011 field trip, I am accompanied by Sisir and his friends Dorjee Lepcha and Nikhil; Dorjee has kindly volunteered to drive us to Rhenock, Aritar and Changu. In trying to figure out a suitable route to reach one of the international borders, we encounter the many 'borders' that implicate this mountainous state. Climbing towards a place called Mulkharga on the eastern border, we encounter school boys coming downward. When Dorjee asks them about the *simana* (border in Hindi, Nepali and Bengali), they say with surprise, "This is the border". We realise, we are talking about two different borders. While we are enquiring about the international border from our location in Sikkim, the school boys are referring to the West Bengal border, which is close and much more familiar to them than the international border.

Located at 27.10'36"N 88.38'36"E / 27.176622.N 88.6432.E, the eastern international border lies 63 kilometres east of Gangtok, at Jelepla Pass, at an altitude of 4,270m. It is also said to be on the trade route to China, Tibet and Bhutan, is close to a well-known market place and one of the nodal points in East Sikkim. Rhenock is a small town located on the way to the border. It is said to be a place where the pro and anti-monarchists fought battles in the street, during an otherwise smooth transition to democracy and annexation, inbetween 1973–75.

The word Rhe-nock, in Lepcha language, means Black Hill. Situated in the extreme east of Sikkim, Rhenock witnessed the establishment of the first police outpost in the state, which is advertised as a historical event, although equally importantly, Rhenock is known for its educational tradition. It has the oldest educational institution, now known as the Sikkim Government School, among seven other institutions, a private museum and a nascent organic resort. It is a nodal point for travelling and a market place. It is largely, a heterogenic space compared to Aritar, up in the hill, which is more community oriented and thus

counteracts the mixed transit point Rhenock, where ethnic groups like Nepalis cohabit with Lepchas, Bhutias, Marwaris and Biharis.

During my two trips to Rhenock (March and October 2011), before the workshop, I also manage to visit the village of Aritar, which is closer to the border of Bhutan. From Aritar to the border, it is nearly a 30 degree or more of an upward slope, while from Aritar to Rhenock, is a winding downward slope, equally steep. Aritar is divided into three segments – the upper, middle and lower – which is common to Sikkim’s mountainous places. Here, we meet people like Rajeev Pradhan, a school teacher in the senior secondary school, located at a place higher up from Aritar village and near a lake. We also get to meet two self-employed graduates from the local college – Kewal Parihar and Tsering Tamang – and two more young people Sanu and Prasant. Tsering, along with Kewal’s sister Samiksha Parihar, joins us later in the workshop at Rhenock.

Rajeev Pradhan tells us about Aritar, which is known for its lake, natural resources and educational institution, as we walk along a narrow dirt road that is shining due to the presence of mica in the ground. Rajeev assures us there is no mine here yet. Having passed through Meghalaya and having had the opportunity of partly understanding the ramifications of the illicit mining business there, I observe that they should feel lucky for this. Since the discovery of uranium (it is rumoured), mining has wreaked havoc on Meghalaya’s natural resources and human habitation, leading to a landscape of toxic waste. Sikkim, though, is geographically and, more than that, politically segregated from the rest of the Northeast. So much so that there are several places where time seems to be at a stand-still; each space is caught up in its own practices, unlinked to the rest.<sup>262 263</sup> (ILL. 2.54)

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<sup>262</sup> As Scott observes about the Zomia, these places behave like stateless locations, isolated from the regular flow of time at the centre.

<sup>263</sup> From the point of view of the environmentalist this used to be a relief, until 2011 when Sikkim joined the rest of NEC (North Eastern Council). Why they joined the council is partly a matter of speculation, but if A.C. Sinha is to be believed, it is a combination of financial and administrative decision. To speculate wildly, maybe MDONER has a role in this, or it may be a better method of sourcing the budgetary allocation, which is shrinking.

We also meet one of the oldest men in the village – Prem Bahadur Pradhan, who is in his nineties. His family founded the village and Middle Aritar is owned by this particular family of Pradhans of the Rai Caste – a group of the Nepali community. He tells us how his family served the Kaziis and the Tibetans, as *Jharlangs* (slaves) or *Kalobharis* (black loads). “I was a slave until 1947, plain and simple,”<sup>264</sup> he states, with a smile on his face. He and his people were forced to carry loads of tea, salt, oil, soap and other commodities on the route to China/ Tibet. Higher up, were Bhutia and Lepcha villages, where the *Jharlangs* rested, enroute. There was no real remuneration for the hard labour, only a little money for survival was given to them. *Jharlong* (slavery) was completely abolished by 1950. After which, this place was chosen for settlement by the Pradhan family, being comparatively less steep than the surroundings, with proximity to water resources. I ask him if intermarriage across cast lines or with tribals is practised and he informs me that though 30 years back they would have been ostracised, today even the various community elders accept such marriages. Presently, economic compatibility is a major consideration for marriage – evidencing a flexible and functional attitude. Today, in case of ceremonies related to death and marriage, everyone from the neighbourhood participates, while previously only people from the same caste did.

### **2.3.2 Dzongu**

My first journey to Dzongu with Sisir, in March 2011, feels like a special one, since it is a site with restricted access, sacred to and protected for the indigenous Lepcha community.(ILL. 2.5) A turn from the nodal market point of Mangan brings one to the secluded Lepcha reserve of Dzongu. For practical and administrative purposes, it is divided into Upper and Lower Dzongu. Tenzing Lepcha – our host and guide, who has joined us from Mangan – tells us that historically, Dzongu is supposed to have been the property of the Sikkimese queen. In 1960, while Sikkim was still ruled by kings (Chogyal Palden Thondup was on the throne then), it was declared a Lepcha reserve. It fell on the democratic Sikkim administration to maintain the reserve after Sikkim’s status changed from a protectorate to the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of India.

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<sup>264</sup> In a personal interview, conducted in March 2012.

Because of its avowed sacredness and difficult accessibility, it has not been widely or well represented in anthropological literature, but those who have approached it, have been unable to avoid the lure of describing the journey at length.<sup>265</sup> The natural beauty and the biodiversity due to the acute variation in altitude within a short distance (500 to 6000 m altitude within an area of 540 km<sup>2</sup>), and the freshness of climate, maintained because of the reserved forest and the bountiful streams, tell us much about the psyche of the Lepcha indigene who are reverential towards their natural habitation and protective of their resources. They have their own rich culture of song, dance, poetry and legends, some of which are seemingly indigenous, while some others are recognised by scholars to be of Tibetan derivation. As for the Lepcha people, though for all practical purposes, they are known to have originated from South China and North Burma stocks, they are also seen as relatives to the, closer-to-home Manipuris and Nagas.

On the way, Tenzing further informs us that Dzongu is divided into two blocks and has 36 villages. According to him, the interesting thing about Dzongu on the one hand is its flora and fauna and on the other, that the Lepcha creation stories originate here.<sup>266</sup> Tenzing also impresses upon us how Dzongu, in being a separate, especially reserved zone, actually overrides the constitution of India. We acutely experience this for ourselves in September 2012, when we arrive on short notice and Tenzing is unable to keep our permits ready. Sisir, who is a Sikkimese of Nepali origin has to queue up at the Deputy Commissioner's office along with Sanchayan and me – the outsiders – for a permit to enter Dzongu. (ILL. 2.6) We also require separate permission for conducting our workshop. All this makes us realise how truly this segregation of spaces works within Sikkim.

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<sup>265</sup> T. Chatterjee, *Rongpas and Their Culture* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1988).

<sup>266</sup> As suggested by scholars like Mainwaring (1878), Gorner (1937), Siiger (1967) and Balikci (2008). It is one of the recent sprees of enthusiasm of preserving and projecting the pure Lepcha culture, that a particular piece of land is traced as Mayalyang, the originary homeland of the indigenous Lepchas. The story of Mayalyang is narrated by Dorji Lepcha, a traditional storyteller in my creative component video. Dasgupta, *A Dictionary of Four Entries* (video time: 13:15–14:01).

Tenzing suggests that Dzongu's particular location is advantageous in establishing connection with the rest of the districts of Sikkim – east, west and south, "You go to Sakyang, Pentang you can go to east, if you go to Dikchu you can touch south and east of Sikkim, and from Mangan, you can go to further north – to Lachen, Lachung and Gurudongmar Lake." After quizzing him in detail, we realise that there is as much fantasy as there is reality in this. For, steep mountainous terrain and rivers divide the Sikkimese geography beyond the scope of complete administrative control. The indigenes' capacity, discipline and time-long habit of negotiating the difficult terrain on foot, keep them flexible, with access to different quarters of the geo-social space; this occupies their imagination. East Sikkim, to parts of which we have travelled (Nathula, Rhenock and Aritar) is motorable from the capital town Gangtok, but is not accessible directly by road from Dzongu. The same holds true of West Sikkim, especially its most important places like Tashiding and Yuksam, which are only negotiable by a very tortuous and ancient land route, through a very difficult and mountainous forest. These are, at best, very rare trekkers' routes today, their knowledge available only to the indigenous local. Lake Khecheopalri in the west, which Tenzing mentions, Sisir affirms to be a difficult three-to-four-day trek, with successful negotiation conditional on one's being of Sherpa (the legendary climber clan/porter) origin!

I learnt from a conversation I had with Jenny Bentley, an anthropologist working for some time on the Lepcha community in Upper Dzongu that there are politics of governance integral to the self-perception of the Lepchas; the new generation does not know how to disentangle from this.<sup>267</sup>(ILL. 2.53) Certain things, which have been adapted by the community, or were invented along the way, have been beneficial for them. The Lepcha script, for instance is supposed to have

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<sup>267</sup> Unlike Anna Balikci, Jenny Bentley's anthropological attempt to be entrenched does not seem to be from the inside entirely – but adjusts with the so-called traditional society that she seeks to rediscover via Geoffrey Gorer, whose route she follows. She is observant of the changes in the Lepcha ideas of the self, but is cynical of any change in terms of activism. Although in 2004, when she began her research, the big dams had also begun – so it is not beyond her capacity to know. However, she appears to think of tradition as a relatively smooth entity with mostly internal qualms and claims. Though her's could perhaps, be called a multi-sited research study, as she studied the two sites Dikchu and Lingthem; they overlap in tradition and culture, hence promising a smooth transition. Comparatively, I would like to see my enterprise engaging with the themes of disagreement, protest and diversity – through which filters the community questions can be visualised. My researches are conducted in communally diverse locations and are not following the life cycles of a single community, but a diverse cohabitation principle.

been an invention during the time of the 4<sup>th</sup> Chogyal, said to help the lamas propagate Buddhism. A Shamanic oral culture, hence transformed into a semi-Buddhist literate culture. This enabled the Lepchas to read Lamaist Buddhist texts, which though originally in the interest of the institutionalised Lamaist Buddhism, also paved the way for some other texts to be produced independently.<sup>268</sup>

The Lepchas are statistical minorities of Sikkim. The indigenous populace, the activist groups of Lepcha origin, as well as some of the anthropologists who have studied the culture of the community are often justly, though at times unduly, concerned about their proportionate demographic shrinkage.<sup>269</sup> But the concerns over ethnic marginalisation seem genuine, since the Lepchas are recognised as scheduled tribes; there are close to 40 night schools that teach the Lepcha language in the Darjeeling district of neighbouring West Bengal. Yet, there has been no effort until recently on the part of the Sikkim government to incorporate the language in the Secondary (parallel to the GCSEs) or the Higher Secondary (A-level) education syllabus. As revealed by Sisir and Tenzing, the Lepcha association had to struggle for a long period to wrest that right from the Nepali dominated Sikkim government headed by Chamling, the Nepali-origin chief minister. If not in entire India, the factors of ethnic origin and caste still matter in Sikkim's everyday.

These affect socialisation and self-confidence too. Of Tenzing (who told me he had once been so shy that he would never speak up in school), this is confirmed by Kerry Little's article describing an event of protest, related to ACT:

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<sup>268</sup> "If the supernatural beings of the Bon, whether the Pho lha mo lha or the Nopas are seen as demons in the literature, I believe it to be a result of the influence of conventional Buddhism, which tends to portray only high Buddhist deities as the true providers and protectors capable of offering more than temporary relief from human suffering."  
Balikci, *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors*, 123.

<sup>269</sup> A.R. Foning expressed concern in A. R. Foning, *Lepchas: My Vanishing Tribe*, (New Delhi: Sterling 1988).

Bentley has just shown a proportionate increase in the Lepcha population, which does away with Foning's 1980's assumption that the Lepchas will eventually vanish from earth, as the Lepcha website also expresses its concern.

<http://aachulay.blogspot.in/2010/06/marginalization-of-lepcha-language-in.html>.

The Lepcha populace of Sikkim is currently 35,728 (2001 Census), compared to the total Indian Lepchas-(50,629; 2001Census), while their number in the neighbouring West Bengal is 14,721 (again, in 2001).

Tenzing Lepcha now stood on a step and spoke. After a faltering start, he found his voice, 'Everyone knows we are here to protect Dzongu. But more than that, it is not only for the Lepchas of Dzongu, Kalimpong and Darjeeling, but for entire Lepchas of the world...' As he grew in confidence, his voice rose, 'Some people say, we are not gaining anything, but I say we have gained a lot. Here we are at 200 days and we have gathered so much strength. When we reached one week, and after that two weeks, and then 100 days, then 150 days, I didn't see such gathering like today. I have seen such strength today and we are going to win tomorrow!' He then spoke quietly, referring to the issues of global warming and climate change, 'Every nation has to suffer tomorrow, so it's better that every community should help us and support us and walk with us. So, we have gained a lot. Yesterday I didn't know the value of our motherland. Because of this movement we came to know very well our homeland Dzongu. And because of this movement we have learned many things, and much knowledge we have gained: environmental, cultural, tradition and everything.<sup>270</sup> So I hope all our colleagues have the same fight against our foe that is the implementation of the projects in Dzongu.'<sup>271</sup>

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Sanchayan, Sisir and I travel to Dzongu for the workshop in September 2012. This is Sisir and my second and Sanchayan's first visit. It is a transitional period of the year; the monsoons will soon stop and we will gradually move into autumn. It is also a transitional time in terms of tourist inflow, especially to further north from Mangan. We converse all the way on the long and tortuous route to Dzongu. I ask Tenzing about the latest situation of the ACT movement. For its comparatively young age, this movement (begun in 2007) is reasonably successful. The ACT activists, after repeated appeals, humiliations and hunger strikes have managed to stop three out of seven big dam projects, and yet are not complacent. In the eyes of an outsider like me, who would compare the predicaments of all environmental activism, e.g. the Narmada Dam, Himachal

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<sup>270</sup> "This land is like a bank for us, a fixed deposit... We don't want someone to take away our land."; "I don't think money is important. I think land is very important, because land never grows in size. But, population... grows, you know. So we have to preserve our land for the coming generation also." Tenzing Lepcha, the leader of the anti-dam movement, expressing the importance of their land for the Lepchas. Dasgupta, *A Dictionary of Four Entries* (video time: 14:03-14:08; 15:28-15:43).

<sup>271</sup> Little, "Deep Ecology," 55.

Dam or the Brahmaputra Valley movements, the perseverance of this nascent movement, seems commendable. (ILL. 2.7)

Tenzing points out the different anomalies of development that haunt Sikkim. The following conversation takes place:

[In the following conversation and henceforth: Tenzing Lepcha is denoted as **TL**]

**TL:** We would like to ask why the government is not interested in the micro projects and are largely interested in the big dam. And further, we also notice that Sikkim is doing very well in the tourism industry, why not concentrate on that, instead of bringing the macro propositions?

**ADG:** You mean the heavy industries?

**TL:** Yes, the government can easily bring in the smaller projects.

[Sisir now wakes up to the debate]

**ST:** Instead of talking of the resistance, maybe we could talk of what Sikkim needs.

[To this we nod in agreement, as Tenzing continues pointing out the ironies]

**TL:** Sikkim needs 64 megawatts of electricity, it is currently producing nearly 1000 megawatts, but the electricity bill is rising.

**ADG:** Have some of the companies started producing electricity from the Teesta Hydel project?

**ST:** Some have started producing electricity, but don't have the funds to bring it in. They need money for that, which the government doesn't have.

**ADG:** Do you mean that they violate all the norms?! Is it a government investment? Hasn't the government brought in the entire big corporate? For, the propaganda says that it is 80% outsider investment.

**ST:** It is the government that has brought in the companies from outside the state, but has agreed to give them the loan necessary for completion of the project. Now, the government seems to have dried up. So, the work has stopped.

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We arrive at a bridge called Ring Khola, across which we find a lake sacred to the Lepchas. It is not terribly big, but the water is clean and crystalline and there are numerous fish in it. I ask Tenzing whether we can touch the water, and he replies that we can. But he warns that it is prohibited to catch the fish. This is believed to be the site of residence of one of the nature gods and anyone who consumes the fish or takes anything away from here is bound to fall sick, or even die. The fishes are tiny and Tenzing tells us that they do not grow any bigger. Later in the evening, while sitting at the home-stay that Tenzing has arranged for us, we talk on a variety of issues that define the Dzongu household, their community and environment. Statistics and faith seem to run parallelly in the conversation. We discuss the state of cardamom production and Tenzing says that in terms of volume today it has remained only 10–20 % of what it used to be in Dzongu. Cardamom is the largest-selling cash crop of Sikkim. In official documents, scholarly accounts (Sinha, 2008) and in Ray’s film (1971), it is hailed as the most important revenue generator. The propaganda has not stopped there; the recent nationally popular reality show *Satyameva Jayate* (Sanskrit, ‘Truth Triumphs’) hosted by cine superstar Amir Khan, holds up Sikkim in similar light, projecting cardamom as still the most pricey crop that has given Sikkim its economic bounty. Incidentally, the programme has also hailed Sikkim as the greenest Indian state, completely overlooking the rampant environmental destruction in several sectors – in the big dam building activities and large scale industries tapping river water. (ILL.2.8)

Tenzing states that all the cardamom plants are expected to die in two to three years and that different experts have different opinions on this; some blame it on the delicateness of the plant species, some say the soil has gone wrong. The common scientific observation is that no plant of cardamom stays alive for more than 10 years. Tenzing also comes up with another (supernatural) explanation; he quotes the village elders (including the Shamans), who say that the lack of faith and absence of proper worship of land has brought about the doom, “Earlier, everyone observed the harvest rituals, but now everyone has become selfish and

nobody observes rituals to appease deities and hence we can see the wrath visiting us.”

## 2.4 The Event of Knowledge

These travels and interactions finally lead to the workshops, as meeting points for forces not yet visualised; multiple subjectivities finding an interactive platform in a forum that charts many segments of a specific location. The workshop is about interactivity, one of whose tools is mapping. This mapping begins from the specific idea of a subject-citizen’s articulation of himself/ herself and superposes this upon the available or the generic, often official and institutional idea of a site – to the effect of contradicting it or registering a difference.

### 2.4.1 Maps

In the process of picking the sites for interactivity we rediscover the instruments of power that work in the context of these borderlands. They make themselves felt through the official maps, either as presence or absence/ obfuscation. The peculiar case of borderlands in general and Sikkim in particular is that we cannot get a map without an official permission, which may take months and even years to procure. I am told this by the Home and Forest Department officials. Google maps may provide one with only a generalised outline. The third source for maps would be activists and NGOs, who share a common initiative for mapping an area, for recording their zones of activity. Examples of these are the Teesta hydel project maps. The fourth option is the tourist maps provided by the tourism department or private tourist operators.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Geographers in both Sikkim and Assam have told me that it is not possible to get maps of borders which are closer in ratio than 1: 100000, while topographers insist that the correctness of topographic analysis in complex geographic terrains depends on the closeness to the object. One has to often get as close as 1:5000, which is not allowed in the border and restricted areas. So cartographers who follow official channels have to often innovate techniques of mapping. I found this to be rare in Sikkim, but found it among researches in on Assam, such as Prashata Bhattachaya of Guwahati University, and ironically, Rafiul Ahmed of Sikkim University. The Geography Department in Sikkim University does not study Sikkim, presumably because of the same bureaucratic protocol they face.



**2.7** Sikkim: Teesta Dam Activities on the Way to Dzongu, March 2011.



**2.8** A Temple on the Teesta, March 2011.

(This temple, which is part of a school, will be inundated due to the rise of water level because of the Teesta Hydel Project.)

As always, our map-making or counter-mapping exercises have two aims; to study how the participants like to represent their locality and to see how they locate and/or fantasise a possible future.<sup>273</sup>

#### **2.4.2 Counter Mapping in Dzongu: Inundation and Electricity**

(Dzongu Lepcha Reserve, Lower Dzongu, Community Place, September 2012)

Sanchayan, Sisir and I, being outsiders in the Lepcha reserve, need a reference point in order to communicate. We begin by selecting two different maps for Dzongu. One of these is the initiative of the eco-tourism group in Sikkim, which is a fall-out of the ACT movement. The other is the circulation map for the hydel project (sourced from the internet), which shows water tunnels and nodal points near Dzongu where turbines will be placed. (ILL.2.9, 2.10) Most of the participants in this workshop being part of the ACT movement or its sympathisers, it seems only natural to select the most relevant thematic that suits the place.<sup>274</sup>

Tenzing Lepcha is our local coordinator in the workshop. The participants, with the exception of Sisir who is Nepali, are all Lepchas between the ages of 20 and 30 years and from local cardamom-farming families. Two of the participants are undergraduate students, the rest are educated till secondary school. Most have studied in the elite Tashi Namgyal Academy and are self-employed. A couple of them help run homestays with their families. No one has any formal training in theatre or filming, or exposure to mapmaking. But they all seem to be experts at using their mobile phone cameras. I also notice that, without exception, all the Lepcha participants are athletic, sports enthusiasts; many play football themselves. Most of them know their traditional dancing and can play some form of musical instrument – the guitar being the most popular.

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<sup>273</sup> Crampton, "Maps as Social Constructions," 720.

<sup>274</sup> 'The movement, spearheaded by ACT started in 2003 and is still active. Many of the Lepcha youth who are members of ACT are also involved in Dzongu eco-tourism. They have a different view to that of pro-dam supporters on the future of Dzongu. The anti-dam Lepchas want to promote tourism and organic farming and to keep Dzongu pristine. The pro-dam supporters, 116 who have sold land for the Panan 280 MW project, see a more affluent Dzongu and the dams as a "harbinger of great economic boom". Little, "Deep Ecology", 39.

The workshop begins in a place called Hee Gyathang, in the neighbourhood of Tenzing's home, in a site that is being projected as a future Lepcha museum. The atmosphere gradually shapes up with the introductory process of theatrical exercises; gestural articulations, the flow of sounds which take on plasticity in terms of the timber of voices – producing words, sentences and meaning, or simple onomatopoeia. This process of familiarisation with the location dynamics then leads to the de-familiarisation of the map that is willed upon, projected into, cut across and even cancelled out – depending on what attitude one cultivates towards it. The event is processual, participatory and collaborative, hence these three aspects, to an extent, figure in the collective decisions, which then split up into the individual decisions of the maps on the margins; maps that are not illustrative of power, nor submissive.

The materials selected for this workshop include a synthetic agricultural fabric called agronet, as well as hardy translucent plastics. The agronet, supplied by the agriculture and forest departments is normally used to build greenhouses, which are visible all over Sikkim's villages. We trace the hydel project flow map onto the agronet by stitching the lines upon it with girl's ribbons. The translucency of the plastic is used to 'map shelters'; map drawings are transposed on them and then they are used to construct a tent-like structure. (ILL.2.11– 2.14)

Once the official maps are transferred onto the material, the participants transpose their own subjectivities on to them. On the eco-tourism map, the ACT sympathisers chart out their daily routes to destinations significant to them. They trace their paths to sites of anxiety or sites of desire (e.g. Mayalyang). They also draw their own paths to their homes through familiar and accessible roads (that either take them along mountain paths, across rivers, or both). Many of them mark important places enroute to their homes, such as a temple, a post office or a block office where they often go to get documents signed and/or clarified. (ILL.2.15 – 2.18)



2.11 Dzongu Workshop: Stitching in the Ribbons on Agronet, Sept. 2012.



2.12 Dzongu Workshop: The Completed Hydro Map, Sept. 2012.



2.13 Dzongu Workshop: Completed Tent, View-1, Sept. 2012.



2.14 Dzongu Workshop: Completed Tent, View-2, Sept. 2012.

While we see the Lepcha participants come alive on the eco-tourism map, in case of the hydel project map, they are somewhat reluctant at first. The government's intention to dam the Teesta and other rivers in Sikkim to create 26 hydro-electric projects (7 in Dzongu) is clearly at odds with its 'green' reputation, largely built on the back of cancelling a major hydro-electric project 11 years earlier; however, it incorporates its 'Green' rhetoric in communications about the dams. It exhorts the 'pollution-free nature of hydro power, the low variable costs of generation, and the growing demand-supply gap for electricity in the country', when persuading the Sikkimese of the benefits of developing hydro-electric power. The dams however, will clearly drown some of the farmer's lands in Dzongu. Currently, this has been cleverly averted by the ACT movement, because of which three of the projects have been abandoned. Whereas, in the remaining projects, the Sikkim government is resorting to obfuscatory tactics like renaming existing project sites and changing names of places.

After stitching in all the flow lines and marking all the positions on the agronet, the shy Lepcha boys initially hesitate to work on it. We have to convince them to mark it with whatever word or sign needed to register their feelings. They register their dissent with the use of text. Words and sentences are inscribed in the Lepcha script; these translate as- 'Live nature naturally', 'We don't need dams', 'No dams', 'Stop the dam project', 'The last time the gods saved us, every time they won't come, so please take care of Nature', 'Dams are about scams' etc. The map of rejection is to be the map that demonstrates the wished future of the hydel projects. The use of girl's ribbons for working upon the maps is a deliberate device to mark the gender imbalance in the event. It is a mutually made choice. This reveals an interesting facet to the issue of gender among the Lepchas. Though in the city, one encounters Lepcha women as much more open in their visibility and engagements, this is not so in the villages where life and work are distributed along the divided gender line. However, from my close observation of the Lepchas in the workshop, interaction with their women in the home-stay (later) and generally following their pattern of life in the reserve, I am convinced that the participants adapt the idea of the ribbon by an amicable reflexivity. The completed map, thus becomes a complex document, where layers of choices of power, gender and protest are visible. (ILL 2.11- 2.12, 2.19-2.28)

### **2.4.3: Rhenock: Meeting of the Multiples**

(Community Hall, Rhenock Bazaar, 17 – 19 May, 2012)

Rhenock is a market place, a place where multiple identities reside and pass through, a place of heterogeneity. Rhenock Bazaar has its own dynamics of spatio-temporal transition, which is impossible to measure unless one is familiar with its inner working. As a place of transition, Rhenock has fought the monarchy and supported the accession to power of the democratic representatives. Though now, we can see mostly stasis. When Sisir, his school friends Dorjee and Nikhil, and I first reach sleepy Rhenock in March 2011, we enter the Daffodil Café for refreshment. The boys from Gangtok spot an old 1950s group photograph of some trainee government employees on the wall and are surprised to identify people they know. They identify some relatives, including an aunt. An interesting conversation then ensues between them and the café owner and they discover the connectives that exist across terrains and people. (ILL 2.55)

On my third visit in May 2012, Sanchayan, Sisir and I meet at the community hall of Rhenock Bazaar and take permission from the authorities to hold a workshop there. We also procure official maps of the place. I discover the interesting fact that while the land distribution maps produced officially evidence a status quo, in actuality there are shifts and adjustments in the spaces, made internally within the community. Also, unlike in the case of Dzongu, Sikkim's ethnic fabric is not reflected in any of these maps. This abstraction indicates a crisis and demands a subjective unpacking of the official map. As is our practice, for the workshop we get two different maps; a generic route map and the specific land distribution map – that talks about the place and its decisions. The Rhenock workshop has a group of mixed ethnicity, consisting of a majority of Nepalis, some Lepchas, Bhutias and one Bihari, all in the age group of 20–39 years. More than half of these have high school education, the remaining have bachelor degrees. Most of them are without regular jobs – self-employed in some manner or other; two of the older participants are government employees. None of them have any training in theatre, photography and video or map-making. Though, as I have noticed before, mobile phones are in popular use as cameras almost everywhere in the hills of Sikkim. Also, most of the hill tribes seem to be musically inclined

and play at least one instrument. Some of the participants are also locally known amateur singers. Sisir is also participating in this workshop.

The various interactive processes that take place before and during the workshop expose crises among the youth – especially regarding the anxieties of employment and the future. They mention a series of coercive as well as regulative policies, along with corruptions in the government. I notice that while talking of grievances, initially almost all the young people talk across their ethnic lines. This dialogical interaction intensifies as the workshop progresses.

On the maps that have been transferred on large transparent plastic sheets, some draw their home spaces; others incorporate their wishes, sometimes projecting the past as the future – as one participant does. He draws in a much-liked cinema hall that no longer exists. He fondly remembers it from his younger days as a public place of gathering and entertainment, and takes the map-making opportunity to bring it back in the imagined future. Gradually, a marketplace map gets personal and takes on expressiveness. While we urge all to locate positions in one register, by either tracing personal journeys or commenting on the maps, we emphasise that it is also permitted to leave marks of dissent. But, in Rhenock we find mostly people who want to operate within convention. Though the participants, who are mainly from Aritar and Rhenock, are eager to express their dissent verbally and gesturally, visually they trace their paths to home, which, upon enquiry, they confess to be easier.

With the different registers of textual and visual material thrown up during the process, we decide to intervene and produce a set of curtains/ screens. Earlier, while scouting the Rhenock market, I had discovered and sourced fabrics produced by three different ethnic communities (Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali). This material, signifying all three dominant ethnic groups of Sikkim, is stitched together into banners. (ILL.2.61, 2.62) The textual material, including explanations of the term Rhenock, poems, place names, descriptions of journeys and daily events are then inscribed on these. The completed maps and banners are now suspended like screens in different layers at the entry of the community centre in Rhenock Bazaar – a mise- en-scène of the workshop. (ILL.2.56 – 2.67)



2.55 Rhenock, Daffodil Café: The Boys from Gangtok Recognise a Relative in a Photograph, March 2011.



2.56 Rhenock Workshop: Tracing the Map, May 2012.



2.61 – 2.62 Rhenock Workshop: Stitching the Voices; Fabric Sourced from Different Ethnicities, May2012.



2.66 Rhenock Workshop: Bazaar Children Studying the Maps, May 2012.



2.67 The Rhenock Bazaar Workshop Mise-en-scène from the Street, May 2012.

#### **2.4.4 Gangtok or Mapping Desires**

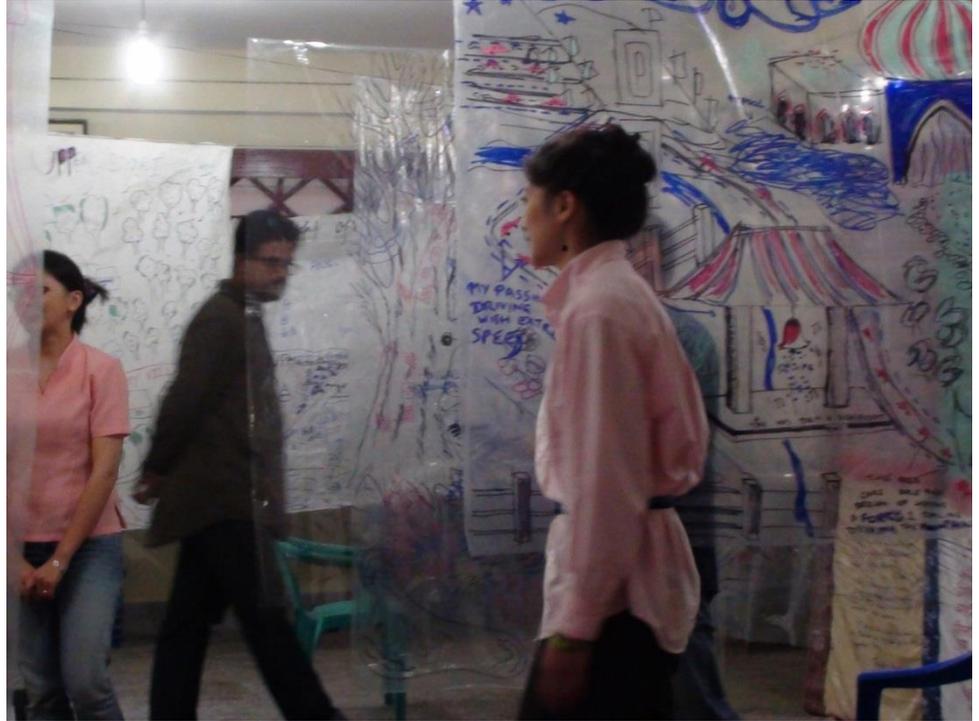
Workshop Venue: (Sikkim Sahitya Parishad Hall, 21-23 May 2012)

Gangtok has a gathering of Lepcha, Nepali and Bhutia participants. There are two people with mixed descent: one of Bihari-Nepali and the other of Nepali-Khasi origin. They are all between 20 and 30 years of age and of various educational backgrounds – high school, graduate and post graduate. One of them is still studying for his MBA. Sisir has done his Master's in Fine Arts and one other participant is an art college graduate. A few of the participants take occasional interest in amateur theatricals and a couple have some journalistic experience; though none of them has any formal training in theatre, photography or video-making. No one has any exposure to mapmaking.

I name this the Alien Nation Workshop, because I conceive this site as prominently, a place of contested identities; more so than any of the other sites in Sikkim – this being a metropolitan place of transit marked by heterogeneity. Interestingly, my first confrontation with my outsider status happens here, when I am asked of what relevance my current research will be to Sikkim, as I am an outsider and will eventually go away leaving the locals to deal with their situations as always. In defense, I reflect that the outsider perspective could be useful for local communities to learn about themselves; outsiders often observe things that escape the insiders who are too engaged with their daily living. Also, an outsider could partially gain insider sensibilities over time. I am vindicated in my response as, in the course of the workshop, many of the participants who have studied in multi-ethnic circumstances or outside Sikkim realise their respective contextual outsideness. (ILL.2.72)

The relativity of the insider-outsider dynamics becomes evident to the Gangtok participants in the course of the mapping activity. They work on individual maps, expressing their particular desires, disappointments and fantasies. Before and after this process, the various currents of thought are discussed in a round table. Below, are some of the visualisations, along with the profiles of the participants. (ILL. 2.73 – 2.86)





2.83 – 2.84 Gangtok Workshop: Mise-en-scène, May 2012.

### A Utopian work

Songay is a Sikkimese girl of Bhutia lineage with a degree in literature from Calcutta, and a post graduate degree in media studies from Delhi. She draws a diagram, which is like a wheel with spokes radiating from the centre. She defines the spokes as a process of transformation from the current society to a fairer and more democratic society with a better gender balance, equality, and freedom of speech and thought. (ILL.2.74, 2.85)

### A Mapped Wish List

Roshni Chettri, a girl in her mid-twenties, of mixed Nepalese and Khasi parentage, was born and brought up in Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya. She got her higher education from Delhi and was subsequently employed as a copywriter in an advertising agency. She is newly married and this is her first stay in Sikkim. In the workshop, she draws a picture that is primarily a wishful projection for her locality – Todong, where she now lives with her in-laws. Her drawing consists of roads circumnavigating intermittently scattered hillocks, existing shops in the area, and multistoried buildings that are randomly coming up in gross violation of the local laws of construction (implemented after the earthquake of the 18 September 2011) and of which she does not approve. All these are put in alongside drawings of imaginary inhabitants' houses: artists, poets, writers, thinkers, philosophers and so on. The end result is a picture that mixes, what exists, with what she wishes was there in Todong. It is interesting to notice that she packs both together, placing in a utopian manner, a poet, an artist, and a filmmaker in a community where, today, in reality, only professionals like doctors, lawyers, and engineers (boring mercenary professionals, according to Roshni), live.

### Residual Drawing

The drawing of a map of Ongmit's twin villages, takes her back to the Lepcha community, in the north of Sikkim, even though she and her immediate family are settled in Gangtok. She need not have gone back to her roots. Yet, when given the option of drawing the picture of either her known world or of a world that she wishes for, she chooses to draw these two villages in the north, the traditional preserve of the Lepcha communities. The drawings help her imagine the difference between the fact of belonging and dwelling in that community and

her current race for a BBA degree and subsequent employment. Even while drawing the picture, Ongmit is not too sure if the village heads would approve. (ILL.2.73)

### Doma's Story

Doma is a Bhutia girl who studied Ceramics from Santiniketan and is a practising artist in Delhi. She also has had a brief stint in a corporate job. She draws a map that consists of an imaginary projection of the future of her home in Sikkim. It is interesting to note that most of the participants from the upper-classes who also have somewhat progressive multi-city backgrounds, paint their maps in a colourful and imaginary manner. They find the future to be a more interesting thing to address, than the reality of the present. Doma, thus, draws a palace and its surroundings where clouds hover above the familiar and the unfamiliar, in a somewhat cohabited temporality. (ILL.2.86)

### Daily Life as a Map

Kewal Parihar is a graduate who works as a tour operator. He studied in the Aritar High School and has joined the workshop in Gangtok at the request of Rajeev Pradhan who was his teacher. Seniors are respected in the Nepali society, additionally there is a community bonding among people in mountain villages with sparse populations. Kewal is probably also interested in cultivating us as people who could be useful to his future plans, as we are from Calcutta and associated with a university. He aims to open a resort close to the Bengal border. With the help of a friend from the village, he composes a map that covers an entire journey from his village to the Rhenock market. Interestingly, temples form the central accents of his map and not the habitual schools or colleges; even his home is missing.

## **2.5 Gestures: Communitas**

In the different workshops we encounter people with different responses to questions thrown up and issues raised during the process. Aiming towards the translation of these into gestural form, we introduce the theatre games involving simultaneous physical movements, attempts at reading others' intentions, mutual

reciprocations either with word, sentence or gestures – creating webs of phenomenological situation. One of the first is ‘Follow the Leader’, in which everyone is expected to replicate the gestures of a changing leadership. Whereas the gestures are common in all the workshops, the contents are differentiated, as they arise either from the dynamics of location, or are chosen by the participants on the spot – turning location into pure contingency. Thus, in the spirit of Victor Turner<sup>275</sup> who analysed the ritual aspects of social drama as well as the social drama embedded in the rituals such as the rites of passages – the different sites show up their difference of constitution, or different rites of passage. As in a rite of passage, the workshop process is potentially a community in perpetual postponement – a ‘*communitas*’.

In Rhenock, the community is conspicuous by absence; there is a vast amount of difference between a Bihari migrant, a minority Bhutia and a Nepali business class (Bahun or Pradhan). Extraneous class relations or subliminal caste relations, however do not surface in public places, what surface are what they say or write on the different registers of interaction in the workshop, which range from somewhat intimate to collaborative and even public gestures. In difference to the traditional ethnography, there is no clear ethnoscape, no coherence to be found in the community orientation of a market, where everyone has merged down their differences for mutual benefit. The workshop is held in the community centre on Thursday and Friday, both of which are days for local *haat* (flea market) and hence crowded. The familiarisation games, find people hesitant in the beginning, but gradually, they begin to get intimate in small groups and engage in conversation. The responsibility of decision-making falls, by turn, on each individual.

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<sup>275</sup> According to Richard Schechner, the theatre theorist who explained Turner in his book – *Essays in Performance Theory* and is quoted by Turner in *The Anthropology of Performance*, “Victor Turner analyses ‘Social Dramas’ using theatrical terminology to describe disharmonic or crisis situations. These situations – arguments, combats and rites of passage – are inherently dramatic not only because participants do things, they try to show others what they are doing or have done, actions take on a ‘performed-for-an- audience’ aspect.” Victor Turner, *Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 74.

Turner’s concept of performance has a distinction from Schechner and Goffmann’s concepts, which have a structuralist or formalist orientation. For Turner, performance is more akin to the ritual process that does not have formal strictures but is governed by symbols.

In Dzongu, however, the balance topples in favour of the rebel voices against developmental anomalies. Words are punctuated by absurd, but limited gestures, compensated by the swiftness of movement, agility and athletic skills; these are manoeuvred for making human sculptures. (ILL 2.29 – 2.36) In the ‘Mirror Game’, where there is always subject-object confusion that takes a turn for an intimate reciprocation, the sense of familiarity pronounces itself. During ‘Follow the Leader’, the participants with activist background are galvanized to the slogan of *achulay*. Once this verbalisation starts, the commonality gets pronounced and initial hesitations vanish. *Achulay* in Lepcha is a word like *zindabad* in Hindi-Urdu, which means long live; *Mutanchi rongkup achulay!* – Mother Nature’s loved ones, Long Live! (ILL.2.37– 2.40)

The political dimension of this phrase, especially *achulay* – that has made it relevant in contemporary context, was revealed to me from reports of the governmental resistance to it. The Sikkim government tries to project the ACT movement as an ‘outsiders’ conspiracy’ and hence, has issued public warning against anti-dam activism. According to Lyangsong Tamsang as quoted by Kerry Little:

‘Aachuley’ literally means ‘Hail to the Himalayas’... a sacred and holy word, a mantra of the Lepchas. ‘Aachuley’ is a sacred call of the Lepchas to their God, Goddess, Guardian Deity living in the Sikkim Himalayas. It is definitely not, repeat not, a political slogan of the Lepchas... no one can stop and deny the Lepcha people from uttering, calling, exclaiming and shouting their sacred and holy word, ‘aachuley’.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Kerry Little says: Auchuley meant Kanchun Dzongpa but was appropriated by Tibetan Buddhism to have a more militaristic traditional meaning – warrior of the mountain gates. “Deep Ecology,”54.

Little started out as an inquirer into the Lepcha’s natural habits; but when the environmental activism started, she switched her focus and started following up on one of the most intriguing and committed engagements with environmental activism. Through her entire research, she followed the anti-dam movement’s course from 2003 to 2008, till the end of the hunger strike in 2008. She did it much like a creative writer, a journalist and a concerned environmental activist. Her concerns were touching on anthropology, but were not entrenched. While, this would somewhere intersect with my concerns, Little’s attempt was largely textual, narrative and rhetorical and not cognitive or interactive, in the sense that she did not seem to have gone beyond the ambit of activism. My approach, on the other hand is multi-sited and has different consequences- it does not have the anxiety of the end in view. I, in contrast to her, aim at harnessing the energies of the environmental concern via the participant’s cognitive articulations.

Little further says:

By accusing Lepchas shouting “*aachuley*” of political agitation the government has given the word deeper meaning in the context of protest. When Lepchas call out “*aachuley*”, it may now have an association that includes the victimization of Kalimpong and Darjeeling.<sup>277</sup>

## 2.6 Between Two Septembers: A Long Day (of conversations)

During the workshop in Dzongu, we attempt to circumscribe the situational dynamics of living in Dzongu. Each one of the participants takes up a notebook, writes down the experiential aspects of everyday, the sociality and changes that he perceives. Because, Dzongu is an exclusive domain where change is not so much expected or welcome and because the participants are activists, this method appeals to all of us.

[In the following conversations and henceforth – **DTL** denotes Dawa Tsering Lepcha, **TTL** denotes Tsering Tendrup Lepcha, **TWL** denotes Tsingwaga Lepcha, **PL** denotes Phurba Lepcha **PN** denotes Pintso Namgyal, **SL** denotes Sree Lepcha]

**SG:** What are the aspects of changes you see in your culture?

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<sup>277</sup> Like many of the songs of love sung for Dzongu by Lepchas as anthems to culture, ‘achulay’ now has a wider meaning and poignancy related to the loss of the Lepchas’ holy land. It has a new emotion attached to it and like many other Lepcha words, songs, and stories, is part of the ‘glue of solidarity’ that forms the collective identity of the protestors. Jasper says the “strength of an identity comes from its emotional side.”

Kerry Little, “Lepcha Narrative of Their Threatened Sacred Landscapes,” *Transforming Cultures* 3, no.1 (2003): 18-19, 46.

“Lepchas from the neighbouring state could not be persuaded or ‘victimized’ out of their protest. They were referred to as ‘outsiders’ with ‘vested interests’... During a trip to Sikkim in early 2008, I noticed a new protest narrative; strung across the main Dzongu Road, large banners, erected by pro-project supporters caution: ‘Decision Taken by Landowners, *Panchayats* (village administration) and Government is Final’ and a warning to the Kalimpong and Darjeeling Lepchas: ‘External Interference in Dzongu is Not Acceptable’. This was ‘protest against the protest’ a pro government narrative/ warning trying to stop and/or hijack the protest narrative.” *Ibid.*, 6.

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess fought the dam projects, and while doing so, planted the seeds that would later become the Deep Ecology Movement. Naess and his fellow protestors chanted a protest motto “Let the river live!” which Naess described, “Exactly as if a river also had a life of its own ... we never heard people saying, ‘a river cannot be alive’.

“Little, “Deep Ecology”, 40, 57.

The opposition to hydro-electric projects that were built in Norway after World War II, including the Alto project, led to the ecophilosophy movement. The movement recognised that the threat of the dams went further than the physical environment, also affecting the cultural environment. For ecophilosophy, natural and environmental preservation includes... culture. *Ibid.*, 7.

**ADG:** Would you please register these changes in your writings?

**SG:** Yes, please do register the changes – like in everyday lifestyle.

**ADG:** Changes that you find from your grandparents' time to your time; changes in relations, in people's attitude... those differences that seem significant to you – about land, property, social security...you can write about it all...

**SG:** You can write in Hindi or Nepali

**ADG:** You can write in both or if your mother tongue is other than these two, you can write in your mother tongue... You can use any script – Roman, Devanagari or Lepcha

**SG:** Lepcha scripts are available?

**ADG:** Yes they are, you saw Ongmit writing in that in the last workshop, remember?

[The participants finish writing and start voicing their thoughts now]

**PN:** Earlier, jobs used to come easily, now that prospect is shrinking.

**SG:** But what kind of Jobs?

**PN:** Government jobs.

**DTL:** It was like... if someone sat at home after passing the class 8 exam, for example, or may be class 10 exam (secondary school), recruiters from the government offices would reach him/ her and offer a job, it was that easy!

**TL:** At their own cost, they would pick you up and take you away, they needed you...

**PN:** But people would refuse to go, often...

**SG:** What kind of jobs?

**DTL and TL:** Government jobs, any job...

**SG:** From the Lepcha community there were many who went to schools at that time, no?

**TL:** No, there were too small a number who wanted to study at that time.

**ADG:** Which is the time you are talking about?

**TL:** It was the time when Sikkim had just merged with India.

**SG:** So, is it your parents who went to school for the first time?

**TL:** Yes, they were the first, before their generation nobody went.

[He looks pensive, may be at the realisation that he is just a second generation literate (though from a good school).]

**SG:** Isn't there a lot of change in the job practice today? What was there earlier?

**TL:** Earlier there were regular jobs like teaching and clerical jobs etc.

**SG:** But are people going out of Dzongu to other places for jobs?

**TL:** Most are going out these days.

**ADG:** Do those who go out keep in touch, or do they just come occasionally?

**TL:** They just come occasionally!

**ADG:** Like visitors?

**TL:** Yeah, like visitors.

**SG:** Then most of the village life is changing... then what do you see your elders doing in the village? You are a generation of young adults; yet your generation is not engaged anywhere!

[He seems to be provoking the boys. They fall silent, perhaps, not knowing what to say.]

**ADG:** Along with that, I might add in the form of a question- what do you want to do in the future? What are your aspirations? About this place...?

**TL:** To come back to this place and settle and not depend too much on the government. The dependency is killing us!

**ADG:** In Dzongu too?

**PN:** Yes in Dzongu, we would like to rely on autonomy...to be independent.<sup>278</sup>

**TL:** We are already independent... if we say we don't want anything from government, the government shrinks! [He makes a gesture of shrinking]

**SG:** What is your vision of autonomy? Instead of taking help from the government, how else are you planning?

**TL:** We are farming, separately, earlier also people farmed but they took a lot of help. But now we can reach the market without government help. There is

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<sup>278</sup> Later, in a personal conversation I figure out that Tenzing, like most of the activists with active ethnic orientations, is now trying to think along a connected network. This connective in the context of the Northeast or to an extent North Bengal (Coochbehar), might even lead to either a demand for autonomous council (as in case of the neighbouring Darjeeling), or a demand for a state (like the Bodoland movement among several others in Assam), or even a separate country (as in case of NSCN of Nagaland or ULFA of Assam). But this, as a political argument, if seen positively, is also an argument against the possible hegemonic lens through which the centrist and 'liberal' Indian state has looked at the periphery in its policies and provisions (e.g. Schedule 5 and 6 of Indian constitution).

"The fifth schedule did not provide for self-government; the sixth schedule allowed for the establishment of autonomous councils. Indeed, at least one member of the Constituent Assembly regretted that the tribes falling under the fifth schedule got short shrift by having to settle for powerless 'Tribal Advisory Councils' compared with the autonomous district and regional councils in the sixth schedule."

Selma K. Sonntag, "Autonomous Councils in India: Contesting the Liberal Nation-State," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 24, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1999): 415–434.

another context to this – previously, Dzongu was the largest producer of cardamom, now this has changed. The people earned a lot of money and then they drank off the money, blew it all up. At that time, other people used to come to work for our people...Then, the cardamom started dying out, slowly. Now, those who grew cardamom have started growing vegetables.

**SG:** Is cardamom still an active crop here?

**TL:** Only 10 to 20 percent.

**SG:** You are not trying to find a remedy?

**TL:** Yes, we are trying.

**ADG:** Is there a reason that the land loses its attachment to a particular crop and hence it stops growing?

**TL:** Yes, that is possible, whoever we call, has his/ her own explanation for what is happening. Some say that the land has gone infertile; some say that the plants are ill... When I asked the very old people, they said- “In our times, cardamom was produced so much but we used to worship, now people are more selfish so they don’t worship...”

**SG:** So nature takes its revenge...

[We change the topic]

**ADG:** And why couldn’t the women come to the workshop? Are they so very busy, or are there restrictions on them?

**SL:** No, no restrictions. They are in school.

**ADG:** All the girls are in school? There is no one like you, who have finished college?

**TWL and TTL:** [Laughing] No, they all go away...

**ADG:** You mean all the girls get jobs outside Dzongu, or are they married off?

**PN:** Yes, girls grow up and often get a chance to do apprenticeship or get jobs... not always big jobs, but these days they at least, have some options.

[After repeated enquiry about why the women were not coming to the workshop despite several requests, Tenzing gave up trying to make me understand his common sense reasons and put me through, at dinner time, to the women of the family who took care of our meals at the home-stay. His mother and sister-in-law laughed aloud, seemingly, at my naivety and said they were participating, only, in the kitchen. They explained that if they were to attend our workshop we would go hungry. In fact that is the ground truth, I realised, of the societies with somewhat fixed division of labour. Women are in charge of the hearth, while men are the procurers. They took pride in getting the food prepared for us while the workshop was on.]

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**ST:** [translating the conversation they are having among themselves] Earlier if someone was angry he would say – ‘I will make you witness your father’s marriage!’ They are saying this won’t apply today, since many people marry after the child is born. So, if you apply that for the purpose of abusing someone, they might retort, ‘Well, I have seen my father’s marriage, how about you?’

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[Dawat Tsering Lepcha from Labong reads his writing on the changes that he has perceived in his surroundings.]

**DTL:** Mobile phones have brought a great change in the village life. Earlier, only the rich could afford them, when I saw one the first time, I couldn’t tell what it was. Before, we had to run to deliver information to a distant place and it was very tiring. In the beginning, only a few people in Dzongu had mobiles so we had to go to them to send messages.

**PL:** Earlier mobile signified class difference, now every individual has a mobile, so our daily life has changed.

**SG:** What are the exact changes?

**DTL:** Changes like – if I have to send information, I don't have to walk.

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[Phurba Lepcha reads his writing]

**PL:** It's about development and pollution – The title is:

'Development has Brought Pollution'. [He reads in Lepcha. I notice that there are no Lepcha words for radio, television and pollution.]

**DTL:** [translating it for us] It means in the world there are plants and animals – the creator's best creation is human beings, so they help each other and also destroy each other. Humans made things which bring profit and also incur loss at the same time. Humans made all these factories and cars, which help human progress at the cost of environment. From factories, we get air pollution and water pollution; from cars – air and noise pollution.

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[Tsingwaga Lepcha has written a song. He reads first in Lepcha and then translates]

**TWL:** I was born in Lingdong. This is my village, it is called Lingdong – whenever I open my mouth, I wish to pronounce her name. What people see from outside, is not the entire thing, inside, life is different.

[He shows us another written song, '*Yang are kayu sa ...*' We request him to sing it. He sings, then translates]

This is my place, but don't stay in your dream state, wake up and start out  
The world out there is different,  
Now it's time to leave sleep-walking behind.

**ADG:** So, this is your song and a very recent one, written within a year or so?  
Do you remember any other songs?

**SG:** Anything that relates to nature?

**ADG:** The notebook is with you, please write down if you recall any other song.  
Or, you call a friend... [Everyone laughs.]

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**DTL:** You are from Calcutta? We have a friend there who is doing graduation and also does tattoos.

**ADG:** So, that is the secret behind your tattoo? So it is home made! Can you show it please?

[Everyone laughs and jokes about it.]

**DTL:** [Hesitantly shows his triceps where the tattoo is and explains] It's when I was very young!

**SG:** [exclaiming] A woman in jeans!

**PN:** This guy makes the tattoo very well.

**ADG:** What's his name?

**PN:** Paljor.

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[Tsering Tandop Lepcha reads his piece.]

**TTL:** Dzongu is in North Sikkim, in this place total people is of Lepcha community. This place is rich in flora and fauna. The interesting thing is that the outsiders don't get permission very easily to enter. The place is reserved for Lepcha people, and is a sacred place. Now, the mindset of the people of Dzongu has changed, they work in the offices and other non-agricultural sectors. Earlier, people lived in huts, but nowadays they live in concrete buildings. Due to advanced technology, people have more knowledge about the competitive world.

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[Pintso is the youngest participant aged approximately 19 years, passed 12<sup>th</sup> standard, he is a brother of Tenzing Lepcha.]

**PN:** I have created separate section for each category [shows his book]. Technology, transportation, education etc...

[He reads] Before there was only radio, now there is television, there was black and white at first, now colour. Earlier, there was only one channel now there are several. You have some choice, people watch adverts also. Earlier people watched films on VCP then VCD and now DVD and computer too. Earlier there

was only desktop, now laptop. [Tsingwaga Lepcha, the singer, has a laptop with him in the workshop.]

Now, mobile has dominated everything, we can call, use it for video, and use it as still camera, for internet as well. Earlier only the rich people could use mobiles, but now everyone has it.

About education – earlier the education system was very poor, now in every corner of the village there are schools and a system of learning has evolved. It has become very easy and advanced.

In transportation sector – we had to walk to Mangan before, but now, there are a lot of vehicles. Earlier people depended on farming only, but now people mostly depend on government facilities. Before, I remember from my childhood, every year people from the village used to get together and go for a picnic, but now no one shows interest, people are busy with their own life only.

By way of conclusion, from my point of view – people are becoming, or will become lazy, day by day. Like in the field of transportation – before they used to walk, but now, they want to go by vehicle even if the distance is one or two kilometres.

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The voices that spill over from the conversations are largely of disappointment with development, which is somewhat puzzling for me. Having also interacted with Lepchas in Gangtok and Kalimpong, I thought it was an anthropological bane to project a community as disinterested in development, job creation and capital, as this. In contrast, the Lepcha Youth Association members who are largely urban (of which Ongmit, who participated in our Gangtok workshop, is an active member), are much more interested in the overall development and in participation in the capital intensive processes, like the latest Lepcha Fashion Show. (ILL. 2.53) Many of the young participants of Dzongu also have good education. For instance, Tenzing, along with Sisir, studied in Tashi Namgyal Academy – a reasonably elite school, on a scholarship. He, therefore, can be considered equal to the Youth Association members, yet holds a view different from them, because of the sheer difference of location and choice, or lack of it. For Kerry Little, an outsider anthropologist and researcher of mass movements from Australia – who was a participant observer in the ACT movement at its earlier stage – this puzzle has a different answer:

A Lepcha leader from Darjeeling told me the following story, 'Lepchas come from Mount Khanchenjunga. The pure snow, created by God, in his right hand, to pick this up, pure snow from Khanchenjunga. This boy, his name is Fadongthing, created by God. First Lepcha person. Lepcha man. From left hand, from snow, he make Nazaong nyoo, meaning girl, he first created... Lepchas, first mother and father. First god creation of Lepcha boys and girls from pure snow from Khanchenjunga.'

It is the Lepcha activists' unification with their landscape and everything in it that makes it so impossible for them to accept major infrastructure development on their land.<sup>279</sup>(ILL. 2.21 – 2.22)

## 2.7 Travelling with: Time

### 2.7.1 Film Time: Satyajit Ray's Sikkim

An 'outsidedness' need not be pronounced out loud, unless there is an overt disagreement with what is inside. The Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray (1921–92), fairly eminent by 1971, was approached by the then Chogyal of Sikkim, Palden Namgyal, for a documentary film on Sikkim. Of 53 minutes, it avowedly expounds on the aspects of sovereignty in Sikkim. Ray echoed the stated stricture of the governing monarchy, in describing the aim of the film (as that of emphasising the sovereignty of Sikkim).

It was the only film by Ray which was banned, not once, but twice, the first time in 1975. Circumstantially, a second time again, in November 2010. People who spoke in defence of the film said various things, among which two views seem interesting, because of their ironic dimensions. Gautam Ghosh – a maverick

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<sup>279</sup> My stance is different from Little's, though I appreciate her position of an entrenched anthropologist. She is an outsider much like me, or any other anthropologist, trying to fathom a 'deep time' via the deep ecology. She has collaged the activist scenario from what she has read, seen and heard, but she carries within her a deep precipitation of the so-called rescue anthropology which classically vexes the anthropological time. The way she changed her moves from an environmental study in 2004 to an engaged activist study against the developmentalism is admirable though and shows she is much attached. My project, since it follows a question and does not start with the claim of original invention, does not align with her project.

experimental filmmaker – said there was no controversy in the film. And, Sandip Ray, Ray's son, during the release of the film in a CD version in January 2012, said that the film was about the flora and fauna of Sikkim.<sup>280</sup> Of course, Ray was not only capable of attending to the complex problems of society and politics, but also of being sensitive to nature *per se*, for which the film is now advertised – probably following his lead when he said:

While they are reaching this point I cut to a shot of a piece of telegraph wire. It's raining and there are the drops of rain approaching on a downward curve. It's a very poetic seven minutes. And the end is also very lively, very optimistic, with children, happy, smoking, laughing, singing... The whole thing builds up into a paean of praise for the place.<sup>281</sup>

But, both commentators, it seems to me, miss the point: for Ray, a believer in authorial tradition, was a master stylist of film; he would maintain the humanist style and flow, much in the spirit of celebration of life, only to wait for the right moment for introducing the counter flow, the antithesis. In this film, that cinematic moment visits us when during the annual festivity of *Pang Lhabsol* in the palace compound, in the presence of all the dignitaries of the state of Sikkim who are dining, the masses are shown squatting at a distance, awaiting the service of lunch. Ray's camera pans to capture the anomaly of the scenography, in a single sweep.

Perhaps in order to trace Ray's journey with this film, we have to take the help of another agency of outsidership, the BBC, whose website still contains the details that we cannot see in the film anymore. According to the BBC:

When the film was completed, the king and his wife were reportedly furious – especially over a shot that showed poor people scrambling for leftover food behind the royal palace in the capital, Gangtok.

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<sup>280</sup> Film sourced at: [http://eedasmethresd.in.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikkim\\_\(film\)](http://eedasmethresd.in.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikkim_(film)).

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

"My father was asked to drop some shots and redo the final product," said Sandip Ray, "He did that but the situation changed."<sup>282</sup> Ray was definitely disappointed, but maintained silence about this episode throughout his life. His expression however took another form – that of metafiction – a detective novella titled 'Trouble in Gangtok' (Bengali original – *Gangtokey Gondogol*, published in 1971, the same year as the film). In this fiction, outsidership is used as an alibi to deal with the controversies over lineage and property. The transnationality of the lineage of an Indian businessman, who is partly located in Sikkim in search of herbs, and his travels, are instrumental in building up the drama of the narrative and bringing together all the other characters – a business partner, the lost son of the businessman, two imposters including a malevolent soothsayer, and the detective trio. In the plot there are actual and attempted murders, there are maskings and deceptions; the location is Gangtok, which was yet to emerge as a tourist destination at the time.

The Chogyal's disappointment is understandable. He and his American wife Hope Cook commissioned Ray, who they thought would boost the public image of their increasingly inauthentic monarchy, (supported till this time by the Government of India, whose protectorate it was). Ray certainly was not completely anti-monarchy in a radical way. But having grown up in a civil humanist and democratic cultural tradition, he couldn't have avoided showing the starkness of poverty and contrast it with the glitz and ostentation of the palace. For, he had to serve his purpose as a humanist filmmaker of his time; as an observer who sustains faith in an ethical position unencumbered by material interest.<sup>283</sup>

Hence, even after the cutting of the controversial episode from the documentary, the rest of the scenography exposes anomalies of life forms and culture in a suggestive and subtle way. Sikkim's political ambience and its location in the

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<sup>282</sup> Satyajit Ray's film on Sikkim: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11345987>.

<sup>283</sup> This position is not necessarily a product of Ray's encounter with Sikkim. It has its past distributed in many other films by the author, whose single most interesting unfinished Hollywood project is *Alien*. *Alien* is a benevolent entity that arrives when a developmental project starts building its corrupt nexus in a village. An allegorical treatment of a simple theme of the arrival of an alien space ship at a remote village, which unpacks the entire context – of corruption, collaboration, complicity and rapport – the entry and exit of an ethnographic outsidership as evident to Ray's rational estimation, attains an articulation in the guise of science fiction.

sensitive and strategic zone of international borderland, partly explains this amount of hide and seek between the media, the public and the republic, wherein Ray's Sikkim acted as a pawn.

### **2.7.2 The Temporal Supplement: Anna's Anthropological Documentary**

Anna Balikci-Denjongpa is a Canadian anthropologist, settled in Sikkim as the Director of the Sikkim Archive Project at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok. In the process of setting up a Sikkim archive in 2003, Balikci-Denjongpa made an anthropological audio-visual project. After the six films that she, along with her team, produced for the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (publicly available), she wrote a report on the project.<sup>284</sup>

Balikci's report works at a variance with her film. For, the task of the report is to situate the circumstances of making the documentaries that unabashedly itemise the aspects of life of the Lepchas, and occasionally, the Lhopos (or Bhutias; the main object of her thesis and her subsequent book). Her book – *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors Village Religion of Sikkim* – is a completely different area and extremely useful. It would be interesting to identify certain strategies and their parallels in all the three genres – the report, the films and the book.

Primarily, though, the book comes out as an extension to her thesis on the Bhutias of Tingchim (a village on the way to Dzongu in North Sikkim), it generalises on the core thematic. Though, everyone agrees that Lepchas and Bhutias do share certain aspects of faith and even ethnicity, it is also increasingly clear that the concept of indistinct mixture of the two is inextricably associated with the self-serving mythic history of the monarchy. The transition, from monarchy to annexation of Sikkim to India, and subsequently, to electoral democracy was a process that a section of the people, primarily the Lhopos, did not take very well. They were Bhutias, direct immigrants from Tibet – as were the kings who founded the kingdom in the seventeenth century – and identified the kingdom as their own. It was looked upon as a personal loss by many people

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<sup>284</sup> Anna Balikci-Denzongpa, "The Sikkim Video Archive: A Collaborative Effort Between Anthropologists, Indigenous Film Makers and the Local Community," presented in seminar Future Past: Cultural Heritage and Collaborative Ethnographic Film Work (to be published).

of the clan, as an injustice and as coercion on the part of India and the indigenous populace of largely Nepali migrants.

Anna, partially sympathises with and participates in the process of the Lhopo identity, not only because it is her research topic, but also because she is intimately part of the field she studies, by virtue of her marriage to a Lhopo, Denzongpa, an aspect of access we discuss later in the context of her report. The films are her post-research project under the guidance of her famous anthropologist filmmaker father Asen Balikci.<sup>285</sup>

Her research in Tingchim was directed towards seeing how the Bon or the village animism/ Shamanism works together with Tibetan Lamaism, all of which are in fine balance with the state's own program and the dominant Nepali populace. Yet, viewers of her film would have a different, relational and discursive experience. Because, she has evidently reserved the huge amount of information processing and thoroughness only for her book; the films – that she calls collaborative and ethnographic – under the 'Sikkim video archive project', work as an in-between to the researched book and the report on the filming process. The six films are: 'Tingvong: A Lepcha Village in Sikkim', 'Cham in Sikkimese Village of Phensang', 'Chaap Chu: A Little Known Sikkimese Buddhist Ritual', the well-received 'Ritual Journeys', 'Cham in the Lepcha Village of Lingthem', and 'Lingvong'.

Her main contention in the thesis was to establish the different dynamics of relation between Buddhism and Bon and through that, a Lhopo culture other than the stereotypical Lhopo cultures of the elites and the Kazis; yet it is situated in the Lhopo village close to the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu. The village Tingchim does not feature in any of her films, and hence her films are not amenable to close scrutiny. All of them feature the village of Dzongu (mostly Upper Dzongu). Also, the Buddhist monastic rituals are treated separately and the Bongthing or Padim (the village shaman) features in a separate film. Despite the emphasis on

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<sup>285</sup> Asen Balikci's (b.1929- ) anthropological filming follows a different trajectory of the cold war/ sputnik era, that had an important, if constructionist, role in the cold war alternative politics, but gradually faded as the search and enthusiasm for the third space of other culture romance waned.

relationality and the interdependence of the local Shamanistic animism and Buddhist religious practices (where the emphasis is usually on textuality, rather than on orality), the relational aspect is conspicuous by its absence from her films; the ethnicities are conveniently itemised. This fact, she admits in her report. The films are merely supplement to the criticality one finds in her book; they are mostly spectacle. One wonders whether this is much like what the head Lama of Lingthem monastery said of the future of the Cham ritual performances (which, as the film textually highlights, has deeper meaning for the Buddhist Lamas) – that the dances will remain but will lose all contextual meaning and become pure entertainment.<sup>286</sup>

Though, her book is extremely sensitive to the case of the Lhopos, the loss of land, the threat to culture and the aspect of access (highlighted in her report), the same treatment is absent in the films. The critical rendering of a community that once advantageously shared rapport with the king, but has now lost its older privileges, produces the anxiety that has affected many anthropological films. Primarily this marks the film as somewhat vexed supplement.<sup>287</sup>

Adhering to the common anthropological practice of referencing communities against climactic aspects, most of the travel and anthropological writings on Sikkim (e.g. Geoffrey Gorer, A.R. Foning, David Lang, J.C. White) indicate its arctic weather. Since, Asen Balikci's major works are on Eskimos, it would be only natural for him to be advisor to his daughter's venture into the filming of the eastern Himalayas.

In his time, in the post-World War II – Cold War era of the 60s, they had the task of rediscovering the anthropological film's purpose. So, climactic behaviourism would be, I have reason to suppose, the base for training eyes and mind in

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<sup>286</sup> Anna Balikci-Denzongpa, *Cham in the Lepcha Village of Lingthem*, duration 50min (Gangtok: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, 2007), DVD. This documentary is completely shot by the cameraman Dawa Lepcha.  
<http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collection/journals/bot/pdf/bot.2003-01-05.pdf>.

<sup>287</sup> In the context of another film *Ritual Journeys*, Dawa kept following the *padim* (shaman) from 2002 to 2010 and people of Dzongu believe it to be his film – according to the blurb of the DVD. Dawa, though has no such tall claims, since in a personal interview in September 2012, he tells me that he does not know any theory, he is no ethnographer and he only learnt the 'observational method' from Asen Balikci, along with Anna. The role distinction between the native informant and the translocal ethnographer, in rapport economy still remains blurred.

anthropological/ ethnographic observation. As for his role in the Sikkim documentary project, the participants have an unsaid privilege, which could be the alibi of being beginners – a claim to innocence of the metafiction.

## **2.8 The Report**

The project of an entrenched anthropologist who is carrying out a participant-observer angle may bring up questions of knowing distances, which the rapport economy somewhat obfuscates. There are two models of interactivity, which may emerge from Balikci's report and the films, in the context of my multi-sitedness and outsidership – in contrast to the familiar gestures of being there.

According to Balikci, the process of completing her anthropological project helped build relationships with the local communities, thus making some of the members effectively confident in documenting, commenting upon, and representing their own culture. Her report exposes those very dynamics that theorists have posited as key documents of reflexivity and meta-discipline. This report was written after the six films were produced. There is also one unfinished film on Lachen, the rough-cut of which she gave me privileged access to.

The report does not just constitute an anthropological notebook. Through it, she brings forth the dynamics of relations between the different disciplines as well as the different groups involved in her research-cum-film project. The economy and conflict of positions are often expressed (albeit, subtly). Her report is rife with suggestions of inner conflicts and contradictions within the insular communities; but never within the majority of Nepalese (75% of the population) who, by her description, have occupied the region since the 1860s with the result of unsettling the traditional Bhutia Lepcha populace and reducing it to a mere 20%. She says in her report, "As a result, Sikkim's indigenous cultures are quickly eroding, and it was thought that a documented video recording be made in some of its most traditional villages while the exercise is still thought to be worthwhile." This is

typical of what Marcus designates as 'salvage ethnography.'<sup>288</sup> She also writes how the relative purity of the indigenous cultures is being maintained in Lachen and Dzongu. To quote her:

This is partly due to the fact that both communities are located in remote areas that are restricted and where outsiders are forbidden to settle on a permanent basis; even indigenous Sikkimese from elsewhere of the state require special permits to enter these protected areas on casual visits. This has, to some extent limited the influence of the Nepali language in both Dzongu and Lachen, a language which is dominant now in other regions of the state.<sup>289</sup>

In her research, Anna was accompanied by Dawa Lepcha and Phurba Bhutia, who are former residents of these places and belong to the community. Anna herself admits to being accepted as a 'daughter-in-law,' which she is, by virtue of having married a Bhutia. This report then shows a complexity of interpersonal and potentially inter-community relations in the process of gaining an access to the culture as revealed in the circumstantial descriptions of the making of her anthropological films. She writes:

Projects such as ours are usually carried out by outsiders — Westerners, or Indians from Mumbai or Delhi — who come to Sikkim for a few weeks or months to carry out a particular study and then disappear.<sup>290</sup> The fact that we were a local team inspired confidence and opened many doors. Not only were we locals, we were from the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, the only government sponsored institution in Sikkim devoted to the study of Buddhism and the cultures

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<sup>288</sup> Marcus explains it as an ethnographic attitude that believes in rescuing ethnicities and cultures that are perceived as dying. Beginning in the 1960s, many anthropologists, including Asen Balikci, engaged in it.

George E. Marcus, "Contemporary Problem of Ethnography in the Modern World System," in *Writing Culture*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 168.

Foning's book, *Lepchas: My Vanishing Tribe*, forms a precursor to this attitude.

<sup>289</sup> Balikci, *Future Past*, 1.

<sup>290</sup> The mention of the two most distant cities in this context is surprising and makes me read this statement between the lines, as the first modern film — after the colonial phase of Sikkim and in its transition to becoming a part of the Indian union — *Sikkim* (1971) was made by the eminent Satyajit Ray. The other two films made in the last decade — from Calcutta and Pune — are those of Arghya Basu. Even overlooking this slippage, we can figure out a peculiar traditional anthropological insistence on insidedness or rapport, which tells more of her style of filming than the report itself.

of its Buddhist communities. This ensured that whatever we filmed will remain within Sikkim and will remain accessible. As far as I am concerned, the main reason I am included in the 'local' category is because I am married to Jigme, a Sikkimese Bhutia and as the Lachenpas put it, I am the daughter-in-law of the land. My marriage certifies that I will not leave Sikkim, and I will be loyal to the Bhutia community, that I will not desert or misrepresent them and will forever remain accountable.<sup>291</sup>

Her report can therefore be read in the different contexts that the same site provides us with. The first of these being, her privileged access as an insider despite being an outsider by birth and upbringing. The second reading comes with her confessional statements, which informs us of her access to the area: the fact that she stayed at the village headman's, her initial entry into the village as a curator of a collection of photographs that had been shot by one of two travellers in the early twentieth century and such factors that made the village Dzomsa (political body) and the Pison (headman) to accept this project. She talks of the censorship during post-production quite elaborately:

Although we have gained confidence and participation of the local political and cultural authorities and are now permitted to film just about everything, it does not mean we have the license to show everything to the outside world. This is where shared understanding and trust come in. If the Pison or the Lachen Rimpoche (religious head) says that something we filmed is not to be shown to the rest of the village, it will not be shown to the rest of the village. If either says that it will not be shown outside the village, it will not be shown outside the village. While viewing a final edit, if the Lachen Rimpoche or the Pison says that a particular scene needs to be cut out, this particular scene will be cut out. Although those situations are rare, they do present themselves now and again, mostly when disputes are involved.

Further, with regard to anthropological authority, power and ethics, she writes:

As an anthropologist responsible for contents, this may come into conflict with my obligation towards objectivity and true representation. But actually, it doesn't. It is important to me that the films be made with and for the local community and

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<sup>291</sup> Balikci, *Future Past*, 6.

their sensitivities be taken into consideration. The films are made mostly for their own use and Lachenpas have a right to say how they would or wouldn't be liked to be represented. What is important for me as an anthropologist is that the original footage be as complete as possible and remains archived as such for future reference. Villagers are aware that the complete footage will be there at the Institute. So far this has not created any problem since the complete footage remained under my control... I doubt any of the material needs vetting at this point since by then, all these conflicts will have lost their relevance they now enjoy and will have become somewhat meaningless to them. They will, however, remain important examples of Lachenpa social behaviour.<sup>292</sup>

The third aspect of her report reveals how she becomes complicit with the Institute she is serving — by focusing not only on certain ethnicities (Lepcha and Bhutias) who she feels are marginalised and vanishing, but also by working on behalf of the fallen dynasty — the Namgyals/ Chogyals, after whom the Institute is named. Their dynastic history remains relevant in the context of Sikkim's past political history, the present Institute and its future projects, and perhaps, also to the anthropologist's own feelings.

## **2.9 Outsidedness**

### **2.9.1 A School on the 'Other Border'**

In a village on the border of the Kalimpong district of West Bengal, we encounter a Sanskrit medium school in a stray hamlet next to a temple. The temple premise has a couple of traditional, wooden barracks; two storeys high. A great din comes from these structures, which are the classrooms of the school. We learn from the teachers, that the school is 60 years old, which means it came up right after the Indian independence; though, they tell us, the college/school in a smaller form, has been functioning from before then. The Siva temple and the school were built entirely by the villagers, who contributed in money, wood and labour. The maths teacher takes us around and shows us the two wings, enthusiastically pointing out the roughly moulded Ashokan capital at the top of the building. He

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

says it was conceived at the time of the foundation of the school. The principal boasts about the Ashokan emblem, which he claims they adopted as a symbol of might and dharma, before it was adopted by the Indian government as the emblem of Indian nationality. This information startles me. This seems to me a case of a time warp where all constitutional norms are suspended. It is a different order here, in fact an order the nation state invokes, but does not swear by — the rule of Dharma, its symbol shining above a Sanskrit school in the premise of a Hindu temple (designed by a Buddhist monk, we are told). (ILL. 2.48 — 2.52)

We are told the school is to become a museum and a college building is in the plan, wherein funding would be required. On being asked about the purpose of the museum, the principal informs us that it would house the manuscripts in their collection.

I am asked about possible funding options for the expansions and I suggest that he could ask the Ministry of Human Resource and Development, who generally sanction new projects in the educational sector. For the museum, I tell him, he would have to write separately and in the case of the grant, which would require some luck and a lot of perseverance, the government could then take it over. And, in case of a financial and administrative takeover, they might consider appointing fresh staff.

### **2.9.2 Talking to Death**

Lingthem, in Upper Dzongu, is where it all happens every three years during the winter months of the Lepcha New Year — the six days of '*Cham*'.<sup>293</sup> In Tibetan Buddhism ritual, gods come with the fearful baggage of death, afterlife and destruction. Destruction concerns the Others — here very clearly pronounced as the enemies of Lamaist Buddhism, a religion which worked in complicity with the temporal authority in the king's time, and even today does not leave an opportunity to coerce the animistic and shamanist villagers into joining the monastic fold.

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<sup>293</sup> Balikci, *Cham in the Lepcha Village*, 2007.

The preparation for afterlife and the event of death that disjoins this life from the afterlife, interests every member of all the orders of Tibetan Buddhism – who generally swear by the book of death. In the ritual dance of *Shinje Cham*, which takes place under the auspices of the monasteries, the sequential performances of masked animal and supernatural forms — dancers dressed up as different characters representing local spirits or higher gods, some very obvious figures, some shadowy ones; benevolent and malevolent aspects — lead up to the day of final Judgement, which is on the sixth day. On the sixth day of the *Shinje Cham*, a dance to the Lord of Death takes place:

It shows us what might happen to us when we present ourselves to the Lord of Death.

– Shinje Gyalpo

Using common weighing scales and black and white pebbles as the measures of good and evil, a lifetime's actions are weighed and it is determined whether one qualifies for heaven or hell. While the crowd waits, Shinje Gyalmo (who is supposed to be bigger than Mahakala, the God of Time) appears; holding the mirror of karma in one hand and a sword in the other, he dances in. Two envoys, a white one with a smile on his face and a black one with a scowl, appear in retinue with a gang of monstrous characters. The bull-headed spirit of Death (Rhung Lo) also appears, along with a serpent. A dialogue ensues between a *leity* — a person from the crowd — and the Bull God. (All the performers speak into the mike for the first time; so far there had been no technology. Everyone is in a participatory, community mould.)

[In the following dialogue, Rhung Lo is denoted as **RL**, Leity as **L**, Dark Subject as **DS**, White Envoy as **WE**, Black Envoy as **BE**, Shinje Gyalpo (The God of Judgement) as **SG**]

**L:** Someone in this world has just died.

**RL:** To what clan and race does he belong?

**BE:** He belongs to a dark clan and dark place full of sin. His name is Dikcet Niyeo Bom (great sinner).

**SG:** Go and get him now.

[Everyone starts running to go and get him, they get him and drag him by a noose.]

**RL:** Time of Judgement has come, what have you got to say?

**DS:** I had no property so I hunted and killed animals for food.

[It is an overt campaign for Buddhism, against Bon rituals that are its village rival, in a medieval allegorical mode.]

**DS:** When I was told about Buddhism and its teachings, I didn't pay attention. When Buddhist teachers told me about heaven and hell, and the judgement in your court, I didn't believe them. Now that I have come before you, I have realised my mistake. Please forgive me.

**WE:** [holding a manuscript before his eyes] He was ignorant and couldn't do any good. He didn't know about Shinje's court and he couldn't accumulate much merit. But still I will do some good for him in my bag [searches in his bag for something.]

**BE:** The man, an evil from an evil clan. He has been a sinner all his life. He killed, ate and drank the blood of the animals. He made families quarrel and fight. He set fire to monasteries. He swindled relatives. His parents are in hell these last eight years, so I will request you to take him to hell and roast him there.

**SG:** You two, don't quarrel. Let me see for myself, in my own balance, in my court. [He brings out a white balance.]

**BE:** [Places a black stone on one side of the scale and says to white envoy] Now, let me see how much you have.

[The white envoy places some stones on the other side, but the balance is tilted to the black side.]

**SG:** There is no point begging for mercy you will go to hell at once!

[They drag the evil person to the hell fire, throw him in and disperse.]

The next person comes and he turns out to be a good man, having given donation to monasteries built roads and bridges and fed animals, and having lit a lot of lamps [essential for rituals].<sup>294</sup>

Again the balance comes out and the white and black envoys play their roles; White wins. Chenrezig, the Buddha of compassion takes him to heaven. A procession of Dakinis (mysterious female deities with occult power, hailed much in Tibetan form of Theravada Tantric Buddhism, here all male actors) takes everyone along and circumscribes the arena.

## 2.10 In Conclusion

In the context of a multi-sited research initiative, there is veritable confusion over totality. This confusion increases in the Sikkim experience, because of its patterns of ethnic diversity, so different from the preceding site. The initial encounter here is with the remarkable terrain difference and the complex inter-ethnic relations. Sikkim also has a certain differentiated temporality that gives it an island like quality. This was previously produced by the co-existence of the power centres of the monarchy and the monastic organisation. In the present day, though Sikkim has disentangled itself from the monarchy, magical Bon rituals and the Tantric Buddhist religion of Tibetan origin continue to govern many of its daily dynamics. Aspects of these are still invoked for a wide variety of purposes like curing diseases, averting natural calamities like earthquakes and subverting intrusive undertakings like the hydel projects.

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<sup>294</sup> This man looks a bit like the past king, wears a similar headdress etc. and his list of achievements reads like a ruler and/ or administrator's. This performance took place in 2005, thirty years after the annexation of Sikkim.

Today's Sikkim is a product of the changes that led it from a monarchy to a democratic state. Yet, its modernity is only partial, suggestive of elitism, since many policies established by the monarchy — that worked via a centrist policy — continue in Sikkim of representative government; many of the arrangements between ethno-governed legislative councils have, till date, retained their status-quo by law. Hence, beneath appearances, there are different equations of sociality and distance that remain hidden to the eyes of the outsider. Under a veneer of cohabitation, the various cultural currents try to mark each other as outsider. These come to the fore when probed over a protracted period and emerge, I realise, if and when one is able to identify the nature of one's own outsiderness.

Outsiderness in contemporary Sikkim is produced by multiple factors. In sites like Dzongu, it is the locational dynamics; the comparative physical remoteness from the urban areas and the fact that by legal provision the place is treated as a segregated reserve exclusively for the Lepcha community. Anybody who is a non-Lepcha is an outsider. The new developmental process in Sikkim has recently produced another kind of outsider — people who have been displaced by the big dams; also, prospective outsiders in others who live with the possibility of losing their land to these hydel projects. Among them are the ACT members who are virtual outsiders in the eyes of the state and the pro-development, pro-change section of the community. There is yet another prospective outsiderness linked to the LEP developmental projects. One of the north-eastern land corridors between India and Central Asia will connect Sikkim to Tibet-China. This and the opening up of trade with China will impact the people whose lives are implicated by the borders. I find that there is deep discontent among these people (largely the Lhopos or Bhutias of Tibetan origin), who practice and live by certain wool-craft traditions of weaving and carpet-making and are apprehensive about the extinction of these owing to the influx of mass produced Chinese duplicates. Apart from these, the divides between the historically existent ethnicities and the migrant communities are major rallying points of the majority-minority and indigenism debates in Sikkim. These generate complex insider-outsider relations.

I am first forced to confront my outsider status during the Gangtok workshop when my motivation in researching Sikkim is questioned. This is, however, dissolved in the course of the interactive dialogues that reveal the relativity of outsiderness. My artist-coordinator workshop partner, Sanchayan also shares this experience of the site. He feels the workshop successfully brings out the inter-community relations in a cosmopolitan situation and results in the merging of inter-community distances in its process. In Rhenock, on the other hand, I am one of many outsiders in a transit place. Consequently, the issue of outsiderness loses significance. In Dzongu, my outsiderness is evident in my non-Lepcha ethnicity. Hence, interactions are easier, as terms of exchange are relatively clear. Sanchayan and my presences seem to intensify the acuteness of the activist voices and reveal the liminal state of the community. By provoking the discontents of the site, we seem to be able to make them come to the surface for debate, thus making the situation discursive. In this way, Kester's cross-disciplinary articulation on outsiderness, perhaps also applies to the position of our outsider engagements in Sikkim, especially in Dzongu, "The artist crosses a proscribed threshold, entering a space where they (sic) don't belong. And precisely in that lack of belonging, in that transgression and estrangement, they are able to reveal the hidden logic of the site itself."<sup>295</sup>

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The planning of the workshops proves more complicated in Sikkim than in Coochbehar, because there are more sites involved with variable ethnic composition. The approach has to be multi-pronged and the workshop exercises and interactions have to be modified according to the context, pace and climate of the specific site. Out of the three locations, Rhenock is a transit place and the workshop venue is located in the middle of a market. Dzongu is an ethnic reserve and a slow place in general. During the three days of workshop here, it rains continuously and we are confined inside. As a result there can be prolonged conversations in this site. Gangtok is an impersonal, urban site and the pace is comparatively less slow.

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<sup>295</sup> Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 44.

The mapmaking activities take on different courses in the three sites. In Dzongu, it becomes a counter-mapping exercise with the participants — mostly ACT members — appending their protest texts on the maps in creative modes of activism. Though this whole enterprise is contextually political for them, the remarkable poetic register to all their output cannot but be noticed. The completed enlarged maps, along with the personal maps, poems and drawings are used to construct a tent that becomes a cosy shelter from the rain, and we end up spending some intimate interactive time of conversation, singing and dancing inside it. This is a spontaneous occasion that just grows out of the situation, with the neighbours also joining in, even though there is an inadvertent ritualistic flavor to the whole process. (ILL.2.41 — 2.47) In Rhenock, the mapmaking gives rise to marginalia related to the site: individual perspectives, daily events, journeys etc. The personal maps trace routes to homes. The Gangtok workshop produces large personal maps, which are the participants' visualisations about the future of their site, incorporating their desires and fantasies.

With regard to the nature and purpose of the *mise-en-scène*, Sanchayan and I differ in our attitudes to the event; this is exposed when in comparing the stagings of the sites of Rhenock and Sikkim, he makes the following observation:

I learnt that in a site-specific situation there are always two different layers of process that emerge — one being the intercommunity interaction, which is very private and personal. But whenever such process is made public, the whole context becomes an extended situation of social space where lots of care needs to be taken to position it as a public gesture. That way, in contrast to Rhenock, the Dzongu workshop that happened in a village in a private house was more intimate and remained private even at the end of the workshop.

I, on the other hand, think that though Rhenock is public in terms of physical location, the interactions are more intimate and the manifestations more private and personal in effect, with no engagement with the marketplace public. Whereas, in Dzongu, though the atmosphere is intimate due to where the workshop is housed, the configuration of the *mise-en-scène* that also involves participation of the neighbours, is of activist significance and more public by implication.

The variation in the ethnic configurations produces aesthetic variation in the sites — in the local craft elements of daily use, like handloom and cane products. Apart from the three dominant ethnic groups of Nepalis, Bhutias and Lepchas, Biharis, migrant Marwaris and even some Bengalis are to be found in the Rhenock market town. And, with each group sporting its typical dresses and carrying wares, maximum aesthetic variation is visible here. From the curatorial angle, this helps to generate some ideas for building the *mise-en-scènes* of the workshops. In Dzongu the agronet that is used by local cultivators for greenhouses, is utilised as a support for the maps that are later used to construct the tent. In Rhenock, the marketplace enables us to source local fabrics associated with the dominant ethnicities, out of which banners are stitched. On these, the participants inscribe texts expressing their feelings and emotions about their location. Utilisation of locally available material provokes a special dynamics in the interactive situations of these two sites and elicits a locally embedded but translocally relevant set of responses. In Rhenock, the participants' identification with their respective fabrics triggers reflections on inter-ethnic relations. In Dzongu, the agronet results in invocation of the nature-ethnicity relationship and brings out a set of land related exchanges. Sanchayan's view is that this use of local material helps the participants to connect with the process of identity formation. This unexpected fallout of the choice of certain parameters appears to hold potential for further curatorial thinking and suggests a strategy that could be adopted in future workshops for similar sedimentation of local knowledge.

## ASSAM: THE DISTRIBUTION OF FRAGMENTS

*As I am poised to leave, Assam is burning again, as ethnic tensions between Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims have escalated into a riot in Kokrajhar. Later, in August 2012, there is a mass exodus after rumours spread, of possible retaliatory attack by Muslims on people of Northeastern origin in other parts of the country.<sup>296</sup> Despite assuaging and palliative talks, it seems there is no respite to the violence in the different pockets of Assam, especially its borders.*

*In the middle of my preparations for departure, a call comes from a well-known young political scientist – Dilip Gogoi, who I have been trying to get in touch with. We meet at the lounge of the Assam Tribune, a prime newspaper with its office in Guwahati, the capital of Assam. Gogoi greets me, hands me his new book and as I leaf through its pages and explain my project, he tells me how the interpretation of Assam is entirely dependent on one's position of being either an insider or an outsider.*

### 3.1 Fragmented Territoriality

Assam is part of the north-eastern conglomerate of eight states. It is distributed along latitude 24.08 N to 27.025 N and longitude 89.042 E to 96.0 E. It is bordered by Arunachal Pradesh in the north; Arunachal, Nagaland and Manipur in the east and south-east; Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya in the south and south-west; West Bengal in the west. It has international boundaries with Bhutan and Bangladesh, and is linked to other countries like China and Myanmar via Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur and Mizoram, respectively. It is linked with the rest of India via the chicken neck of the Jalpaiguri corridor of West Bengal. Assam

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<sup>296</sup> "Aatonke Dokkhin Bharat Chhede Palacchen Uttar-purber Manush-ra" (in panic, North-eastern people are running away from South India): Regional Bengali newspaper Ananda Bazar Patrika reports on 17<sup>th</sup> August 2012, about the mass exodus due to the fear of retaliation from Muslims. Rumours have been spread by SMS, resulting in a ban on bulk SMS by the state. It is said that in July when the riot started, there were 480,000 refugees in the camps. This came down to 36,000 by November, making people believe that the situation was improving in Assam.

has a spatial spread of 78,438 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 26.6 million, with a variable density of 340 per sq. km. This population density forms the major rallying point of Assam's politics as well as the bone of contention between the endogenous ethnicities.

On the basis of physical characteristics, Assam is distributed into three zones — the Brahmaputra River Valley, the Barak River Valley and the hill regions comprising the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar hills. The Brahmaputra Valley is permanent settlement to many tribes such as Bodos, Koches, Miris, Chutias, Kacharis, Deoris, Rabhas, Lalungs, Morans and other indigenous population; it also houses Muslims, Hindu Bengalis and tea tribes,<sup>297</sup> apart from being the homeland of the majority of people identified as the ethno-Assamese. The Barak Valley has a different demographic pattern. It is inhabited by the tribes Kukis, Meitei Manipuris, Dimasa Kacharis, Rongmei Nagas, Mikirs, Barmans, Kuruks, as also people of Nepali origin, tea tribes, minority Assamese and the majority of ethnic Bengalis (mostly migrants from Sylhet). Next to Barak Valley is the tribal territorial council of Karbi Anglong, allocated for the Karbi tribes, located in the hills. A few other smaller tribes and ethnicities in this region are Tiwas, Kukis, Garos, Khasis, Hmars, Mizos and some ethno-Bengalis.

The undulation of terrain and criss-crossing of routes with rivers, gives rise to complexities in habitation, movement and feelings. Different ethnicities, especially the two dominant ones — Bengalis and Assamese — have engaged with these complexities in different ways, during and after the British rule. For instance, the ceaseless attempts made, during the 1950s and 1960s, towards homogenisation and realisation of the goal of making Assam a nation-province of the ethnic-Assamese have not only aggravated the ethnic cleavage developed

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<sup>297</sup> The indentured labourers who were brought over, largely from Jharkhand and Orissa by the tea planters in the nineteenth century are now called tea tribes. It is a blanket term often used by the tea garden workers- with or without a tribal origin, to describe themselves, in order to take advantage of the reservation policies of the government.

during colonial period, but has created new cleavages along the ethnic fault lines leading to the reorganisation of Assam in 1972.<sup>298</sup>

Apart from geographical and ethnographic complexities, the land is marked by other complexities such as the historical past, its documents and its implications for the present. Also, straight and linear history, here, seems to be an imposition on a society naturally governed by mythic currents. Tribes affiliate to different lineages and develop legends to establish their identities. Some of these identities are locational; for instance, the name 'Dimasa' stands for 'children of the big river'. As an example, the Herambas claim that they are called so because of their origin from the demoness Hirimba, who was wife to Bhima – one of the five Pandava brothers in the Indian epic Mahabharata. From the foundation of a tribe, to its migration, to existing mutuality between clans and spatial segregations, are all often explained in terms of mythic relations, creating a different temporal order. These definitional ploys act like a time-warp, which could have either mnemonic or instrumentalist political translation, such as, in territorial demands.<sup>299</sup>

### **3.1.1 A Ferry, Two Rivers and a Question**

Since 2008, every year, when the seasonal flow of the Brahmaputra becomes predictable, M.V. Chandradinga, one of the barges afloat near its banks, has been used by the DMC for holding multimedia workshops and symposiums. Founded by Sonal Jain and Mriganka Madhukalya, both multimedia practitioners from Guwahati, the DMC has initiated an artists-led alternative art space on this ferry, calling it Periferry. Project Periferry is for holding inter-media activities, involving practitioners from all over the world.

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<sup>298</sup> By the Northeast India (reconstruction) Act, Dec. 1971, several districts or administrative territories of Assam became new states, along the border of India. These were Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh (earlier called NEFA) and Mizoram.

<sup>299</sup> "To many of us, it appears that we are either caught in a time warp or that we are heading back in time when these very issues, of demands for statehood or great space, captured both political and media headlines, disrupted life and impacted the fabric of society." Sanjoy Hazarika, "By the Brahmaputra," The Center for North Eastern Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi; <http://www.c-nes.org/2220/in-new-and-old-states-where-will-the-poor-live>. Posted 14<sup>th</sup> August 2013, accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> Nov, 2013.

In 2009, I am invited to be part of one of Periferry's annual events – the 'Two Rivers' symposium – in the barge on the bank of the Brahmaputra in Guwahati.<sup>300</sup>(ILL. 3.1) The title of the symposium rouses my special interest, because, a significant defining feature of the valley of Assam is that it is divided into two, the by-product of its two rivers; the Brahmaputra, which flows from China through the Arunachal Pradesh, into Assam and on through Bangladesh into the sea, and the Barak, which comes from the mountains of Manipur and flows through southern Assam and Bangladesh, into the sea. The two valleys have a history of assumed and expressed differences between the two dominant ethnic groups in habitation there; ethnic-Assamese in the Brahmaputra and Bengalis of Sylhet origin in the Barak. I am therefore, surprised to learn that the 'two rivers' of Periferry do not signify the two rivers of Assam, but the Brahmaputra and the Thames of remote England, to where some of the other participants belong. Later, in a personal conversation, one of the organisers tells me their motivation behind the title; they thought that the transnational aspect of Assam (which is not immediately perceptible in Guwahati) needed to be brought into focus. Guwahati, though physically at a distance from the border, is implicated by the transnational flow of the Brahmaputra.

While, Assam's two-river dimension belongs to its geo-ethnic constitution, the Thames and the Brahmaputra, apart from the lack of physical contiguity, also miss out on metaphoric closeness. For, the Thames flows through a single national territory – the United Kingdom – while the Brahmaputra flows through three national territories of East and South Asia – China, India and Bangladesh. In India, it flows through Arunachal Pradesh as Dihing and in Assam as Brahmaputra, then, before meeting the sea, it goes southward into Bangladesh, where it is called Meghna and Yamuna. Apart from the winding intestinal configuration that the Thames shows at certain places, which is also a regular feature of the Brahmaputra (it is called the braided river), there is hardly any point of comparison between the two.

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<sup>300</sup> This was sponsored by Khoj, Delhi and Panos South Asia (Jorhat based voluntary organisation). Khoj is sponsored by various sources such as Delfina Trust, Artangel and Ford Foundation. Panos is a fund raising group that sponsors research. Later, the Periferry residencies were sponsored by the Inlaks Foundation and the Charles Wallace India Trust.

To return to the two rivers of Assam, the Brahmaputra and the Barak have developed different cadastral regions because of their tributaries and distributaries. And, this distribution of spatial zones and their markers by the rivers has a deeper relationship to the ethnic configuration, as is seen in southern Assam and in Goalpara region where migrancy is controlled by the river–island–capillary–archipelago situation. Ethno-nationalists and secessionists often have these situations in mind when they raise the questions of migration as crisis for Assam. The geographic divides produced by the riverine phenomena are thus crisis ridden. Translation of such space-time relations remains the complex task of a cultural observer, who may attend to this phenomenon of multiple spaces in terms of time and ethnicity, but will always be implicated by a possible inside–outside question.

The production of time-based projects, particularly films, confronts this aspect of the different, incompatible zones of time, which are recognised and marked internally as ethnic differences. This becomes evident when one culture tries to represent other neighbourhood cultures; the representation may be vexed by appropriation or trespassing, which the smaller cultures may like to guard against. Periferry’s film on the Sacred Groves, which is a documentation of a journey into the reserve forest in Meghalaya – a fiercely protected terrain sacred to the Khasi community of the region, with limited access to outsiders – illustrates this. Interspersed in the forest are megaliths, which are sacred to the tribe and have coded meanings.<sup>301</sup> Khasi ethnographer, Desmond S. Kharmawphlang says, “The Khasis compute their history with *maw* or stone and the Khasi word for memory is *Kynmaw* or ‘rooted in stone’. A careful study of the megalithic culture of the Khasis would give accurate historical insight into, more importantly, the clan, the village, the *Hima* or the traditional native state.”<sup>302</sup>

The making of the documentary was an obvious act of trespassing by the ethno-Assamese artist, who is not a Khasi. When screened at the University in

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<sup>301</sup> Sacred Groves are communally protected areas, bearing religious significance for the protecting community. Hunting and logging are strictly prohibited within these areas. M. Gadgil and V.D. Vartak, “Sacred groves of India: A plea for continued conservation,” *Journal of Bombay Natural History Society* 72 (1975): 314-320.

<sup>302</sup> Desmond S. Kharmawphlang, “Of Memory and Stones,” Centre for Cultural and Creative Studies, occasional paper (Shillong: NEHU, 2010).

Santiniketan, it provoked protest from a Khasi student; she thought it was an act of intrusion. Periphery was in a way, trying to appropriate the spaces that, post-1972, were divided into several new territorialities, each belonging to a different ethnic group. Today, if these spaces that exist in changed configuration are invoked as if they are a part of Assam, it would be at the cost of the diversity signified by them and would, by implication, flatten the spatial and ethnic variety.

Assam is thus, an extremely diverse terrain. Relationships between communities, and aspirations to statehood and citizenship differ at a slight shift of geographic belonging or ethnic longing. Sanjib Baruah, one of the most ardent and consistent political sociologists on Assam writes:

Assamese sub-nationalist politics originates in and is sustained by the civil society and not political society... It is not accidental that organizations that have led sub-nationalist protests in Assam often perceive themselves as being 'nonpolitical'.

Baruah then defines the civil society as not institutional but social space.<sup>303</sup> This seems to be a close parallel to ethno-nationalist rhetoric where society and polity are defined by culture. This predominantly cultural discourse often conceives the spaces of society in terms of the dominant and potentially hegemonic. Hence, social space, in the discourse that Baruah may have in mind, is by implication homogeneous. Politics often is a hidden entity behind the rhetoric of non-institutional social. At least there is that great possibility, considering the context of the Assam movement, and Assam at large.

The emergence of consistent social relations amid such variegated difference can only take place, naturally, in everyday happenings in the public spaces such as markets or schools, and alternately in the constructed situations of a workshop. This potentially establishes a difference from the policymakers' perspectives, or bureaucratic highhandedness guided by statistical compulsions. This requires, to my mind, attending to the everyday instances of interactive

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<sup>303</sup> Though Baruah tries defining it in the context of the Assam movement, which ironically conceives of Assam as a territoriality defined by a single language Assamese; he himself finds it coercive, but chooses to align with the general sentiment. In contrast, the micro-instances of social interaction in a multi-community environment seem more complex, since they seem to be guided by different and often divisive aspirations. Baruah, *Durable Disorder*, 134, 135.

moments in specific locales, which relate to a spatio-temporal otherness. The question is, whether and how, through these interactive moments leading to an event of knowledge, the notions of insider and a possible outsidership gain visibility, and whether a sense of community emerges from such situations.<sup>304</sup>

### 3.1.2 An Outsidedness: Surreal's Ethnography

The screen is shaky, the northern wind is blowing hard over the Brahmaputra; one side of the upper deck of the Chandradinga has to be covered before the image on the screen can stabilise. As the image sharpens into focus, we see a split visual, with a native Assamese boy in the company of Europeans on the left, and an old man with grey hair and recognisable local features, on the right. The local boy on the left has grown up to be the old man in his 60s on the right. He is visibly happy and holds in his hands an arrow and a toy house; seemingly playthings – mementoes from his childhood. The next slide appears. On the left of the screen is a picture of Bruce Allan, an artist from Gloucester, UK, who was born in Assam's Dhooli tea estate in Jorhat.<sup>305</sup> Bruce is one of the invited artists presenting in the symposium. As this slide comes up, his eyes brighten, and he starts recounting his memories of the man next to him in the slide. The man is Joyram, a childhood playmate. The next image shows a different set of people on the left and a picture of grown-up Bruce – together with an unknown person – on the right. One of the guys in the picture on the left is 'One-two', a driver's son, who Bruce used to "muck around with" in Dhoolie.

Bruce works along the questions of distance and proximity. This produces a surreal of an ethnic kind, wherever it involves cases of ethnic claims or belongings. The constitution and the premise of surrealism relate to the disjointed material of dreams, translated into material world of desires and/or wishes. Ethnography discovered its surreal disjointedness in its field-studies and records<sup>306</sup>. A Surreal's ethnography works out the surreal in reverse. It is a situation where a surrealist – a practitioner of dreams – discovers the inventory

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<sup>304</sup> Considering that at times society and community work as contrasting categories in Assam.

<sup>305</sup> <http://www.axisweb.org/seCVWK.aspx?ARTISTID=148>.

<sup>306</sup> James Clifford, *Predicament of Cultures* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988).

of objects, at the juncture of memorial and the 'real' and works on it. In case of Bruce, it happens through the entangled personal memories of a colony, from the ambiguities of his own childhood.

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I first met Bruce in 2006, during the Khoj Kolkata workshop. In 2011, we meet again after Two Rivers, in Gloucester, during one of my academic trips. We discuss a few points on his attempted project in Assam:

[In the following conversation and henceforth: Bruce Allan is denoted as **BA**]

**ADG:** Bruce, when you started filing your dad's photographs, what register did it they strike?

**BA:** I started looking into my father's documents after my mother died. I discovered a little suitcase full of them. Found his contract of employment from 1926. He was the Assistant Director of a tea estate for 38 years. In fact, my father died when I was still young, about 21 years old. In many ways it was as though we lived on different planets. I came over to England when I was 10, in 1960, with my mom. I quickly grew into the new pop stuff – Beatles, Rolling Stones etc. My father's life was completely different. He was responsible for more than 3,500 people on his two tea estates. His existence there and his responsibilities were tuned to a completely different time – a time that structures the code of conduct and process by which the tea estates were managed. His interests remained very much the same. Common ground remained sports, like cricket.

I did not know him so well as to know what I should be doing with the material. I didn't know whether he was a good guy or heavy-handed as a manager. One good thing that I remember is a letter that he received from the West Indies cricket board in the season of 1963–64, when they visited that part. My father was in charge of their hospitality. Legendary Garfield Sobers and Rohan Kanhai signed a bat; you can still read it...

I thought it would be nice to go back to the tea garden... Before Khoj Kolkata, I went to Pasighat, Dibrugarh and then to Jorhat – it was an extraordinary moment. I was going back after 47 years.

The bungalow, where we had stayed in my childhood, has undergone transformation. From a teak wood structure it has become, for security reasons,

a grilled enclosure. Wooden floors are now concrete. The car park has disappeared. The expansive lawn that had a tennis court in it, has shrunk. The Davis Cup team had actually played there.

**ADG:** So, the court is gone?

**BA:** Yeah, and at the end of the tennis court there was a hedge, beyond which there was my mother's vegetable patch, which is now replaced by a contemporary temple.

**ADG:** A contemporary Hindu temple?

**BA:** Yeah! [We both laugh] Beyond that, there was a *nullah* (drain), and a house on stilts, where we used to play in a sand pit. There was a mate who played with us, a driver's son called One-two.

**ADG:** You mentioned him at the Two Rivers...

**BA:** Yes, the name came from a ball game my mother used to play with us. She would throw a ball and would call out 'One, Two, Three' and at three we were supposed to start running. Before my mother could utter 'three', he would run. He was given the name One-two.

**ADG:** Can you recount the work you did for the Periferry workshop?

**BA:** Yes, I did an installation at the site of the dilapidated stilt house. I called it a repository of memories. This is in remembering One-two. There were a few things that I had taken back to India. One was a bamboo arrow from Dhooli. I used to use it as a paint stick in the 60s.

I remembered Joyram, whom I also met this time. He would cut out posters of all kinds and collect the pieces in boxes, especially posters of cowboys and Indians, which were popular in the 60s. I reconfigured all of this in my work. The run-down toy house in the posed photograph of Joyram was indicative of the site, the arrow was sort of time's arrow and the hut was suspended in the middle of the installation. Coming back to Dhooli was to sift through a huge stock of

memories... One memory I have is that of walking onto the grass barefoot, after the rain...

I was told that the very first word I uttered was in Assamese and not English, since the maid who looked after me was Assamese. It saddened me that in spite of this, when I met Joyram, I needed an interpreter to talk to my childhood friend.

**ADG:** Did your project develop out of the documents or a more experiential journey?

**BA:** Yeah, the project actually developed out of a journey my childhood friend Reginald and I undertook to Assam. Reginald was also born in Assam and grew up in the gardens of Dibrugarh for a while, not as long as me. When we returned to England, he and I shared the same public school.

Mamuka, the Georgian artist from the Khoj workshop, who had also come to Assam at that time, spun ideas around starting a workshop on the boat in the Brahmaputra. Mriganka took it up and started Periferry. The first residency was in 2008, I was lucky to be invited. I went with Mriganka to check out my history through different perspectives. But, in the end, our approaches to things turned out to be so different that we dropped the idea of developing a cohesive project.<sup>307</sup> When we had the 'Two Rivers' I did not know how to make a coherent sense out of it. But the record is in order now, the experiences are documented. The question is how to go back to it?

**ADG:** If you recall your daily life in Assam, in your childhood, where snake charmers were present – as is evident from the photographs you showed at the conference – in comparison to the experiential daily of today's Assam... how do you think that past fares?

**BA:** Well, my project was a rudimentary look at how the past fares, with the present. I realised that my life here was sandwiched between my parents and chores, and was protected. And, I know that there are many hardships that an

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<sup>307</sup> I remember having discussed their possible projects together with Mriganka during one of my several visits to Assam. We both agreed that there is an orientalist streak to Bruce's project. This was in 2009. But, as my research progressed, I increasingly realised how there are several such pockets of orientalism in the so-called grounded cultures. The matter, it seems, is that of relative closeness or distance.

ordinary person in the tea estates or elsewhere would face. But I think there was a balance between the two worlds then, during my childhood. The newer dynamics of ethnic landscape derides the serenity we knew. This makes the scholars like Sanjib Baruah or new media people like Mriganka say that if you draw a circle around the Brahmaputra Valley that is what is Assam now.

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[On another occasion, Bruce and I converse at a different pace – he reflects further on the context of Assam]

**BA:** I am thinking of my visit to Majuli Island...<sup>308</sup> The reality of this place is that it is endangered, it can disappear any time. This came out quite strongly during my visit in 2011. It has a proximity to Dhooli tea estate where I grew up. In my childhood, I didn't even know it existed. But, it seems to be the spiritual hub of Assam.

**ADG:** Why do you think so?

**BA:** It is a bit cut off, but it is a calmer place. Though the amenities and the roads are not good, it is a lot calmer and by tradition, a repository of lot of indigenous practices, such as the Vaishnavite practices of the *Satras*<sup>309</sup>. There are a few odd features that this culture shares with the whole of Assam. For instance, English is not taught in schools.

**ADG:** Is that so? Quite surprising!

**BA:** Yes, it is. It may be surprising to us, but this may have come about as a reaction to so much of English presence.

**ADG:** It could also be about several other presences, the presence of 'outsiders' in general that aggravated the reaction. I was reading Sanjib Baruah and Yasmin

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<sup>308</sup> Majuli, on the Brahmaputra, is the largest natural island of Asia. It was formed by the course changes of Brahmaputra and its tributaries, mainly the Lohit. Mājuli is also the abode of the Assamese Neo-Vaisnavite culture. According to environmentalists, it is endangered and has the prospect of shrinking, like many other islands of South Asia, due to the greenhouse effect.

<sup>309</sup> *Satras* are institutional centres, unique to the *Ekasarana* or monotheistic tradition, which preserves relics of the preceptors; a seventeenth century tradition supported by Koch and Ahom kings, important for the proliferation of Vaisnavism in Assam.

Saikia; they mention that Bengalis were being imported to Assam from Tripura and Sylhet.<sup>310</sup>

**BA:** I sort of noticed the reaction to the presence of outsiders, even in many intellectuals, apart from having seen it in common people.<sup>311</sup> One of them being a close collaborator, it may cause embarrassment if I name him... He has an antipathy to the intellectuals from Calcutta. I think it comes from the British period, when even the petty clerks were imported from Bengal.

**ADG:** There is a difference in the attitude between the people in Upper and Lower Assam and those who are in southern Assam.

Baruah finds that out,<sup>312</sup> but does not quite engage with it, perhaps because of his own ethno-nationalism – a kind of sympathy for the authentic Assamese, even while being in Pennsylvania. Though his is a scholarly, much refined and considered position; in general the quest for authentic indigenism is linked with language and territoriality, which cuts up Assam into several zones – sometimes making even Assamese as a language seem an imposition from above – putting that position under a scanner.

At the end of the day, ethno-nationalism fans the fire of infra-nationalism. As we can now see, Garos, Karbis and Ravas are demanding separate states. The Barak Valley might want to secede, though that demand is masked in so many layers of deprivation argument. But the anger of deprivation and hurt is at least more than 50 years old.<sup>313</sup> The fact of ULFA functionaries having now confessed

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<sup>310</sup> Baruah, *India Against Itself*; Yasmin Saikia, *Assam and India: Fragmented Memories, Cultural Identity and the Tai Ahom Struggle*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005).

<sup>311</sup> "I discovered that there could be times when 'looking Assamese' in Assam could be a risky business. Non Assamese soldiers at checkpoints were more likely to ask those who fitted the description for identity papers. I shudder to think of the effect of this rule on the less fortunate citizens; after all the vast majority of people of India don't carry any identity papers at all." Baruah, *India Against Itself*, xvii.

<sup>312</sup> "Social encounters have often been significant insights during the 'field trips'. For instance I was taken aback when I first heard what was then a new term 'ethnic Assamese'. At a fashionable party in New Delhi, I was introduced to an army officer who served in the Northeast. I was introduced to him as someone who lives in United States, in Delhi, en route to Assam. But, why the odd qualifier 'ethnic'? As I begun spending more time in Assam I wondered about the possible connection between a term that conceptually isolates a group that has historically metonymized Assameseness – and the logic of enforcing law and order in Assam. May be it was not accidental that I heard the term used by an army officer who had spent time in the Northeast." *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>313</sup> An elaboration on the Barak Valley Movement for separation can be found in: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Barakland>.

to being associated with or funded by Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI of Pakistan), sends the thinkers of indigenism into confusion. Then there are inner lines... created to divide the hills from the valleys, for administrative purposes.

**BA:** There is a big divide between the hill tribes and plainsmen in Assam. Tribals want their separate space. And, I know for sure that the Nagas want their greater Nagaland, which is projected as comprising of a part of Manipur and a part of Myanmar.

**ADG:** The ethnic groups can secede if the crisis is not seen or addressed in a flexible and creative manner. But by drawing their borders in a different way, the tribal groups – the potential countries – could play into the hands of their more powerful neighbours. This is a concern for the future.

Also, the moot point mentioned by Baruah is that there are different directions that the secessionist ethnicities are taking, the world over. Each of these groups – numbering nearly 200 – queues up in Brussels to put its case before the European Union and has its office there. These groups include Basque separatists, PLO, ULFA, Chechens etc.<sup>314</sup> This certainly reveals the world in a different light.

But the future, or the task of generating more creative thought on the future, lies with the government that projects an economic connectivity between the ethnic Northeast and their transnational neighbours; through the LEP. It is thought that by building roads and other connections it would be possible to increase the volume of business, a part of which would trickle down to the Northeast to effectively divert attention from secessionist activities.<sup>315</sup> Some effects of that planning are visible in parts of Assam – six-lane roads are under construction – often causing environmental hazards [with back cutting of rocks, felling of trees; also the dams]. In fact, the deprivations can match the projections in their volume. False weightage is given to these futuristic projections at the cost

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<sup>314</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *Ethno Nationalism in India: A Reader*, ed. Sanjib Baruah (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>315</sup> Rajat Ganguly, a theorist of International Relations on South Asia, a professor at the Murdoch University, Australia, states that the insurgencies depend on causal conjunctures, which when they get fractured, destroy the basis of insurgencies – in the seminar “Continuities and Discontinuities of Asian Engagement: Borders, Mobility and Identity in Northeast India and Asia”, IIT, Guwahati, Assam, 17–18 Oct., 2013.

of immediate local, ground-level needs and realities like loss of habitat and displacement of people. Barak Valley is witness to several agitations where pressure groups keep demanding broad gauge lines for train routes and shorter and convenient road routes to Guwahati.

The road map of these projects is not very clear to many. I only know that in September [2011], Delhi signed a treaty with Dhaka on the border policy, indicating that a serious dialogue is underway – perhaps an attempt at securing the territory before the business can take place.

**BA:** That apart, there are other factors – last week I met some members of the Mising community... But, I don't see how they can have a separate state; they are not equipped to run a state. Also, India does not want to sacrifice its buffer zone to China. A small area with greater autonomy won't interest the tribal populace; they would have secession as a demand... [Bruce continues after a pause] When Kosovo was created, it was small but it was an inspiration for larger ethnic bodies [he grows thoughtful].

**ADG:** Besides, there are divides over the claims to the valleys...

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There is no dispute over whether Assam is a divided terrain. There can be debate over how many such fragments one could attend to, how many lines of division segregate or bind spaces and locations of experience. There is also a difference of opinion over what justifies such divide or even whether it is justified. Political opinion-groups and scholars in metropolitan locations like Guwahati and Dibrugarh, generally agree that there are positional differences among the discursive communities, depending on whether they are insiders or outsiders.<sup>316</sup> We can thus see how inside Assam, even after the redistribution of states in

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<sup>316</sup> “An engagement with 'geographical history' — especially an enquiry into divergent cartographic cultures, provides a corrective to the prevalent view of a static Northeast existing in 'splendid isolation'.” David Vumallian Zou, M. Satish Kumar, “Mapping a Colonial Borderland: Objectifying the Geo body of India's Northeast,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70, no.1 (2011): 143.

Sajal Nag, (2002), Willem Van Schendel (1992, 95) and David Ludden (2005) noted the usefulness of 'geographical history (or historical geography) to locate current social problems' in India's Northeast, fettered as it is by the tyranny of national geography and the closures of territorial boundaries. In a slightly different context, Ludden also argued for setting the 'academic agenda at intellectual intersections of mobility and territorialism' (2003)

1972, there are several such insides and outsides, which reinsert the issues of fragments. This is an aspect the humanist liberal scholarship tends to overlook, but it comes out elsewhere, in the spaces populated by the Others. In the words of Zou and Kumar, “India’s inner Asian Borderlands hold the useful key to understanding South Asia today”<sup>317</sup>.

It would perhaps be interesting to take the relational questions<sup>318</sup> of landlocked borderlands like Assam to its geographic areas where the infra-national is likely to generate, from its several borders.

### 3.2 Folds of Territoriality: Micro Social Assam

The root cause of inter-ethnic conflicts and assertion of identities by various ethnic and tribal groups lies in the solitary approach towards identity, adopted by the ethnic-Assamese in the so-called postcolonial Assam. Efforts to make Assam a nation province for the ethnic-Assamese have flared-up the identity conflicts, which, in turn, have accelerated the transformation from multiculturalism to monoculturalism. According to Manjeet Baruah:

The process of transformation of the trans-Brahmaputra valley from a continental crossroad (a passage) to a frontier (bound space) has produced animosities and clogged up the social spaces. Thus, spaces and societies which were brought under colonial control are part of ‘order’, while those that were left outside are treated as ‘savage’.<sup>319</sup>

During the British period, the administrative domains divided the hills and valleys into separate zones. Valleys were tea producing areas where the colonial

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<sup>317</sup> Zou and Kumar, “Mapping”, 143.

<sup>318</sup> “The sustained practice of balancing adjacency and immersion – it used to be called distance and intimacy – still haunts the discipline [of anthropology].” George E. Marcus and Paul Rabinow in conversation with James D. Faubion and Tobias Rees, *Design for the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 61.

<sup>319</sup> Manjeet Baruah, *Frontier Cultures: A Social History of the Assamese Literature* (London: Routledge, 2012), 6.

administration had a control and was considered civilized, the rest were considered savage.

The border, a zone of diversity, became a geographic theatre of flux; because of the British policy of settling in Assam, peasants from the eastern part of the then-undivided Bengal, and the natural and environmentally-economically guided migration over the years. The land was so ambiguous in its ethnic make-up that it was brought under the sixth schedule of the Constitution, post independence. The process started under the 1935 Government of India Act when the hill areas were divided into the 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' categories. The Lushai Hills (now Mizoram), the Naga Hills and the North Cachar Hills were the excluded areas, over which the provincial ministry had no jurisdiction. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills, and the Mikir Hills were partially excluded areas.<sup>320</sup> The schedule was an arrangement made especially for Northeast India, to provision for autonomous, self-governed areas to be allocated for the tribes of that region. As a result, a large number of tribes live as independent, self-governed entities, and continue to exist as distinct communities. In relation to this, Manjit Baruah says:

Contrast of two different spaces such as the hills and the valleys, or the tea gardens and plains (which also look like hill-valley difference in miniature by geographic/ demographic terms). This is shown as contrast between 'order' and 'absence of order'. This is traced to the challenges of locations, whether geographical, or sociopolitical or cultural, which prevent the space with its communities from constituting into an order and also make integration into an order difficult.<sup>321</sup>

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On a December morning in 2012, I meet Sandipan Bhattacharya, by appointment, in a public bus from Silchar to Patharkandi in the Karimganj District of Assam. Sandipan, a film-maker and a secondary school teacher, is on his way

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<sup>320</sup> <http://lawmin.nic.in/coi/SIXTH-SCHEDULE.pdf>.

<sup>321</sup> "It is notable that the historiography cannot conceptually distinguish crossroad and frontier as different formations. Given the fact that the Turner thesis was formulated in the 1890s, when the frontier had almost become a past rather than being 'concrete', living reality. The positivist approach in such retrospective history is evident." Manjeet Baruah, *Frontier Cultures*, 10.

to school. Sandipan's school is close to the tri-junction border between India's Assam and Tripura states and the international border of Bangladesh. Also present with me is Pinak Pani Nath, my research assistant from Silchar. We engage in conversation.

The border is visible; it is very close to where we are, which whets our curiosity about crossing over. Sandipan, from a migrant family, knows a lot about the routes to Bangladesh and via Bangladesh, to Calcutta – where in the past, all Bengalis wanted to go, because, (until recently) it was considered the cultural capital of India. Sandipan tells us how we can reach Goaland *Ghat* (Jetty) by evening, from Chandipur by launch and catch a train from there to Kolkata/ Calcutta. The old route through Bangladesh to Kolkata can again, according to him, be restored.

[In the following conversation and henceforth: Sandipan Bhattacharya is denoted as **SB**, Pinak Pani Nath as **PPN**]

**SB:** If you go via the Akhaura [Tripura] border...

**PPN:** There will probably be new scope for business, if those borders are opened. Even now, there are quite a few businesses that are carried out across the borders, which are not so legal...

**SB:** [Continues, ignoring the critical suggestion] Now, from Agartala to Dhaka via Akhaura there is a chance that broad-gauge lines may soon be laid. There used to be a line prior to 1924... [So, it is technically possible!]

**ADG:** What do you feel when you go over to the other side?

**SB:** There is a feeling of mutual distrust. Frankly, we could have stayed back. We would have got a lot from the other side. Here, the Bengalis are isolated from the mainstream. We could take land only. [Meaning, they have had to be satisfied with land on this side of the border, without entering into the cultural milieu].

**ADG:** And why so?

**SB:** It is because of the local political situation... I wanted to interview all the authorities and record the conversations with the people on border crossings and place them side by side, it is an ongoing project...

Where we are about to reach now is Kukithol. Next to it is Panchakhanda, after that is Katisayar, you must have heard about Katisayar?

**ADG:** Yes, was it not the home of Chaitanya?<sup>322</sup>

**SB:** Yes.

**ADG:** Are there efforts to create a situation of social interaction by the state?

**SB:** Yes, there are volleyball tournaments organised by the BSF, where people are allowed to come over from across the border... I can work on them [he means doing a video] when it happens, if I get the chance.

**ADG:** When does it happen?

**SB:** There is no fixed time, whenever the authorities feel the relation between the BDR [now called BGB] and the BSF [India] is easy, they have a tournament.

### **3.2.1 Citizenship: Attempts at Defining an Outside**

The movements that sought to define the question of outsiders, primarily sought to define ethnicity in terms of roots/origin. Amalendu Guha asks, "Who are the foreigners?" In 1978–79, the term '*bideshi*' (foreigner) and '*bohiragoto*' (outsider) were used interchangeably. These terms not only covered foreigners, but also people from other states of India. Later, the Assam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Council) and the intellectual and senior-most constituent of the Gana Sangram Parishad (the pro ethno-Assamese political body) intervened to narrow down the meaning of the term to the post-1951 immigrants from foreign countries, with questionable citizenship status. This received wide acceptance

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<sup>322</sup> Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was a Hindu saint and social reformer from sixteenth century India, revered by many as an incarnation of God.

from the other constituents of the movement. It represents a major tactical shift.<sup>323</sup>

In a 2006 essay, Guha quotes Gail Omvedt on her sociological analysis of the paranoia created over the 'ethnic influx', which led to the ethnic riot of January 1980:

The basic Assamese fear is not so much of losing jobs to Bengalis (or, Other outsiders) but of losing their land. This is a much more basic issue, because it calls into question one of the defining characteristics of a nationality, that of a territory; and the loss of territory to people who settle on it tends to be permanent.<sup>324</sup>

He then goes on to critique her. Guha's argument is that if Assam were to be seen on a statistical and comparative scale, several census data starting with the 1961 census would show Bengal as having had more Bangladeshi immigration – 15.4%, compared to Assam's 11.4%. This difference is seen maintained a decade later. According to him, the reaction to the outsiders by the political and social groups of Assam's indigenists is governed by a fear psychosis with no realistic basis.<sup>325</sup> The contradiction, to my mind, lies in Guha's approach, which mostly trusts statistical material as evidence. Sociological data, which has proportionately larger involvement of subjectivity and qualitative elements, may not match the assumptions available in statistical evidence. Above all, this entire debate has one common factor. It looks at a ground level crisis like an official map, mostly from above.

There are different takes on the nature of the Assam movement, which seeks to define the sovereignty of Assamese people in terms of the broader and expansive sense of territoriality – a sense that is largely founded on the

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<sup>323</sup> Amalendu Guha, "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam's Anti-Foreigner Upsurge 1979-80," *Economic and Political Weekly* vol. XV, no. 41-43, Special No. (Oct, 1980): 1699-1720.

<sup>324</sup> Gail Omvedt, 'Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam's Anti-Foreigner Upsurge 1979-80,' Abu Naser Saied Ahmed ed., *Nationality Question in Assam: The EPW 1980-81 Debate*, (New Delhi: Akansha Publication, 2006).

<sup>325</sup> Guha, "Little Nationalism," 79, 91- 92; T.K. Oomen, review, Gail Omvedt "Reinventing Revolution: Socialism and New Social Movements in India", *Contemporary Sociology* vol.23 no.6 (November, 1994).

reorganised and consequently lost territories, which have formed separate states such as Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Tripura. These takes comprise Socialist arguments like Guha's,<sup>326</sup> the liberal humanist argument of Hiren Gohain or Omvedt,<sup>327</sup> who rely on the idea of 'national self-determination' and those of the Chicago and Cambridge sociological schools that, like Sanjib Baruah, call the Assam movement 'Sub-nationalism'.<sup>328</sup>

The realist account of territoriality and history tells us that during the time of the Ahom kings, Assam was much smaller than it is today. It did not include the districts of Goalpara, Cachar and the North Cachar hills within its territory. After the Yandaboo Treaty (1826) or annexation of Assam by the British, Upper Assam – the parts governed by the Ahoms till then, such as the Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Dibrugarh districts became part of the Bengal Presidency. After 1874 and until 1947 it became part of a separate commissionerate.

According to Guha, among others, Assam was a multi-lingual terrain, where the share of Assamese-speaking people was less than 25% and the proportion of Bengali-speaking people was 40%. As a result of the reorganisation (during the period of 1947–72) on the basis of linguistic principle, the state of Assam today has 61% of Assamese-speaking people.<sup>329</sup> The data on Cachar district in the south of Assam is amazing – with the Bengali people constituting a dominant 90% of the population. Here, among the minorities are the Meiteis (Manipuri), the Kacharis and the Assamese.

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<sup>326</sup> Guha is also critical of Sanjib Baruah's approach at this point, for what Guha calls- an articulation on behalf of the middle classes via categories such as 'ethnicity', 'plural society'. *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>327</sup> Omvedt, "Little Nationalism", 136-141; Hiren Gohain, "Little Nationalism", 132-136.

<sup>328</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself*, 67-68.

<sup>329</sup> There seem to be controversies at every step of the possible progress of establishing identities in Assam, since as Sanjib Baruah and Sanjoy Hazarika confirm, people do fake their identities in the border areas. Myron Weiner, a formidable political commentator on India's identity questions with a focus on Northeast India, has also expressed his doubt about the reliability of the state's census data.

There was a different sense of loss among the indigenous populace in the distribution of Assam as a state during the colonial governance, when boundaries were fixed as tax regimes – a device that instrumentalises space before its appropriation by the State.<sup>330</sup> So, from the 1850s, when tea was found to be a part of the economic/ commercial policy, there were strategic policies adopted; the same was true of the discovery of oil. This led to the displacement of people and significant loss of profession especially in the sector of agriculture. A similar pattern continues in case of displacement of indigenous people in the name of developmental future, leading to the question- ‘When was postcolonial in Assam?’<sup>331</sup>

### **3.2.2 Ethnic Flip-Flop: Conditions of an Archipelago**

In 1874, the British separated Assam from Bengal and placed it under the control of a Chief Commissioner with its capital in Shillong. The province included Sylhet district – a predominantly Bengali Muslim area. Sylhet was transferred to Assam to cover the revenue deficits of the Chief Commissioner’s province. In 1905, the British partitioned the sprawling, densely populated province of Bengal into a western – predominantly Bengali Hindu – province and a new province of ‘Eastern Bengal and Assam’. Both, the Bengali Hindus and the Assamese bitterly resented the partition. In 1912, the partition was annulled, and Assam was reconstituted as a separate province, one that included the predominantly Bengali Muslim district of Sylhet and the predominantly Bengali Hindu district of Cachar. Subsequently, during independence and the partition of the country in 1947, in a flip-flop of opinion, the Indian government settled for the three districts of Cachar, Hylakandi and a part of Karimgunj to be separated from the larger Sylhet and attached to Assam and India.<sup>332</sup> The rest of Sylhet went with East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh.

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<sup>330</sup> Zou and Kumar write, “Drawing on Bernard S. Kohn’s usage, we understand objectification here not as timeless mode of describing the colonized objects, (people and places), but as specifically modern process of enumerating, calibrating or reinventing the previously fuzzy ideas of space and culture into consciously rational ends.” Zou and Kumar, *Mapping*, 144.

<sup>331</sup> Kar, “When was Postcolonial,” 49-80.

<sup>332</sup> Subsequently the tribal populated hill regions of Assam were formed into separate states.

Currently, within Barak Valley, these three districts differ slightly, in terms of their ethnic constitution. This difference emerges in the dynamics of everyday exchanges. Though, the orientation of the larger towns like Silchar and partly Karimgunj is more cosmopolitan, the smaller nodal places near the border exist with their own everyday dynamics. Karimgunj town, adjacent to the international border with Bangladesh, is governed by the border, whereas the smaller places like Lathitola, Latu and Mahishashan are more ethno-governed and the border expresses itself differently here. In Cachar, the highway from the district headquarter, cultural-centre Silchar to the Myanmar border via Manipur, forms a three-point junction at Pooler Tol just before Lakhipur. One of the three routes leads to Lakhipur – which is the main market hub of the area; the other enters deep into Manipur; the main route leads via Jiribam and Manipur/ Imphal to the international border with Myanmar. Once again, the cultural experience is different in comparison to Silchar. Also, the ethnic maps are different in the three directions and the border experience is more variegated. The ethnic variety includes Kuki, Chin, Manipuri, Mar, Bengalis from Sylhet, among others. Many of them do not subscribe to the concept of the Indian nation. This comes out in inevitable token gestures of defiance on special occasions like the Indian Independence Day on 15<sup>th</sup> August. (ILL.3.2 – 3.6)

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On my second visit to Lathitola in March 2012, with Sandipan and Pinak, I am escorted by Ram Kumar Koiri, the retired headmaster of the village school. We first meet Yadavji, who is a former *Gram Panchayat Pradhan* (head of the local village council) of the Lathitola village of Patherekandi subdivision of the Karimganj district of Assam. I have the following conversations with Yadavji and Bairagya Das – a landed farmer from the same village. Bairagya lives on top of one of the numerous mud hills in Lathitola, which is on the tri-junction border between Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh. (ILL.3.7– 3.10)

[In the following conversation and henceforth: Yadavji is denoted as **Yadav**, Bairagya Das is **BD**, Ram Kumar Koiri is **RKK**]

**ADG:** When did your family settle here?

**Yadav:** It was during the British period, when tea plantation started [in the 1850s].<sup>333</sup> We came here as workers at that time. There were several generations who settled, subsequently.

One part of our family came from Bihar to settle here in Banskandi and Patharkandi, the other went to Maibang, which was the ancient capital of the Dimasa Kings... But the *Rakshashas* [demons in Sanskrit] carried off Hirimba to Cachar and turned her into their type. She became a Cachari.<sup>334</sup> Similarly, our people who went to Maibang, became part of the clan of Herambas, the so-called demons.<sup>335</sup> We are mere humans, and afraid of the Herambas. The whole Heramba lineage hence got cut off from us. That's the story so far... [Laughs]

**ADG:** Where do younger people go for education and where do they go after education?

**RKK:** Some go to Maharashtra and some go elsewhere in India for jobs.

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<sup>333</sup> "In 1855, the then district administrator of Barak Valley issued a statement regarding the discovery of tea in that area. In the very next year the first tea estate currently known as Bajrangpur Tea Estate was established." Rama Prasad Biswas, *The Cultural Space of the Tea Workers of Barak (Bengali)*, (Silchar: Srijan Graphics and Publication House, 2007), 89. Myron Weiner observes "The first significant wave of migration into Assam began shortly before the middle of the nineteenth century when the British created tea plantations in the hill areas." Myron Weiner, "The Political Demography of Assam's Anti-Immigrant Movement", *Population and Development Review* 9, no. 2 (June, 1983): 283.

<sup>334</sup> Kachar/ Cachar – the Dimasa kingdom of the ancient and medieval period was also called Heramba, from where people relate the name Hirimba, thus humanising/ ethnicising the demoness of the legend. Yadav, who is a literate priest, familiar with legends, suddenly takes this mythic route.

<sup>335</sup> There could be three approaches to the origin myths and their representations. The traditionalist one: "Vedas and the... the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Aryan mythology has percolated down to the consciousness of the tribal .... I have just spoken of Kachari patronage of Assamese Hindu literature. Kacharis describe their old kingdom – now nonexistent, as Heramba Rajya. Bhima actually did not visit Assam, but ancient geography migrates, that is, when a certain culture spreads, the older myths and legends are carried over to a new region and the new settlers feel at home if they find themselves linked with respectable traditions which they had obtained elsewhere." Praphulladatta Goswami, "Hindu and Tribal Folklore in Assam", *Asian Folklore Studies* 26, no.1 (1967): 19-27.

Second: a quote from the administrators report on Assam during British rule 'There is no doubt a feeling that Assam is a land of *Rakshashas*, demons, Hobgoblins and various terrors'. Saikia, *Assam and India*, 58.

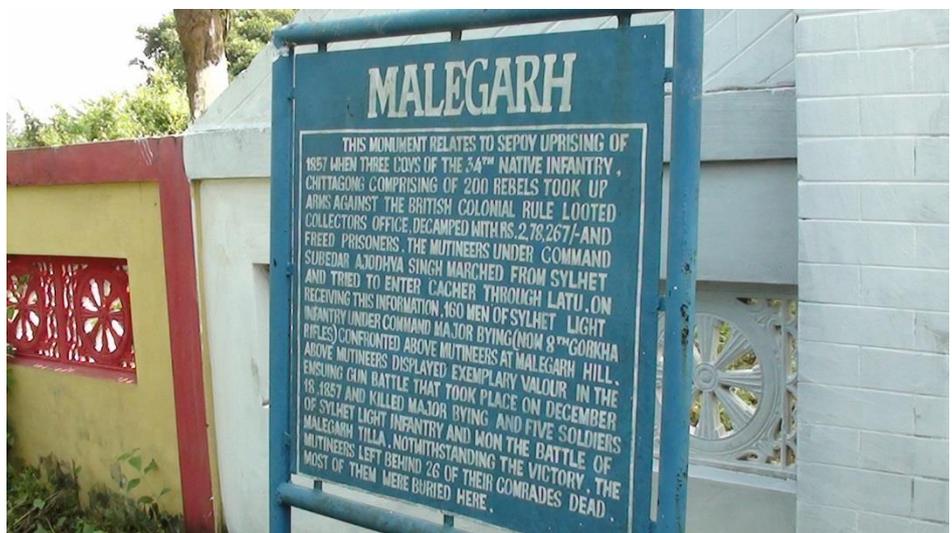
Third: "Authors of territorialism have long described their own sublime domain as the enclosure of civility, outside of which fearsome people and demons lurk in the dreaded forest, wild steppe, fierce desert, mysterious mountains, and endless untamed darkness of the sea. As a result, most evidence that we use to write history articulates territorialism in one way or another. The vast record of territorial order banished disorderly mobility to the outlands." David Ludden, "Maps in the Mind and the Mobility in Asia," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 4 (November 2003):1061.



3.3 Assam, Latu: A Bridge on the Barak River Leading Across the Border, 2011.



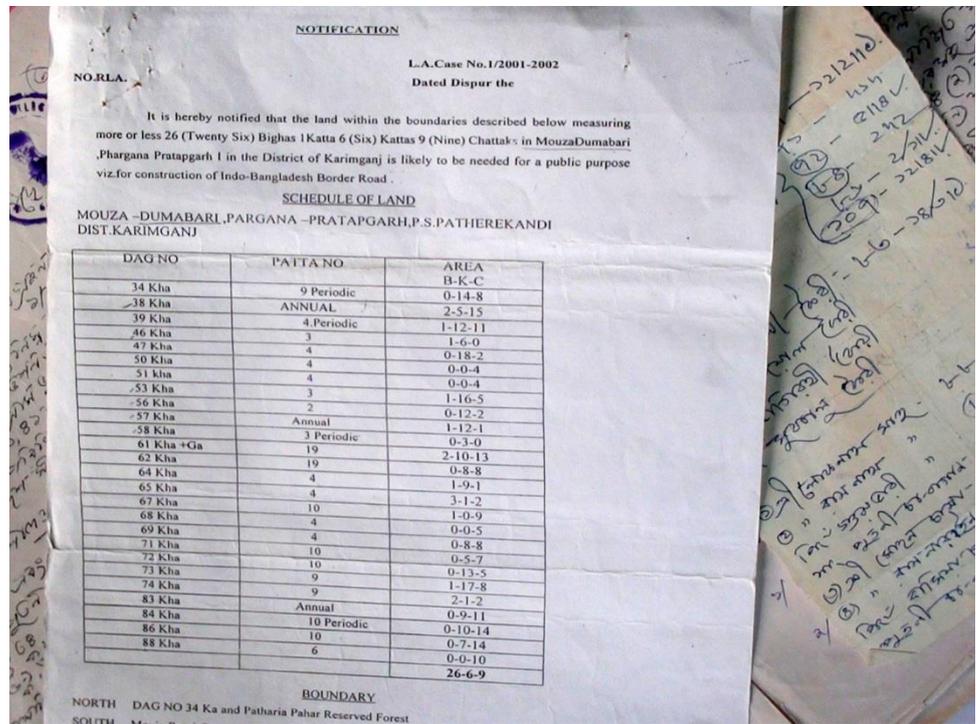
3.4 Assam, Latu: Regular Chores next to the 30ft. Border Fence, Nov. 2011.



3.5 Assam, Latu: Board Commemorating the Martyrs of 1857 Sepoy Mutiny in Malegarh Hillock, Nov. 2011



3.9 Karimgunj District, Lathitola: A Calf Close to the Border, Nov. 2011.



3.10 Karimgunj District, Lathitola: Government Notice for Land Acquisition in Patherekandi- 2001-02, March 2012.

**ADG:** [to Bairagya Das] Are there special areas allocated for the different ethnicities- Orias, Biharis, people from Uttar Pradesh, Bengalis etc. in your village?

**BD:** No, we just live side by side, in clusters, and can speak in Bengali, Hindi and Oriya... [Significantly, he doesn't mention Assamese, for, among the tea garden labourers there are hardly any ethno-Assamese.] We settled during our grandparents' time, way back. The world has changed since then. We are the original inhabitants of this site, between Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh. Our original home was Tripura; it starts from that side [pointing in the western direction].

**ADG:** This is so very close to the border... do people still cross over?

**BD:** We are all Indian people, there are mixed communities... [Pauses, his eyes get animated. His wife, from a distance indicates to him not to say more. He continues, though now in a more passive manner.] But we have been cohabiting in this space for a long time now.

**ADG:** Is there a special constraint of being in the borders, like private lands being taken over by government agencies for special purposes such as border road building? Or, population inflation?

**BD:** No, we are a mixed community... we are farmers with fixed land areas and I see no population influx... but in some cases such as the Master's [he points at Ram Kumar Koiri, who is locally referred to as the Master], there was some crisis related to land acquisition, perhaps.

[At this reference, RKK nods indefinitely and then looks away; we keep quiet since he is our host. Later, he shows us some of the signed documents from the Collector's office announcing acquisition of his and other people's lands and unsettled claims for compensation towards road-building close to the disputed territory of the tri- junction.]

**PPN:** But, generally you can identify who is from outside?

**BD:** No, we are a mixed lot and can't differentiate much.

**ADG:** But, you can cross over to the other side at will?

**RKK:** [answering for BD] Yes, you can, if you have proper documents...

**ADG:** There is no hostility?

**RKK:** You go to Sarad Bhai, who is currently the D.C. (the BSF Deputy Commandant), they will send a message to the next post. You can figure out for yourself once you meet them.

**ADG:** [addressing BD] Are you afraid that the police will catch you if you squeal about the migrants?

**BD:** [Shyly smiles] No, no!

**PPN:** Then where does the fear come from?

[In the background, BD's wife and other women speak up for the first time, on behalf of the headman.]

**Chorus:** The fear comes from the midnight events! When anybody transports cattle across the border, he is woken up in the middle of the night and questioned.

**ADG:** So they round you up despite your being the proper constitutional representative, a village head?

**BD:** Yes, they misuse the power.

### **3.3 Stereotypes and Challenges in Spatiality of Experience: Memories and Distance**

Memories are governed by distance. But distances are not guided by the same quality of memoriality and memories cannot probably be quantified. And,

'nostalgia' is just a make-believe nomination for anything past, to relegate it to an unreachable realm.<sup>336</sup> In Assam, memories find their different points of spatial comparison in the construction of the selves. These constructions are chiefly governed by the physical location of the subject.

In South Assam, in contrast to the rest of Assam, the space is already an island, since it can be approached by road only via the state of Meghalaya, or by air. In the Barak Valley, a sense of isolation exists as the language in use by the majority is Bengali of a variety much different from that of mainland Bengal, or even from that of subjacent Bangladesh. A history of separation from the parent state of Sylhet during the partition, a language movement as a reaction to the imposition of Assamese as the official language in the 1960s<sup>337</sup> and the protracted isolation from mainland Assam and coveted Bengal has formed much of its culture, albeit with a sense of independence. But a mixed sense of temporality, it seems, makes the space a cultural hybrid, where a different sense of time cohabits even within the same community.

My forays into South Assam acquaint me with private experiments in the public domain, such as Sandipan Bhattacharya's films and the recently published, celebrated autobiography of poet Manindra Gupta – who is from the Cachar district of South Assam. Gupta's name is not known in Cachar at all, not even among the literary people and the otherwise-alert intellectuals of the region, though he is widely known and appreciated in Kolkata. The two creations can be juxtaposed to see how certain affinities and differences are spelt out through their attitudes to time. Despite having used different mediums, they connect and disconnect by their locations of production, as by their attention to the sense of

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<sup>336</sup> "It is not uncommon for the necessary inadequacy of such translation to be diagnosed wrongly as nostalgia. The error lies not only in the pathological suggestion it carries, but primarily in its failure to understand or even consider how the migrant relates to his own time at this point. Driven on by anxiety, he has only the future in his horizon. 'What is going to happen to me? What should I do now? How am I to be with the others in this unfamiliar world?' These are all cogitations oriented towards what is to come rather than ruminations about what has been so far." Ranajit Guha, "The Migrant's Time," *Postcolonial Studies* 1, no. 2 (1998): 159.

<sup>337</sup> On 19<sup>th</sup> May, 1961 Barak Valley rose for the first time in peaceful protest against the imposition of Assamese as a language of instruction. The state police walked in when protest was in full swing and shot at the gathering, killing 11 people instantly. The anniversary is observed as a black day by the Barak Valley *Bhasha Sahid Diwas* (Language Martyrs Day) Committee, every year.

time-space relation. While, Sandipan is an entrenched citizen of the Karimgunj district of Barak, Gupta left the valley in his teens in the 1950s.

### **3.3.1 Memoriality of Space: Films**

Sandipan Bhattacharya's films are on Karimgunj and the Sylhet district of Bangladesh. His visits to Bangladesh, as well as his journeys by train along the border, are testimonials to the urge for revisiting ancestral places that Sandipan feels, collectively, with other migrants from Sylhet. His relation to this part of Assam is that of a migrant in search of lost routes of connectivity. Here is an express sense of loss as well as mnemonic recounting via landscapes he has traversed. For him, the bordering spaces are presences of a mixture of past religious and secular orders of objects, events and personages. This is revealed in his films.

#### Railpahar

The camera tracks the landscape through the windows of a moving train, while Sandipan's voice-over recounts memories of villages he has left behind, or villages that were birthplaces or dwellings of great men – a freedom fighter of Bangladesh or a religious reformer... The description of landscape becomes a reverential recounting and hence comes alive like an enchantment. I discuss these aspects of his film with him and realise that the space of the journey depicted, remains somewhat exclusive for him. Hence, it has to be read as a very personalised and subjective journey, even though the public domain is used.

Bhattacharya's articulation is about capturing the elements of surprise in the journey through different terrains and is overtly in the documentary mode of recording. But a careful registering of the sound–image relation goes to show the subtle change of path in articulating the past. In capturing a journey to Bangladesh, he has followed the definite goal of tracing continuity between Karimgunj and Sylhet. Though it seems pre-meditated, in retrospect, the film develops as a combination of a series of chance encounters, as happens in the course of a journey.

*Railpahar*, literally means Rail Hill. It begins with a train leaving a station, while the voice-over (V/O) introduces the film as a letter to a friend. This turns out to be a device for introducing the Sylhet-Cachar colloquial Bengali; later in the film, the more classical and central (i.e. literary language of Calcutta of the past) linguistic codes are maintained for treating the terrain through a reverential eye and ear:

V/O: *Bidyarombher jonyo amra char bhai o tin bon babamayer songey thaktey esechilam Kathigoraey.* (For the sake of starting our education, we, four brothers and three sisters had come to stay in Kathigora with our parents.)

This language of narration is archaic in the new millennium, for any Bengali-speaking community. It is quasi-Tagorean and gives the film a pastiche soundscape. The visual is a sequence through the window of a moving train, with an occasional look inside. The train is an allegory of travel. Sandipan scans the flitting view much in the manner of a nineteenth century colonial description of a native landscape, the voice-over reeling off the ethnicities of the different people spotted in the passing scenes;<sup>338</sup> a retro-effect, from the point of view of twenty-first century man passing through the ancient, colonial, rail channels. During the course of the film, the language switches from archaic to ordinary-contemporary, then again to archaic, probably to denote a relation with the past; a past to which the author wants the tenor of the presented visuals transported.

In the next sequence, the signalman is shown waving a green cloth and the voice-over tells us in archaic Bengali, '*Jeno Ghumer desher adhibashi, Jeno somoy bandha pore achey tar kaachey*' (As if he is a resident of the land of sleep, and as if time is held ransom with him). Sandipan uses the available ambiguity of the Bengali language to his advantage. As listeners, we are caught between two alternative readings – at a dilemma whether time is trapped or being held ransom.

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<sup>338</sup> Ethnic identification can sometimes be confusing. For instance, while returning to Silchar from Karimganj on a winter Sunday in 2012, when we tried to make conversation with a guy who seemed to be Nepali, he turned out to be a Bengali from Diphu (capital of Karbi Anglong, a territorial reserve for the Karbi tribe in North Cachar Hills). We also had with us, Subir Sarkar – another long-time Bengali resident of Diphu – who had just participated in our Karimganj workshop. At the end of our conversation with the stranger, we apologised for our mistake.

Thus, he builds layers of sound and visuals for narration. There are track changes as well as visual overlaps, which work out different transitions between spaces shown and spaces suggested by the soundscape. The soundscape comprises on-screen and off-screen sounds and music effects – often suggestive of another space. The background score at the end of the film – the first few lines of a well known song by Tagore – sets up the whole tempo and the lyrics beautifully round-off the language of narration: “*Ami choncholo hey, Ami shudurero piyashi...*” (Oh, I am restless and covetous of the boundless distances...).

After traversing the mountainous terrain towards the border of Akhaura, the train stops. The journey ends, a requiem begins. The requiem suggests that the sudden end of railroad ends the prospective flow into the past. Sandipan uses a narrative inflection to attach a quality of memoriality to the spaces shown in the film, as if they are lost passages from the past and as if the space is trapped in time.

### Sylhetnamah

Bhattacharya's other film, *Sylhetnamah* (Chronicles of Sylhet) is about the other side of the Barak – the district of Sylhet, the second most prosperous in Bangladesh, from where the maximum number of people migrate to the UK.

Though the district is just across the border and is visible from different points of the Karimgunj town – where Sandipan now lives with his family – the intensity of attraction for his place of origin has pushed him to travel to Sylhet. One of the busiest business-centres of Bangladesh, this is a place where one finds all kinds of goods, and business houses juxtaposed with wayside rope-tricks. The signs of capital are everywhere and after the Dhaka and Mymansingha districts, this is Bangladesh's most coveted place for jobs and settlement.

The film shows several locations that would unfailingly be dear to any regular Bengali gentry, regardless of place of origin, such as the fish and the herb markets. It also takes the viewer through wayside curiosities, the shopping malls and newly built housing complexes, some of which bear obvious influences of European modernism. It is also likely that the finances for the complexes have

originated from there. Next, we are shown a jetty and the V/O announces it to be the birth place of the Vaishnava guru Advaitacharya. We are told that close to this place is Sonaighati, the birth place of Bangabandhu Usman, who was Mujibur Rahman's closest associate and a main force behind the 1971 rebellion that led to the formation of Bangladesh. It is a sort of pilgrimage for anyone associated with Bangladesh. It is popularly known that there has been no communal infighting here and a strong sense of community binds its people together. Hasan Raja, the great spiritual guru was also born here and is commemorated by a museum. The film tells us that Tagore referred to him often; he quoted Raja's songs in speaking of national integration. The commentary now is in Sylhet's Bengali dialect, as if with the purpose of befriending or intimately communicating with the locals, as if they are Sandipan's prospective audience. The visuals are passive, they take a secondary role and the verbal narration dominates.

We see a plaque on a house that says Raghunat Pradumnya Mishra; V/O states that Upendra Mishra was the grandfather of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the great Vaishnavite reformer of the sixteenth Century. The narration, suffused with emotion, transforms the visual field into an enchanted landscape and is reminiscent of the *Kathokatha*<sup>339</sup> tradition of recounting. The visual of the plaque transforms into evidence that the spiritual figure was born and lived here. The site becomes a mnemonic abstraction.

### **3.3.2 Distant Memories: Stylised Exterior**

Manindra Gupta is an off-beat poet. Though originally, an indigenous resident of Barak Valley, he now lives in Kolkata. He has grown extremely popular recently in Bengal because of his autobiography in Bengali, *Akshay Mulberry* (Indestructible Mulberry); published in 2008 from Kolkata – by a small forum of Little Magazines called *Abavas*.

The book's multi-sited nature forms an interesting contrast with the literary production of the Barak Valley, whose writers work from an entrenched situation.

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<sup>339</sup> Local form of nightlong storytelling that is an admixture of legend and rumour; the subjects – of mythic nature – are annotated with social commentary.

Gupta has relocated several times; this positions him as an outsider – one who went away when he was in his teens and never came back. In the autobiography, he speaks of the period of his transition from adolescence to adulthood, as well as the geo-physical transition of his life, from the geographically isolated Barak Valley to the mainland – not Assam to where the Barak region legally belongs, but Kolkata where the Barak belongs by desire.

In explaining how he developed an affinity for Tagore, Gupta analyses that the fact of his being a semi-adult too, like Tagore during his moment of personal crisis, must have made him want to keep returning to his writings. He writes (translated from the Bengali), “At times, I feel as if I am that finger-length boy, who, surreptitiously, holding on to the end of Tagore’s long robe, enters into a silent, indistinct zone of enchantment.”

And, “Why is a youth of five and a half feet trying to become a finger-length child? Because, five-and-a-half-feet has many responsibilities towards himself and others, but he cannot fulfil much of them, as is visible. So, the five-and-a-half-feet existence has to be hidden by something, preferably by the leaves of the books. Books are his igloo of escape; each book is a singular brick of that total configuration of the hemispherical igloo.”<sup>340</sup>

Thus, by his own confession, Tagore has been transformative for Gupta. He has been able to find a refuge of sorts in Tagore that allows him a path of escape. This is a route he seeks in wanting to be transformed into a child who can hide – from responsibility and guilt. It fits the psychology of a migrant with his guilt, but has no physical relation to the divided terrain left behind. In Gupta’s autobiography, the past is governed by the event metaphor, a rite of passage occurring in many sites, where time is a frozen motif following the line of progress from childhood to adolescence to youth. His state can be called an apostasy;<sup>341</sup> he no longer finds himself acceptable in his land of origin.

The motifs of the past are just anchors to finding a grip over the present. The physical distance from the palpable geography becomes a cue in negotiating

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<sup>340</sup> Manindra Gupta, *Akshay Mulberry* (Calcutta: Abavas Prakashan, 2008), 198.

<sup>341</sup> Ranajit Guha, “The Migrant’s Time”, 155-160.

one's position in an alien land. Hence, when Gupta roams the city of Calcutta, for him, its streets compare, not with the Barak River that he knew, but with the Brahmaputra – though less unrelated to him. He invokes an artifice of distance. The CIT road that cuts through Calcutta's heartland in north-south orientation, dividing it into the East and the West, is known by different names in different places. Starting from Rasa Road, Tollygunj in the South it goes via Kalighat, Bhavanipur and Chowringhee, becomes Circular Road in Central Calcutta and goes on as Chitpur Road via Chitpur, Jorasanko and Terittibazar upto the Bagbazar Canal, where it is Bagbazar Road. For Gupta, it is reminiscent of the Brahmaputra, which starts as Sangpo from Southern Tibet and becomes Meghna in Bangladesh before meeting the sea. He says, "*Path hente ami byatha o bhar khoy korte chai.*" (I want to walk off the pain and heaviness of heart.)

### 3.4 The Narratives and Their Resolution

The ethnic dimension of community in Assam manifests itself in the daily exchanges, which are largely oral. On occasions, it finds its way into written literature, which is either institutionalised or extra-institutional, but in the public domain – like novels or films. When in print and/ or in circulation, this dimension potentially affects discourses of belonging and desire and thereby affects the overall mapping. Thus, by a turn of choice an innocuous family drama, a love story or a romantic novel may become the ploy for addressing the dynamics of the multicultural, the state of community and relationality of experience. According to Manjeet Baruah:

Multiple narrative system defines the pre-colonial literary practice in south and southeast Asia – in oral, written and performance domain and multi-layered narrative system. The manuscript, the oral and the performative were bound together.<sup>342</sup>

The literary scene in Assam is marked by the differences of dialect within the Assamese language in mainland-Assam (i.e. in the Kamrup District, The

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<sup>342</sup> Manjeet Barua, *Frontier Cultures*, 79.

Brahmaputra Valley and Upper Assam). Scholars suggest that the choice of language and dialect is often a sign of alignment with the populist slogan of unity of Assam, or an expression of difference from ethnic, but also at times the gender point of view.<sup>343</sup>

Many of the post-1950's novels discuss the porosities in the culture. Manjeet Baruah quotes Birinchi Baruah's novel *Seuji Patar Kahini* (Tale of the Green Leaves), where Sonya, the illegitimate daughter of a European planter falls for an indigenous man, Narottam. After some time, Sonya backs off because of her different origin, skin tone and culture, despite being a worker herself. Baruah identifies this as a sign of porosity between the plantation culture and the outer world; an attempt that breaks free of the stereotype of enclosed/ enclave places of the colonial discourse, predating the contemporary concept of porosity.

Ganesh Dey of Lakhipur, whose writings do not belong to the institutional Assamese genre, takes up a different challenge. He belongs to the Barak Valley, where Bengali is the language of communication despite the presence of Manipuri, Naga and Dimasa communities. He feels cut-off from the dominant Assamese cultural discourse. He is culturally impacted, because of the situation of Sylhet/ Cachar after the partition, as also by the lost access to mainland Bengal. Hence, Dey feels equally distant from his forefathers' homeland – now in Bangladesh – and the Bengali populace of mainland West Bengal/ Kolkata.<sup>344</sup> He says, the distance from the latter is because of the lack of support, or lukewarm treatment that, according to him, they have received from Kolkata. Dey identifies this as a collective grievance of the people of Cachar District or even of Barak Valley. He has, as a result, helped start a newspaper and a journal from his remote location in Lakhipur. Post-retirement from the Nehru College, he writes a weekly column in a daily newspaper 'Jugasankha' and has also compiled

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<sup>343</sup> This is apparent in the treatment of femininity as the centre of experience in the novels of Mamoni Raisom Goswami a liberal feminist, Bishnu Rabha, a socialist, or even a liberal Ganesh Dey of Cachar – in a different language and genre (i.e. Bengali language of Cachar-Sylhet with complex alignment of contradictions between magic-realism, moralism, modernist liberalism and pro-women leanings).

<sup>344</sup> "To many Bengalis of Cachar, it is an accident of history that Bengali-speaking Cachar is part of Assam. A Bengali writer from Cachar describes this as one of the legacies of partition of Bengal in 1905." Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself*, 103.

three of his novels into a book. All three are love stories.<sup>345</sup> At their core, they are also transcendental narration.<sup>346</sup> Time has a role to play in structuring the novels. The characters have multiple points of entry and exits in the plot; they break free of the shackles of traditional feudal or middle-class household to explore the world, but in the end fall back on the traditional mores. They seem to be more in search of an archetypal innocence than a break from tradition.

### 3.4.1 A River that Comes Round or the Allegory of (Cycle of) Time

Ganesh Dey's novella *Kalangmar Kuley* (On the Bank of the River Kalangma) weaves together three narrative flows — one of union and two of deception — taken forward by two main protagonists, via a mythic narration of the story of the Dimasa Cachari kingdom and its ruler. The entire story is woven around the riverine civilisation of the Barak (called Kalangma in the Dimasa tongue).

One of the main characters is the lonely, divorced and childless middle-aged professor — Anirban, who is the storyteller unfolding the story of the Cachar kings, wherein there is love and deception and the degeneration of an empire. Anirban relates the story to his diligent, liberal, young and admiring student Chandra, who gradually gets drawn towards him. A brief engagement with the final scene reveals how the *mise-en-scène* is built up gradually with the help of little personal details of both the protagonists — a method better suited to realist narrative. Yet, in the end, what was potentially a realist novella transforms into a symbolically charged story with archetypal underpinnings.

On this particular day, Anirban and Chandra climb the Borail Mountain to visit the caves where the ancient legendary tribes named *Gamaigujus* lived. At her insistence, Anirban narrates to Chandra an imaginary sequence of a day in the life of the tribe. So far, Anirban's stories have been around the history of a past

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<sup>345</sup> The stories are: *Kalangmar Kuley*, *Prathito Prithibi* (A Desired World) and *Lokkhobheder Dhonuk* (A Bow to Hit the Target). Ganesh Dey, *Three Novels of Ganesh Dey* (Silchar: Hemaprabha Prakashan, 2008).

<sup>346</sup> Transcendentalists believed that society and its institutions — particularly organised religion and political parties — ultimately corrupted the purity of the individual. They had faith that people are at their best when truly "self-reliant" and independent. It is only from such real individuals that true community could be formed.  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendentalism>.

kingdom, whose lineage can be traced and reconstructed in the form of documented local knowledge, now the tenor changes to fantasy. Meanwhile, a storm blows up and the heavy downpour forces the duo into a darkening cave. (Translated from the Bengali original):

**Chandra:** Their society was matriarchal, was it?

**Anirban:** Must have been. In the ancient time all the societies were matriarchal.

**Chandra:** The Gamaiguju community that lived in this cave must have been under the command of a woman?

**Anirban:** Must have been.

**Chandra:** Then, since we have come on this calamitous night, let's imagine ourselves being several thousand years back, and I am a woman and a commander of this cave and I am ordering you to tell me some imaginary truth about the Gamaiguju tribe...

Dey uses several time-switches — one is the obvious tense cue:

This cave is several thousand years old [Anirban says]. Twenty four people **live** here. Six of them **are** young men. Four of them **are** extremely old. Seven of them **are** young women. There are four children, two **are** disabled old men, crippled by wild animals. There **is** a peculiar person called Gloha. He **is** a young man who has almost reached the end of his youth. The leader of this team of Gamaiguju **is** the young woman Dohani. Everyone **is** naked.<sup>347</sup>

Past and present come to the same uneven plane, much like the novella's larger plot of absolutely modern complexities and their transit into the space of the past. Anirban's descriptive overlap informs us:

That night the primitive men and women mate amid the clime of destruction, following the intoxication and the ritual protocols of dance. After the consummation, Gloha worships Dohani, as if she is transformed into a goddess now, and he has become a priest in a fertility rite.

Celebratory phrases referring to nature draw the curtain on this narrative. The Borail, the surrounding chirping of birds all witness and celebrate this new union,

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<sup>347</sup> Dey, *Kalangmar Kuley*, in *Ganesh Dey: Three Novels*, 118.

attaching a residue of the archetypal effect to the tale (of hybrid and magical nature).

Overall, the situation is built up like a realist romance narrative of a foundational kind, we as readers are made to enter a ritual situation where bodies meet as in the archetypal union of the cyclical donor and receiver — the sun and the earth, leading to a possible fruition. This happens through a set of melodramatic dialogues between the erstwhile teacher and his student.<sup>348</sup> The text of *Kalangmar Kuley* is filled with these parallel realities which have a mythic-historical support and touch of magicality but is re-enacted in the present.

### 3.5 Three Locations

In the course of my extensive travel and interactions in Assam, between 2011 and 2013, I identify three sites, Silchar, Karimgunj and Lakhipur, for the events of knowledge; all of them in Barak Valley, due to its dynamics as a location of multiple disjunctures and shifts. The valley is bounded by the Meghalaya plateau and the North Cachar Hills on the north, Manipur hills on the east, Mizoram on the south, Tripura on the south-west and Bangladesh on the west. The plain is a result of the erosional and dispositional activities of the Barak and its tributaries. The valley has an east-west length of 100 km and north-south distribution of 70 km. The area is 6972 km<sup>2</sup>, which is 9% of the total area of Assam. Silchar is its focal point of administration and business, and acts as a transit point between

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<sup>348</sup> Modern Indian viewers of both parallel and popular cinema (with different degrees of criticality) are familiar with the foundational narratives in pre-independence *Dharti-ke-lal* (Son of the Soil, 1946, direction – K.A. Abbas), and *Genesis*, 1986's narrative with socialist leanings, by director Mrinal Sen. Both these films show, in two different veins, the establishment of a family under duress. Though the family lasts in Abbas, but dissipates in Sen's plot, the foundation of a family is a foundational narrative since family comes before society or state formation, going by materialist anthropology.

*Genesis* faces a rigorous analysis from Gayatri Spivak as she argues that in contemporary capitalism: "In the broadest sense, taking patriarchy (traffic in affective value-coding) and neo-colonialism (traffic in epistemic-cognitive-political-institutional value-coding) into account, it is 'the Total or Expanded Form of Value,' where the series of [the] representations [of value] never comes to an end". Jean Franco's review of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's book *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, *Boundary 2* vol. 23, no.1 (Spring, 1996): 177-184.

Ganesh Dey, when he surfaces as an author from behind the mask of the professor, might face similar legitimization crisis, suggested by Spivak via Mrinal Sen's film. Spivak's treatment of the film material is thematic and gestural. She treats the predicament of the characters in terms of social and not cinematic codes, thus the coda/end of the film, where a bulldozer appears, remains untouched.

the valley and the three adjoining states of Tripura, Mizoram and Manipur, or the adjoining countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh.

### 3.5.1 Silchar

From an ancient Dimasa hinterland and eventually a colonial outpost of the British, Silchar has evolved into a modern town. Manindra Gupta calls this town a colony, a 'founded' small-town with no past.<sup>349</sup> He says, "There are no indigenous people for this place. The town is small but the roads are good. We don't know where the indigenous dwellers went off to. But the current dwellers comprise of three categories of people. In the first category are people who came from the Sylhet district of Bangladesh. The second, comprises the people of mongoloid groups like the Nagas, Mizoas, Meiteis, Gurkhas and the Khasis. To the third group belong, a few Europoids (Europeans)."<sup>350</sup> More scholarly versions tell us of the earliest citation of Silchar in official documents. The generic name Cachar prevailed in official records until Captain Thomas Fisher shifted the revenue circle from neighbouring Hylakandi's Dudhpatil to the Janigunj market area of Silchar in 1833. We find the first mention of Silchar in a report published in 1835.<sup>351</sup>

Situated on the bank of the Barak, it is the headquarters of Cachar. Approximately 350 km southeast of Guwahati, it is the second largest city of Assam, both in terms of population and municipal area. The name Silchar comes from '*Shiler Chor*', which means a bank of stones. The bank of the Barak here used to be covered with stones. Approximately 90% of the residents of Silchar are Bengalis who speak the Sylheti dialect; the rest are Kacharis (Barman), Manipuris (Meiteis), Marwaris, Assamese, Bisnupriya Manipuris and some tribal groups like Nagas.

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<sup>349</sup> His first encounter with Silchar was in the late 1930s, during the British rule.

<sup>350</sup> Gupta, *Akshoy Mulberry*, 123.

<sup>351</sup> R.B Pamberton, Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India, Calcutta, 1835. Also Sanjib Deblaskar, "The Origin and Growth of the City of Silchar," *Sāmbhar, New Phase* (Silchar: Sun Graphics, Oct. 2007): 91. This is a Bengali little magazine.

Spatially, Silchar is a trapped entity. Though over the years, it has evolved as a central place of Southern Assam and the cultural capital of the Barak Valley, people who get the opportunity, leave in search of white-collar jobs and prefer not to return. In general, even well paid middle rung jobs are a scarcity here. Silchar is also trapped because its tenuous connection with Guwahati is only through the Meghalaya state by road, which is not accessible during the long monsoon from June to September. The only rail route it has is a metre gauge line via Laming and that is often disturbed. There has been a demand since 1947, for the expansion of the track; a survey started in 1983 but, to date, no significant work has been done in that direction. This has led to repeated protests from resident-groups.<sup>352</sup>

The city is filled with the remnants of what Manindra Gupta calls colonial heritage, starting with the Cachar and the Tea Grower's Clubs on the Central Road, to the Old Polo Ground, the churches, administrative bungalows, and old living quarters. There are also new developments; apart from buildings and mid-size shopping malls, new residential and up-market localities are springing up.

Soon, it seems, almost all the referential cadence from Gupta's text will vanish. Ethnicities will mix, auto-rickshaws will negotiate newer routes to the ISBT (Inter State Bus Terminus) or other local spots. Newer city-limits will form. Newer fears and uncertainties of space will emerge, as will newer maps.<sup>353</sup>

### **3.5.2 Karimgunj**

Situated on the northern fringe of the Karimgunj district, Karimganj town is flanked by the Kushiara and the Longai Rivers. Located just on the border, it is separated from Bangladesh by the Kushiara. One prominent feature of the place is a long canal called Noti Khal, meandering across the town.

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<sup>352</sup> According to resident, Uttam Das, this line is one of the slowest possible routes, considering it covers 216 km in 12 hrs, at the rate of 18 km/h. Ibid., 24-28.

<sup>353</sup> As I am writing this, in response to the sanction for a separate state in the Teleganga of Andhra Pradesh, several ethnic and tribal groups from the north-east of India have raised their demand for separate states. Cachar and two other districts are demanding separate statehood. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, Bengali daily, (Kolkata: City edition), Aug 22, 2013.

The region of Karimganj became a subdivision of the Sylhet District of British-India in the late nineteenth century. It was severed from Sylhet during the partition of India and included in India as part of the Cachar district in Assam. In 1983,<sup>354</sup> Karimganj became a separate district of Assam with a population of 52,316. Karimganj town is 55 km from Silchar. Guwahati is approximately 330 km by road from here. As a site, it is closer to the international border than either Silchar or Lakhimpur.

The residents of Karimganj are largely interested in training the next generation to send them away. This attitude is somewhat similar to that of the people of Sylhet, on the other side of the border. In fact, the town is organised as a duplicate of Sylhet in Bangladesh, so I am told by local residents, many of whom have relations and connections there. Sandipan tells me that the layouts and looks of the two places are very similar.

There is however, among the people of Barak, an acute anxiety of comparison with the culture of mainland Bengal, as also competitiveness. I discover this competitiveness, when I am advised by a local person in Karimganj that I should advertise I have already conducted the workshops in Silchar and Lakhimpur highly successfully — in order to ensure an enthusiastic participation here.

As in Silchar, Karimganj's younger generation covets an escape from the circumstances that it sees as confinement. Whether with the help of a connection abroad, through an education or the excuse of a cultural project — it wants to run away. Meanwhile, people of the older generation, many reasonably educated, feel an obligation to project 'culture', this being a peculiar mixture of mainland Bengal (considered the highest form of culture, exemplified by Tagore's plays) and local and provincial cultures; displaying simultaneous affinity and distance from Kolkata. In the youth, there is both sentimentality and stubbornness. They want to hold on to the values of the migrant-citizens; at the same time are wary of being categorised (by the authorities) as non-citizens, denizens or Bangladeshis and forced into hiding. Their willingness and

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<sup>354</sup> In 1947, Karimganj with its four police stations – Karimganj, Ratabari, Badarpur and Patharkandi, joined the then Cachar district of Assam, it became a district on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1983. Bhakti Madhab Chattopadhyay, *Obibhokto Kacharer Jono Binyas* [Bengali, trans. *The Demography of Undivided Cachar*] (Silchar: Srijan Graphics, 2010), 25.

eagerness to venture out into the unknown in search of better opportunities, is in contrast to the ethno-Assamese.<sup>355</sup>

### 3.5.3 Lakhipur

Lakhipur is a small town that encircles a market place, in the Cachar district, about 39 km from Silchar town. From a basic transit point on highway 52 — between Manipur and Assam — which crosses the notorious highway 39 leading to Myanmar<sup>356</sup> via the Moreh border, it has evolved over the years into an important, thriving market. Local legends and existing documents support that in the late eighteenth century, Nagas and Manipuris used to come down to Lakhipur to get their food stuff in barter against other goods. It is possible that the name Lakhipur derives from the goddess Lakshmi or Lakhi (dialect). But there is a Manipuri myth about the name, contradicted by a Naga myth; both claim that the name derives from a queen of a bygone era, who belonged to their tribe and whose generous blessings have been responsible for the evolution of the marketplace.

Market-day in Lakhipur is Thursday — a day astrologically assigned to the goddess of prosperity, Lakshmi. Every Thursday, the market opens at the centre of the town, where there are permanent concrete shades for the shops to be set up in. Those who do not get space under a shelter, sit out in the open. This is a very colourful market, which is extremely buoyant in terms of economic activity. Apart from local sellers, mountain tribes also come and set up shops in it. Outside this central shelter, are lines of permanent shops selling provisions, stationery, shoes, hardware, computer peripherals; also photocopy shops and a solitary internet-café. Interestingly, many of these are owned by Marwaris.

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<sup>355</sup> A relative urban mobility data on the Assamese shows that only 6% of the ethno-Assamese are urban dwellers, as against 18% of other ethnic groups (largely Bengalis). Of the 8.9 million Assamese-speaking people, 99.4% were located in Assam (by the 1971 census). According to Guha, this speaks volumes on the mobility of the ethno-Assamese. Guha, "Little Nationalism," 125.

<sup>356</sup> Sudeep Chakravarti, *Highway 39: Journeys Through a Fractured Land* (New Delhi: Fourth Estate, 2012).

Signs announcing the presence of a developmental economy are all over — the ATM counters have proliferated since my first visit in 2011. Now, in March 2012, there are two kiosks, each with two machines. Both of them are crowded, and considering that there are no other ATM counters either towards Silchar or Jiribam, the importance of this market centre is underscored.

Scholarly accounts often mention that the British government in the nineteenth century had settled ethnicities like Manipuris and Rongmeis here at the edge of the hills, close to the 'inner line' to save the local Bengalis (who are unused to war) from the ferocious hill tribes (like Naga, Kuki, Mar).<sup>357</sup> It may seem unimportant to an outsider, but is relevant to an insider that a Manipur resident knows from childhood, the significance — both positive and negative — of a multi-ethnic mix.<sup>358</sup> All the way to the Moreh Border from Lakhipur, there are Areas of Influence (AOIs).<sup>359</sup> These AOI categorisations are based on the theory of ethnic contiguity, and it is a serious affair for the traffic passing through to remain wary of them and avoid any kind of conflict. The truce and pacts regarding ceasefire that are signed between the government and the tribal militants are mockingly called 'Alphabet Soup'<sup>360</sup> by the locals.

On the way from Lakhipur to Manipur, Pooler Tol is the first of the small towns at the three-point junction, from where one turns into the road to Jiribam. Jiribam is on the Manipur border with Assam. The Chiri River flows through here, technically dividing the two spaces almost as if in confirmation with the Inner

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<sup>357</sup> "In 1880 there was a 'daring raid' on the tea plantation. The men who were from Khonoma marched down the bed of Barak through Manipuri territory..."  
Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder*, 107.

People used to run away due to the tribal 'terror'. It was locally called '*bhagan*'. The population was reduced. After formally taking over Cachar, British administrators started interfering in the internal administrative matters of the Dimasa rulers. The administrator, Thomas Fischer invented a new strategy, placing a settlement of Manipuris here, to protect the relatively weak and non-fighting Bengalis from the external threat. Sanjib Deblaskar, *Barak Upattakar Itihash O Samaj* (Bengali), [tr. *History and Society of the Barak Valley*] (Agartala: Poulami Prakashan, 2011), 79.

<sup>358</sup> Each ethnicity uses a colour code. Kuki = Pink, Nepali = Yellow, Naga = Green; to the left of Senapati (town), there is a cluster of land with three colours, nearly at arms-throw. Shongangjang and Maokot are marked in Kuki pink, Dharagiri and Simli are marked yellow for Nepali and Lonee Naga hold out its Aukpta (green). Chakravarti, *Highway 39*, 105.

<sup>359</sup> This information is unavailable to the local residents of Lakhipur. It seems the insiders/residents and the outsiders have different sets of information (and interest). I figured this out while talking to Neely Devi and Kartik Das (a teacher at the local music school).

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

Line. Though the ramifications of the Inner Line are not so pronounced here in the border between Assam and the hill state of Manipur, it definitely has its economic and revenue implications. On our way to the Friday market at Jiribam, our shared Tata-Sumo gets searched by the border police. I am enlightened by Satyajit Das, a resident of Lakhipur accompanying me that the police are looking for contraband drugs.

I am interested in visiting the Jiribam market, because I have been told it is a twin to the Lakhipur market, in many ways. I notice immediately that Jiribam market is less organised and more mono-ethnic. The people are mostly Manipuri, with only one or two people coming over from Lakhipur to set-up shop. The market itself is more of a reflection of the trans-territoriality of the site; it has Myanmar and Chinese goods on sale, along with local craft objects and tools. Most of the manufactured items are of transnational origin. In Moreh Border, there is thus a dependency on the Myanmar market.<sup>361</sup> One other thing that strikes me is that the people here are more suspicious of outsiders. They are averse to being photographed. They will not allow us to click pictures of even the commodities on sale, while in Lakhipur the locals were willing to get their photographs taken.

### 3.6 The Event of Knowledge

In Assam, the presence of multiplicity is inevitable; as we have seen, this becomes more pronounced as one reaches the borders of the state, which tend to become a passage to transnationalism — as in the cases of Lakhipur and Silchar. The political sociology has got two contrasting approaches — consociational<sup>362</sup> and that of critical political economy. As mentioned earlier, the developmental policy planners devised a way to circumvent confrontation by introducing the LEP, in the early 1990s, and founding the MDONER. While the

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<sup>361</sup> Since the Jiribam market is quicker to catch-up with the aspects of secondary market or middleman's market than Lakhipur. This happened after the Morey border was developed into a free-trading zone by the government of India, for diplomatic reasons. Dulali Nag, *Local Dynamics, Universal Context: Local Trading Through Moreh* (Calcutta: Mahanirban Trust, March 2010).

<sup>362</sup> Political scientists define a consociational state as a state that has major internal divisions along ethnic, religious, or linguistic lines, with none of the divisions large enough to form a majority group, yet nonetheless manages to remain stable, due to consultation among the elites of each of its major social groups.

ulterior aim of this is to harness capital and resources, the policy makers have not thought out the social and environmental fall-outs of the projects undertaken, because of their focus on creating zones of economic activity, rather than attending to social claims. There are several instances to show that this has started affecting the aspirations of the people and disturbing the social cohesiveness. Whether these approaches will, in the future, solve the territorial claims of ethnicities, I cannot gauge from all my travel and interactions in Assam. My aim, through the events of knowledge, is to lend eye and ear to the borderland's everyday situation and predicament.

In the process of organising the workshops in the three different micro-sites, I have to devise how to address the differently constructed communities. In Silchar, it is a found community of fellow migrants. Although from different places, the migrants accept their commonality in their migrant-status, and refuse to get critical about their differences. In Karimgunj, the community is a circumstantial *communitas*.<sup>363</sup> In Lakhipur, it is purely contingent. The different groups are economically interdependent, and successful cohabitation rests on a principal of limited access to each other's ethno-communal enclosures, which may or may not be physical. There is a wider variety of community here, signifying possible control, conflict and conciliation, because of essential compulsive cohabitation. These undercurrents of conflict in the community are masked even in contrasting local elite productions, such as Ganesh Dey's novels and Indranil Dey's theatre. The result of enquiry conducted by a researcher and what is articulated by a creative experience of fiction, form different significations about existing communities. This changes the nature of data in the anthropological research and transports the question of community to a different plane. Thus in Marcus and Rabinow's voices:

I believe a basic substantial distinctiveness in what it can deliver from research, all the way down to the reconstructing of the nature and form of data on which

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<sup>363</sup> It comes very close to what Turner calls 'existential *communitas*': "*Existential or spontaneous communitas*, the transient personal experience of togetherness; e.g. that which occurs during a counter-culture happening." *Turner, Ritual Process*, 132.

the ethnography depends.... Whether or not what we are proposing can reconstitute the notions of what data are, it's a start.<sup>364</sup>

In the workshop situation, the best method for testing the cohesiveness of a group is to go through the process of theatre games. The games start with the bonding exercise, where the participants stand in a circle and the conductor ignites the circle by touching any one randomly. He/she then sends out an energy impulse by touching the next person, who in turn passes the touch on in similar manner, till the circuit is completed. This continues till each individual in the circle is triggered in turn, and by means of the energy transfer, a cognitive relation between the members is established. This is followed by the 'Game of Points', in which, at a signal, all the participants move simultaneously in a designated space, taking care to correctly calibrate their speeds and directions so as to maintain their relative distances from each other. To be able to pull this off satisfactorily requires great alertness and mutual coordination. Another game that we introduce in Silchar and Karimgunj is 'Make a Wall'. The participants line up between two designated points of a space, to form a wall. They have to be touching each other at all times and also stretch to cover the whole distance. The position and length of the wall keeps altering with the conductor's changing instructions, accordingly the extent of stretching. This game, as the previous one, is premised on the absurd. Next, we introduce 'Follow the Leader'. Each participant becomes the leader by turn and produces gestures and sounds for the rest to imitate. Sanchayan and I gradually suggest generic themes, such as Market, Morning, City, or more complex — Border, River — or more specific — Barak, Jiribam, Lakhipur, for the group to work with.

Various word games are introduced. Participants recall familiar words from their childhood that have fallen out of use; words that indicate lost objects or functions. In an extension to this, they are asked to write all the new words and/ or replacement words which add to their everyday vocabulary. These include words they use to describe their alien others. Another activity involves the writing down of some experience of their locations. In Lakhipur and Karimgunj, the writing

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<sup>364</sup> George E. Marcus and Paul Rabinow in conversation with James D. Faubion and Tobias Rees in *Design for the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 62.

exercise is complemented by a simple photography exercise — both video and still — as another register for recording experience of a chosen corner of their location.

The mapmaking, as usual, proves a very important component of the workshops. First, the members draw their own maps depicting their homes and connect them to their favourite locations as they remember them. These individual works encourage dialogue. Then, we have an interventionist scheme in which we get into a discussion and choose one or more official maps. These are enlarged on flex to 10 x 12 feet and worked upon by all the participants, who mark their locations of otherness and write about them on the margins. (ILL. 3.14–3.21, 3.29, 3.30, 3.32–3.34) The sheer process of it leads to debate and dialogue. The motion that starts as a very intimate and private exercise often turns generative, and often public (3.23, 3.35–3.37), especially when the final *mise-en-scène* opens onto a public square (such as, ostentatiously, in the Lakhipur Market). (3.52)

In consultation with Sanchayan, I also decide to initiate wall text in these workshops, which is a design compulsion as well as a desire on my part to introduce an unknown snippet of aesthetico-social information — such as the tale of an exotic local ritual, or a phrase as a teaser, or stories culled from either local or other related sources. The texts are printed (in the original Bengali as well as in English, sometimes even in Sylheti dialect, Manipuri and Nagamese translation, depending on the site) on translucent graph-paper in the format of very long horizontal scrolls, around 3 ft in height. These are wrapped around posts or similar available support in the public space and back-lit.

In Karimgunj, we select a story about the death of an elephant and the description of a ritual process, from Manindra Gupta's book (that nobody is familiar with here). Some of the girls in the workshop identify the ritual, considered auspicious, as still in practice. The other text is sourced from a Bengali book of proverbs in rhyme<sup>365</sup> on the people of Sylhet (when Cachar and Karimgunj were part of it), collated and annotated by Kamaluddin Ahmed, a local folklorist and a well known scholar. It talks of the women of Sylhet as a generality and suggests that they

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<sup>365</sup> Kamaluddin Ahmed, *Sanskritir Rong o Rup*, (Bengali) [Tr. *Colour and Form of Culture*] (Silchar: Sungrafix, 2008), 25.

covet grooms from London. One of the snippets says, “Those who are very lucky get them and others lament.” Ahmed’s accompanying annotation says, “Women from this part of the world feel lucky when they get spouses from London”. This proves an effective and catalytic device to activate the workshop, especially when the material is taken from a text that already exists, is in circulation and is about the location. To our surprise, we discover that the non-participant facilitators (Extra Canvas members) are also in identification with the texts and their possible reflexivity.

For Lakhipur, we select tales of different ethnicities culled from various local sources, but largely from Manindra Gupta who is again, completely unknown here. Gupta’s stories are about Manipuris and subaltern tribes he saw in the 1930s. The latter included Nagas of whom he caught occasional glimpses, moving about obscurely, engaged in cleaning drains or carrying drums of dirt. He recounts boyhood memories of such instances, along with his realisation in adulthood that the rulers had tricked the simple tribals into these menial labours. He emphasises his happiness for the Nagas when they demand a separate state after the independence of the country. These are put up in the market and provoke animation and interaction among the local communities; we can observe this, but remain in the dark about their content.

### **3.6.1 A Community in Words**

(Workshop Venue: Ellora Community Centre, Silchar, 14—16 November 2011)

During my third visit to Silchar, this time with Sanchayan, in 2011 for the purpose of holding the workshop, a *bandh* (strike) is called by all the labour unions, against FDI (Foreign Direct Investment). We cross the Barak Bridge, the only entry point to the town from the airport side and are stopped by *bandh* enforcers. It takes some argument from our side to convince them that we are outsiders caught unawares by the *bandh*. Finally, we are allowed into the town, but are forced to be confined to the hotel room for the rest of the day.

The workshop, next day, has a mixed group of 20-32 year-olds. The oldest participant is my research assistant for this chapter, Pinak Pani Nath, who is also the local coordinator. He has a Masters degree in Fine Arts from the local

university. Some of the participants have completed their graduation or post-graduation from the art institute there. One of the participants is a self-taught artist. While a few are still students, most are self-employed. There is one local journalist. He, and a few of the Arts students have some training in photography. Many of them have a little amateur theatre experience. No one knows mapmaking. While most of them are Bengalis of Assamese origin, there are some Nepalese and two Assamese participants. (ILL. 3.25)

We start with a session of storytelling; recounting of the changes visible in Silchar's landscape over the years. Puplu Das, the journalist, contrasts the changed ambience of today's Silchar with that of his childhood. The location around his house has changed from a very forlorn area to a place huge in traffic. He recounts two indices for this change; the tea gardens, once secluded and peaceful, have now become sites for criminal activity, and the exotic birds that he used to watch on the lakes during childhood boat-rides are no longer visible.

Joydip Bhattacharya, a self-taught artist, has grown up in Silchar and lives on the outskirts of the city. He has seen the greenery being replaced by concrete buildings and thinks that the space-crunch is now really felt.<sup>366</sup> Joydip recounts how the open and porous spaces of his locality have been replaced by distinct walled-in entities; people have enclosed their private plots, binding any available waterbodies inside their compounds for exclusive use. These, perhaps, compensate the settler-community of affluent migrants from Sylhet for their lost bondings, and satisfy their nostalgia for what has been left behind; smaller garden-variety water bodies in token of the private ponds that many of them had on their properties.

Pinak Pani's house is close to the highly reputed GC College of Silchar. He describes how the space was sparsely populated and houses were distinctly identifiable by their names. The names have turned into numbers, and with the

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<sup>366</sup> Since the spaces in the city were arranged under the 1950s legislation, there were new land laws towing the line system, which applied to the outskirts, but the major migrants — with some degree of affluence — who were from the mainland Sylhet, came and bought property or land. Deblaskar, *Barak Upattakar Itihash*, 65.

increasing number of people and lanes forming mazes, now it is much more complicated.

The feeling of alienation is present among the residents. These feelings are spatially governed since there are moral codes of conduct instilled at home. Post-graduate student, Swapan Kanti Kar, lists a set of spaces within Silchar where he feels alienated. His list is all-pervasive, where personal and social experiences mingle:

1. Madhurband, a Muslim dominated area (In our childhood, we were told not to take that route. That's why, even today, I feel hesitant and afraid to go there).
2. Police Station — may be because I have never been there.
3. Mizoram Circuit House — where I felt like a complete outsider, may be because of ethnic difference.
4. Deputy Commissioners' Bungalow — I feel like going only in the company of others, the atmosphere is prohibitive.
5. Red light area — because it involves social prestige.
6. Crematorium — transports you to another realm, may be a place to understand oneself better, but I don't like going there.

Chinmoy Chakraborty, from Mazumder Lane in Sadarghat, a relatively low-end area of Silchar, initially had a fear of the religious minorities (Muslims) and their localities due to regular news of murders in those areas. He feels, this has now reduced, probably because of the spread of education. Among the emergent areas that generate fear in Chinmoy are the prohibited red-light areas of the city; he mentions Fatak Bazar and New Market. Most of the other changes that he identifies in the city are quantitative, such as the increased density of population around his school, the floor getting cemented and the changed skyline.

Ajanta Das, a final-year student at Assam University, lives in Vivekananda Road of Silchar. She describes her cognitive registers, engaging with the abstract and concrete changes in the outside world, she writes:

We get a mixed soundscape in my area; it's an area with Manipuris, Hindu Bengalis and Muslim Bengalis cohabiting. So, at different times of the day, especially in the evening, you get to hear the Kirtan, the Aajan and the sound of conch blowing.<sup>367</sup> About the Other spaces — in Bhagatpur junction, where the Manipuri population is in majority, there is a parlour. When I went there the first time, I ventured deep into the space, looking for the right parlour. There, among the Manipuris, it seemed all of a sudden an unfamiliar land. It seemed, as if I have come far away from Silchar.

Kanika Chanda, a post-graduate student, writes:

I went around scouting for subjects by the river, for a photo-shoot. I'd never gone out for photography before that. It was a unique experience at the Kalibari Char on the bank of the Barak, where I was absolutely surrounded by children who posed for me. At some point, I drew the attention of some overcautious women who accosted me, asking for details of my identity and my purpose. One of them, a very aggressive one, looked capable of violence. I was afraid for my camera and kit. I felt all of a sudden transported to an unfamiliar state where there is surprise and fear, as if I have come to a different country and I am no longer free, no longer in Silchar.

Also interesting, are the experiential passages that school teacher and practicing artist Dhruba Jyoti Paul writes in English, which pronounce, in tentative words and somewhat jumbled sentences, the feeling of difference with the Muslim community of Madhurband. He says he is hesitant to venture into the area because of 'noticeable cultural difference'. The tenor changes, when he strikes-out these sentences and writes in Bengali that in their childhood, they had been forbidden to venture into those areas by their elders. He states, "I somehow can't erase those childhood ideas, hence I feel alienated when I think of these spaces, and don't feel like going there." His fear of venturing into unknown localities, possibly rises from a social injunction. (ILL. 3.21)

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<sup>367</sup> *Kirtan* — a form of devotional singing popular among Vaishnavite Hindus. *Aajan* — the Muslim call for prayers. Conch blowing — by blowing into a conch shell, an auspicious sound is produced. this is an aide to Hindu Bengali rituals.

When I conduct the word games, Dhruva Jyoti compares past words with their present versions and is good at reflecting on parallel words in the languages of the different neighbourhood communities. He is even able to differentiate between Bishnupriya and Meitei Manipuris (subclans) by their usage of a single word. It is interesting to learn from his writing, what are the words and phrases remembered most by people even outside an ethnic community; everyone seems to know the Manipuri phrase '*Essein flie*' (water is coming). *Essein flie* can be seen in two different contexts; under ordinary circumstances it can be an observation about the supply line of the municipal water distribution system, or it may mean the water level of the Barak is rising — a flood-alert.

Next, the participants write down the words for their local 'Others'. In a mixed community, there are many terms by which one group refers to another as an unknown Other. These are generic terms — for instance, '*Dukhar*' which means Other. It has an obscure origin, and can be found in a variety of languages, like Nepali, Mar and a mixed language spoken in the tea gardens. It has travelled, over the years, with migrants in Southeast Asia. Out of the three locations, *Dukhar* surfaces more often in the Lakhipur workshop. During this activity, I also ask them to visualise themselves as somebody's Other and try to experience what their next-door community might feel about them. In the discussion forum that follows, when they are asked to describe the contexts of these words through their sense of alienation, the descriptions become performative. (ILL. 3.11, 3.12)

### From Word to Maps: Mapping Anxieties

Till now, the participants have made a compilation of words falling out of usage and new words appearing in the colloquial field. They have noted the physical changes that have come about in the city and have identified and expounded on the spaces in the city that alienate them, or rumours that scare them off. We find that most of the reactions to spaces are premised on sharp distinction of gender and community, alternately of ethnicity. After all these exercises, we try to assimilate the revelations into a cohesive experience of mapmaking. (ILL.3.13-3.17)

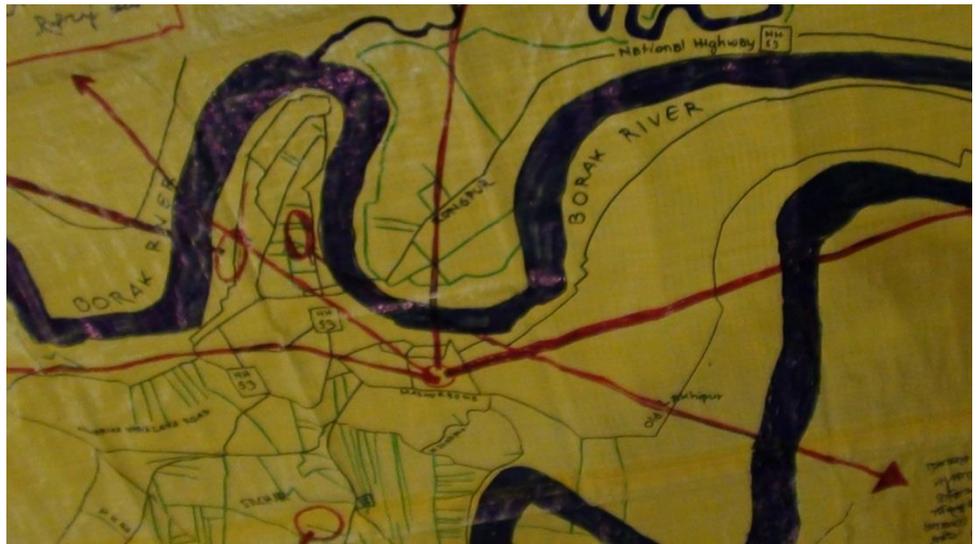
Two maps are selected: a contemporary map of Cachar, showing current roads and national highways in graphic terms and an extended map of Sylhet drawn

on the eve of the partition of India in 1947, with notations in Bengali. The latter is titled 'Map of *Srihatta*', Srihatta being the seventeenth century name of Sylhet. It shows the boundaries of undivided Sylhet (pre-1947) including Hylakandi, Karimgunj and Cachar. This transitional map, which is a more organic, cartographic delineation, seems complicated for the current generation to read. When it is enlarged and displayed, there is a lot of argument and discussion over it. At first the participants cannot identify familiar places. A debate starts on whether the boundary line of the map represents Cachar properly. All this is because these youngsters are only familiar with the post-partition twentieth century map. In the context of this task, I also make the startling discovery that geography, as a subject, is not taught anywhere in Southern Assam, either in schools, or in colleges. I am told that even in the very few schools that have formally included it in their curriculum, there are no specialised teachers. (ILL.3.18)

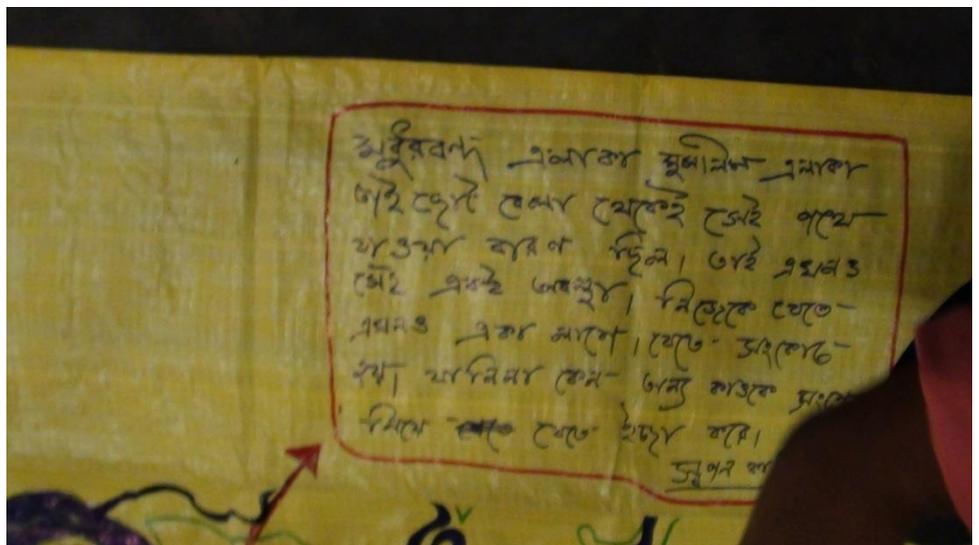
The engagement with the map of Cachar is on a personal register, where the participants first locate the points on or near the border that are experientially known to them. Then, with the help of text bubbles in the margins, they append comments on their experiences or knowledge of the places. For the map of Sylhet, a two-fold intervention is designed. The participants begin by marking out their identified areas of alienation — about which they have already written in their notebooks. The other task is to construct on flex, their own routes in the city, traced around the Barak River, with spaces of anxiety and curiosity or critique highlighted. This turns out in effect to be the insertion of, what might be called infra-maps, on the margins, tracing memory routes of the concerned areas; also notations about their fear-factors and experiences of otherness connected with those routes. (ILL.3.19 — 3.25)



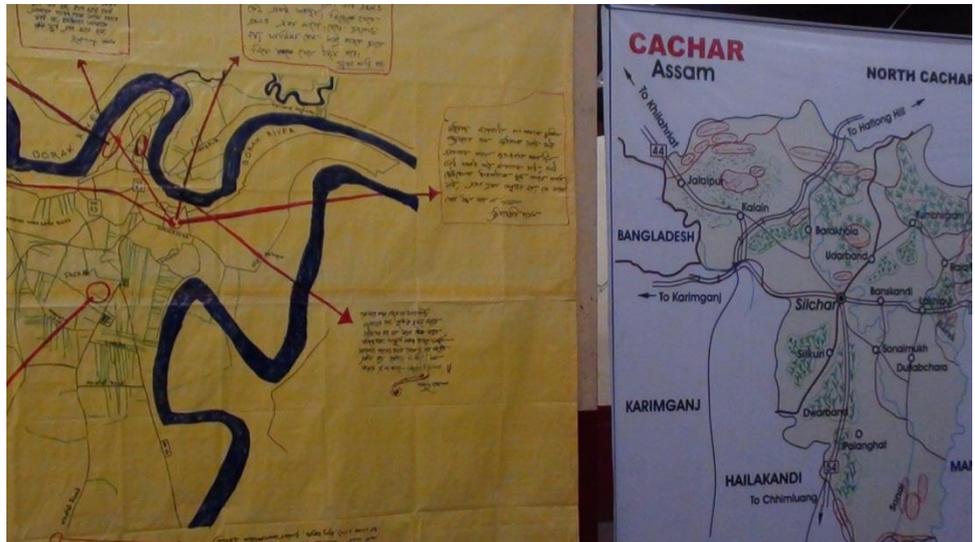
3.19 Transferring the Map on Flex, Nov. 2011.



3.20 Silchar Workshop: Tracing the Barak River and the Routes, Nov. 2011



3.22 Silchar Workshop: Marking the Narratives of Alienation, Nov. 2011.



3.23 – 3.24 Silchar Workshop: Mise-en-scène, Nov. 2011.

### 3.6.2 Staging Escapes: Gestures

(Workshop Venue: Law College Campus, Karimgunj, 7–9 February 2013)

On a bright winter morning in 2013, we travel about 90 km from Silchar to arrive at the Karimgunj Law College premises, only to find a low turn-out of people. I realise that it is a volatile time for the place. The school board examinations are due and the local *Panchayat* elections are impending (in two days-time from the workshop), snatching away some of the prospective participants from us. In half an hour, though, the force gathers. The majority of the participants here are

members of the local amateur theatre group Extra Canvas. Therefore, they have some theatre training, but none has training in photography, videography or mapmaking. Between 20 and 30 years old, they are all in some form of employment. All of them are local Bengalis. We reorganise the classroom for our purpose; benches upon benches in 20x25 arrangements and the room gets cleared. The same device is used for several settings in the next three days.

The workshop starts with the usual process of energy transfer and coordination games, graduating on to Follow the Leader, word games and gestural narrations. The mapmaking event is a major feature, as always. Apart from this, in Karimgunj, we introduce two new projects for the participants. The first is survey-mapping of their familiar surroundings via mobile phone videos and stills. The second task is to collect and assemble photographs of either themselves or their family members, from any journey undertaken by them as tourists. We sort the photographs into the categories 'Family and Travel', 'Friend and Travel', 'Institution and Travel' and 'Travel and the Future'. In the survey-mapping exercise, the participants are asked to bring back pictures and/ or videos of familiar and/or favourite places in the immediate neighbourhood or surrounding locations. Many bring back pictures taken of their schools, colleges, homes, or trace their favourite paths between their homes and these other places. A sense of intimacy is thus visible to be subliminally flowing; they capture personally significant places – not public places or city squares or markets. One person has taken a picture of the local Ramakrishna Mission – a powerful institution with symbolic significance, perhaps, especially for the local Hindus living in contiguity with the border (which is the fallout of Hindu-Muslim segregation). He says the Mission is personally important for him, because he has taken spiritual initiation from here. Not one of them works directly with any location associated with the border, which is just next-door across the river. I deduce this to be in subconscious avoidance of this immediate reality of their locations. Their 'always ready to move out' mode does come through in the other exercises and in conversation. At some point in the workshop, Sanchayan and I also decide to introduce choreographed sessions of human sculptures and their interpretations. For this, the participants form groups to present choreographic pieces on themes of their choice, restricted to their locality and experiences. (ILL. 3.26 – 3.28)

## Double Staging in a Tableau

One of the most articulate and enthusiastic participants here is Ruma. She is from an affluent background and very proud of her accomplishments as a dancer. She was selected for a dance competition during an exchange programme for a South African Amity project, where she won a prize. Throughout the workshop, she displays acute consciousness of her achievement. In the collective mapping exercise, she notes “Karimgunj is a conservative place” on the margin and recounts a story in support of her statement about how once when she was out with a male cousin, she was spied upon by spiteful neighbours who spread malevolent rumours about her, which reached her parents. She was traumatised by the incident and feels such an attitude of conservatism hinders development.

In the human sculpture exercise, Ruma comes forward with an idea that highlights her sense of self-worth. She suggests an enactment of the public award ceremony in South Africa where she received her prize. Interestingly, the rest of her group headed by Subir fall-in easily with her idea. While Ruma expectedly plays the central character, the rest of the group members take on the side roles. This narcissistic exercise is followed by a second choreographed piece, this time visualised by Subir, in which the group reconfigures to present a street scene of Swato with an overt racist angle to it, leading to violence and torture of suspected outsiders (a depiction that also implicates Karimgunj with its migrant situation). Perhaps, the ambitious self-projection of the girl provokes the group to react to the negative aspects of the South African social milieu. I can attribute this reaction to the extreme competitiveness that is in evidence in most of the younger generation in Karimganj. They end their staging with the conclusion that South Africa, despite all the veneer and the celebration of amity is still not rid of apartheid. In so doing, Subir manages to cleverly critique Ruma’s act of self-projection, without her even realising it, for she unsuspectingly plays a part in his choreography.

Subir is a Bengali from Diphu, the capital of the tribal territory Karbi Anglong, an outsider in Karimgunj. He turns out to be a deft manipulator; Diphu being rife in Assamese ethno-politics, Sanchayan and I think, Subir is in his elements in this performance, especially when Pete Seeger’s American folk song ‘Wahira

Wantana Mera' breaks out in chorus. Most of the other participants hardly have a clue to the specific aspects of racism. Overall, this turns out to be an amazing choreography, considering that the preparation time was barely an hour before the staging.

### Memories and Desires in Photographs

For the photograph task, all the participants bring pictures of their travels in different tourist destinations. While many of these are merely witnesses to happy memories, some pictures are also projections of imaginary futures or indications of desired destinations.

Ruma brings pictures of her childhood trip to Puri (a pilgrimage on the eastern coast in Odhisa/ Orissa). She also has pictures of herself in front of the Tajmahal Hotel in Mumbai, which is the site of the of 26/11 (2008) terror attack; it is also a symbol of India's financial capital – a coveted destination for seekers of livelihood and glamour. Fazlur and Surojit, also bring photographs of themselves posing in front of the Taj. This spot is unlike what an average middle-class Bengali person from mainland Bengal would choose as a site for a memorable picture of their Mumbai visit; they are more likely to select Elephanta (fifth century cave temples).

As we know, Bengali-speaking people from Cachar or the Karimgunj district of Assam are not comfortable with mainland Bengal, represented by Kolkata and its culture, because they feel it boasts of its grounded superiority of knowledge and does not acknowledge them to be a part of its cultural extension. This is, perhaps, a stereotype created by them, about the Bengalis from mainland –their Other. Though, often, they have actual ties with the place, in public any intimacy is overridden by the need of proving their differences. Hence, it is no surprise that none of the participants have any pictures to show of holiday trips to their neighbouring state. The only places that are non-controversially shared between the two people are the pilgrimages of West Bengal, like Dakshineswar and Belur Math, which are known for the spiritual presences of the world-renowned gurus Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Vivekananda. At least a part of the participants bring photographs of their visits to these holy sites. This comes as a

surprise to me, because a somewhat secular imposition seems visible in public life.

A majority of the photographic collections reveal the desire to move beyond the various spatial barriers faced; this is nowhere as pronounced as in Karimgunj. We learn that Roni, who is a college student, wants to run away to what he perceives as a safe haven – London. His brother works as a chef in a hotel in the Midlands. He shares photographs of his brother's neighbourhood cars frosted in the early winter, and pictures of favourite tourist spots of London such as Big Ben, Westminster Abbey and Houses of Parliament. He admits openly his wish to migrate immediately after completing his studies. Everyone studies here with a very definite short-term goal in view. Though Karimgunj is an ancillary business centre, very few jobs are available. Also, what defines the contours of the escape plans like Roni's is the fact of being second-class citizens in Assam (described by the now popular category– 'Denizen' – though not officially recognised, used widely by scholars like Sanjib Baruah).<sup>368</sup> Fazlur's story is close to Roni's. His sister is married to someone from Karimgunj who is settled in London. In the slide presentation, he shows a man in a three-piece suit – his brother-in-law, posing in his snow-filled front yard.

Though, Fazlur and Roni both present pictures that express their desire to settle in London, they do not express the same desire in staging their human sculptures. While another group does touch upon trans-territorial migration, their group is silent on it – perhaps because in their perception of the performative, exposure of desire seems 'risky'. "The photographic presentations are individual presentations of desire and memories of places, which generally narrate each one's spatial memory of Karimgunj, but the collective presentation is like a public performance," as Roni explains later, in an informal discussion outside the workshop.

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<sup>368</sup> Baruah, *Durable Disorder*, 205-206.

### 3.6.3 Lakhipur: Transition and Stasis

(Workshop Venue: Lakhipur Girl's High School, Lakhipur, 2- 4 March 2012)

During the reconnaissance before the Lakhipur workshop, when I go to Binnakandi across the river, I find out about Rongmei Nagas in Captainpur and tiny Hatir Had village close to the border, sandwiched between sprawling tea estates. Hatir Had comprises barely 14 families, who are all related, in short, one extended family. The village has no electricity and faces a constant problem of erosion from the Barak. This I learn first-hand when my autorickshaw almost falls off the road into the river. I meet Mayong Singh, the head of the extended family. Ten years ago, his family moved here from Silchar. A strange case of counter-migration from the city to the village! When I express curiosity about this, his answer is, "You can't have a settlement without a piece of land. We don't have land in the cities."

While visiting the Rongmeis to learn about their weaving tradition, I interview Kaga Sung, a primary school teacher, who tells me that the local State Bank generally refuses to open accounts for them. With visible emotion, he relates the story of his humiliation at their hands and of how his daughter Keri came to his rescue by visiting the bank with him the next day and successfully getting the process started. The Rongmeis have a peculiar gender dynamics; their community is patrilineal, but families are largely controlled by the women, who also contribute significantly to the economy through their weaving and craftwork. Though in the social sphere, and for all practical purposes like endorsements in local administration lists, claiming of social benefits or political rights, the men are formally recognised as the heads of the families and play the token leadership role. The State Bank's initial refusal to open Kaga Sung's account because of his tribal identity and change of stance on Keri's intervention, therefore, causes an unusual kind of role reversal.

Towards the end of my visit, I invite Keri to join our workshop. At first she is non-committal and I despair that I am unable to get through to her. Rongmei Nagas are less expressive and articulate in front of strangers. But, she turns up on the day of the workshop with her friend Jiphu and her portable loom. Communicating through Neely Devi at first, we tell her about the interactive exercises, but she

does not want to take part in any public action, preferring to weave something on her loom.<sup>369</sup> Keri learns we are working with maps and begins weaving quietly with her companion, not volunteering to participate in the workshop activities. Throughout the three days, the two girls sit in their corner weaving their piece. After allowing her some time to get comfortable, I tentatively engage her in talk. Eventually, she starts communicating directly with me in broken Hindi, and we have a conversation on textiles. I am curious about any typical Naga motifs that have been handed down through the generations, as well as about any innovations by the younger generations. I get both answers in the affirmative, though with no details. At the end of three days, she has woven a tiny map of what she could identify as the Lakhipur region in the Cachar map on display there. At the top of the map are two rows, respectively, of contemporary and traditional motifs. (ILL. 3.38, 3.40)

The workshop is held in the hall of Lakhipur Girl's High School, located behind the marketplace. The participants are a mixture of Manipuris, Nagas, local Bengalis, naturalised third or fourth generation migrants from Bihar and one or two people of mixed-ethnicity. They are in the age-group of 18–30 years. Some of them are high school students, some undergraduate students and a few are graduates. None of them has any formal training in theatre, photography, video-making or mapmaking. But, most of them attend a local art school in the region.

Following sound and mimicry games related to the market theme, the participants document the Thursday market and other surrounding areas of their choice. Then, armed with the new set of visuals and sounds registered on their mobiles, they get into a discussion on space-making. We experiment by playing the sounds of the video recordings with the visuals hidden, and it is felt that the sensation of the audio is akin to experiencing a physical journey through identifiable spaces; from the audio inputs, it is possible to identify the corresponding sites. Everyone selects to play the sound games again and this time they admit to them being much enriched.

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<sup>369</sup> People of the Rongmei villages do not have too many occasions outside their own festivities, for self-display. Therefore, at first, the mere thought of appearing amongst strangers must have been stressful for Keri. She loosened up in the course of the workshop, as she saw the other women participants interacting.



3.40 Lakhipur Workshop: Keri Rongmei's Textile Map, March 2012

## Video Bricoleurs: Defamiliarising Maps

The participants are divided into groups and given a choice of two subjects for the video exercises; they have to either shoot sites in or around Lakhipur that they find interesting for historical, social or cultural reasons, or attend to the dynamics of the Thursday market by recording visuals or interviews with people. Participants who are from nearby regions like Pooler Tol, Banskandi, or Binnakandi, mostly choose to make videos of sites of interest. These include Zaved Mazumdar – a Bengali from Banskandi, Thoiba – a Manipuri from Pooler Tol, Bengali, Saurav and Manipuri, Karouhauba Singh – both from Binnakandi. The Lakhipur market is explored by local Bengalis Dipankar Deb Roy, Abhishek Roy and Saptarohi Chanda, Manipuri girls Neely Devi and Riyasena Devi and Sudipta Nunia – a naturalised local Bengali.

I find it intriguing that the market option is selected by the locals; perhaps, they are more curious about the influx of people from outside. They seem eager to interact with the different ethnicities; people they have hitherto encountered every market day without choosing to engage with. But, during the shoots, the market suddenly turns unfamiliar to many of them, because they find themselves engaging with total strangers and having to use tongues foreign to their own, like Manipuri, Bengali of Sylhet-Cachar dialect, or Nagamese – as the case may be – in order to get across to the various ethnicities.<sup>370</sup> This phenomenon is revealed later in the discussions on the video-making experiences, and helps me to understand the reason for the heightened conviviality noticeable in the workshop since the video exercise. This is because, during the making of these videos, when Sanchayan and I explore the marketplace, camera in tote, simultaneously (if not side by side) with the participants, we make an important breakthrough. This act turns out to be an interesting trope of collaboration. Because, in coming together to share the same task, we also share a similar sense of being among strangers and experience the similar unease of having to introduce ourselves, of

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<sup>370</sup> “Shared mapping of the socio-spatial relations cannot take place when language gets instituted as a distinct code. As a direct result, it sparked off the debate on the ethnographic limit now embedded in the Assamese language, vis-à-vis allowing the different groups of people from within the valley to communicate.” Manjeet Baruah, *Frontier Cultures*, 96.

encountering strange languages – curator, artist-collaborator and participants end up operating on the same plane.

The market videos mostly turn out to be interviews with the traders and vendors and depend on how the participants interrogate their subjects. Most have standard questions for them about their past and present experiences as tradespeople in Lakhipur. The Manipuri and Naga sellers seem to have brief predictable answers, but no counter-questions for the interviewers. They display neither curiosity nor anxiety about being recorded. Comparatively, Bengalis are slightly suspicious of the video makers' intentions. They want to know why they are being recorded. Based on my ancillary researches, I conclude that the cause of their anxiety could be the Indian government's Migration Prevention Act,<sup>371</sup> which seems to work only against the Bengali-speaking people in Assam, as the only migrants hunted down are those from Bangladesh. The government seems to have no interest in any migrants that may cross over from the Myanmar border. It becomes obvious from conversations that there is a bitterness among the local Bengali population, because, even though all the adjacent states of Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland have transnational borders with Myanmar and there are active possibilities of militant and migrant crossovers through these borders, the tribunal aims to detect intruders in a selective and biased manner. They look only for Bangladeshis. This keeps the local Bengali-speaking population always insecure, as often they are indiscriminately suspected of being Bangladeshis and 'D' voters. Well-known writer-activist from Karimganj, Sanjib Deblaskar, writes about this phenomenon in his 2011 pamphlet:

It has been observed, hundreds of thousands of names were entered in the voters' lists with wrong spellings, inaccurate addresses, wrong entries of fathers'/ husbands' names. This was done without the knowledge of the persons concerned, clearly with the deliberate intention of dubbing them as 'D' voters for deportation. Moreover, the hapless 'D' voters were not even offered a chance to defend themselves, as the entire matter is kept secret, no notice, no summon

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<sup>371</sup> International Migration Detection Tribunal (IMDT) was set up in the 1980s to detect illegal immigrants, in the wake of the Assam movement. It has reemerged in a different political situation recently, but has had a lingering life story, for the Southern Assam residents. Sanjay Hazarika, *Strangers in the Mist* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1994), 251-252.

issued till the police force arrives to drive them to the detention camps *which reminds one of the concentration camp of Hitler.*<sup>372</sup>

Those who choose to explore the surroundings through their videos, select familiar subjects like daily routes from their homes, fields on the way, the general landscape or the river. None of them document houses, people or populated areas. Participants like Zaved and Thoiba try to analyse the reasons behind their selective cognition. They feel it is the effect of encounter with the unfamiliar, yet closely available, cognitive inputs; the different ethnicities, though physical neighbours, are unfamiliar, unknown entities. But, while delineating their daily routes in the written descriptions of their space and in the personalised maps, the participants, indicate stable markers, such as houses, schools, and also their neighbourhood ethnicities – all of which go to define, distinguish and describe them. (ILL. 3.47, 3.48) Each self-description includes either an endearing or passing reference to these ethnicities. Sourav writes, “I live near Binnakandi Ghat. In my neighbourhood there are Manipuris and Nagas.” And further, “My home is close to the highway. Earlier there were very few houses in the neighbourhood, but now it is filled with shops. The bus-stand is close-by and there is a rumour that this place is soon to become a subdivision; this is helping in increasing the population density.”

Following the video exercise, high school student, Saptarohi Chanda’s voice is impersonal in his writing and he uses the collective pronoun; the writing seems to run parallel to his video, almost describing it in the making. He journeys into the Thursday market (translation from the Bengali):

First we see a Manipuri woman sitting with puffed rice, *Janchak* and *dhania patta* (coriander). After this, we go to the Naga zone of the bazaar and see people of various ethnicities – e.g Manipuris wearing Manipuri *Phanek* (a tribal lower garment) are selling flattened and puffed rice and cloth; Bengali people are selling cane mats; Muslim tribes[sic]<sup>373</sup> are selling eggs; some people are selling bangles and necklaces. I go to one place and see a Muslim man selling

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<sup>372</sup> Deblaskar, *Portends of Disaster: Challenges before the Linguistic Minorities of Assam – A Case of the Valley of Barak* (Silchar: Sungraphix, 2011), 4.

<sup>373</sup> He confuses ethnicity, tribe and religion.

a large turkey. Some people are selling pigeons, chicken and ducks in cages. Then we see apples, grapes, bananas, oranges and pomegranates being sold. Then we see cane products like *mura* (stool), *khaloi* (fish trap), *jhapi* (container), *dala* (lid), *pati* (floor mat). Then we see a man selling money.<sup>374</sup>

In the mapmaking exercise, a geographic map is enlarged and printed on flex, in duplicate, to accommodate all the participants. They identify and trace their familiar locations and neighbourhoods on them, and write marginalia that express their grievances about their location and future aspirations for it. Some of the marginalia recount local and personal stories heard from elders, including a tale of a hunting expedition on elephants and a tragic mass-suicide. During my scouting trip before the workshop, I chance upon an old locally-made map belonging to the Meitei community, at the Manipuri Community Association (MCA) office and decide to incorporate it in the workshop. I borrow the map and have it photographed and printed. This is then enlarged by hand in the workshop by the participants. They mark out their homes and the locations of their respective communities in it. It becomes a map showcasing the ethnicities of the region. When completed, it comes as a revelation to the participants, who are taken by surprise at the tremendous ethnic diversity within their small location.

### Mise-en-scène

Sanchayan and I envisage a coordinated mise-en-scène for a suitable conclusion to the Lakhipur workshop. I plan a staging that will bring together all the interesting gleanings of the workshop – information and material – in the heart of the marketplace, as well as pull the local audience into participatory involvement. We plan out the physical and conceptual elements, of course allowing space for our own subjective deflections. The workshop participants also contribute with their inputs related to the logistics and physical aspects of the putting-up.

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<sup>374</sup> In many places in India there are people who sell money; they will exchange torn notes of higher denomination with healthy notes of lower denomination. I have personally seen this in Lakhipur market. The damaged notes are said to be locally 'repaired' and recirculated.

At the end of the three-day workshop, the *mise-en-scène* is set in the middle of the shaded market area, which remains unused except on the weekly market days. The central shade consists of a long pillared hall open on all four sides, which we utilise as a row of three approx. 10 x 11 ft connected units. Appointing the road-facing side of the hall as the front, the unit on the left is blocked into a niche for use as a green room. The blocking is done with two 10 x 12 ft maps printed on translucent sheets. One of them is the Cachar map, worked upon during the workshop, (ILL.3.39) while the other is a Lakhipur map tracing the course of the Barak River. This second one is the locally-drawn MCA map manually enlarged by the participants, on which they have transferred their personal *infra-maps* from their sketchbooks and added marginalia. The backlighting is provided by two halogen lights fixed on the outer edges of the niched-off unit. This allows for an interesting play of flickering shadows created by the movement of back-stage players throughout the performance. (ILL.3.49, 3.51)

Locally woven cane mats normally used as building material, are utilised for walling-off the length – designated as the back of the hall – to provide backdrop for the performance. The mats are structurally modified by the participants, who have intermittently inserted pieces of paper with words and sentences about their homes and surroundings, into the weaving. (ILL.3.43, 3.44) A few display boxes to be used as comment boxes by the audience and meant to double as props during the performance are leaning randomly against this backdrop. These are actually locally procured cardboard cartons transformed into multipurpose boxes with sticks attached to the bottom for holding them by. They have been pasted over with photographs clicked during the workshop and printed in Lakhipur, – converting them into contemporary memory cabinets, a repository of the participants' journey through the landscape of Lakhipur. (ILL.3.45, 3.46)

The right-hand end of the hall is closed-off with the wall text scrolls that are backlit. They are an assemblage of textual material culled from Manindra Gupta's autobiography and the writings of *littérateur* Syed Mujtaba Ali. While Gupta is a native of the Cachar district of undivided India, who migrated to Kolkata, Mujtaba Ali is a famous Bengali author, originally from Sylhet, who shared a long-standing relationship with the western part of undivided Bengal but migrated to erstwhile



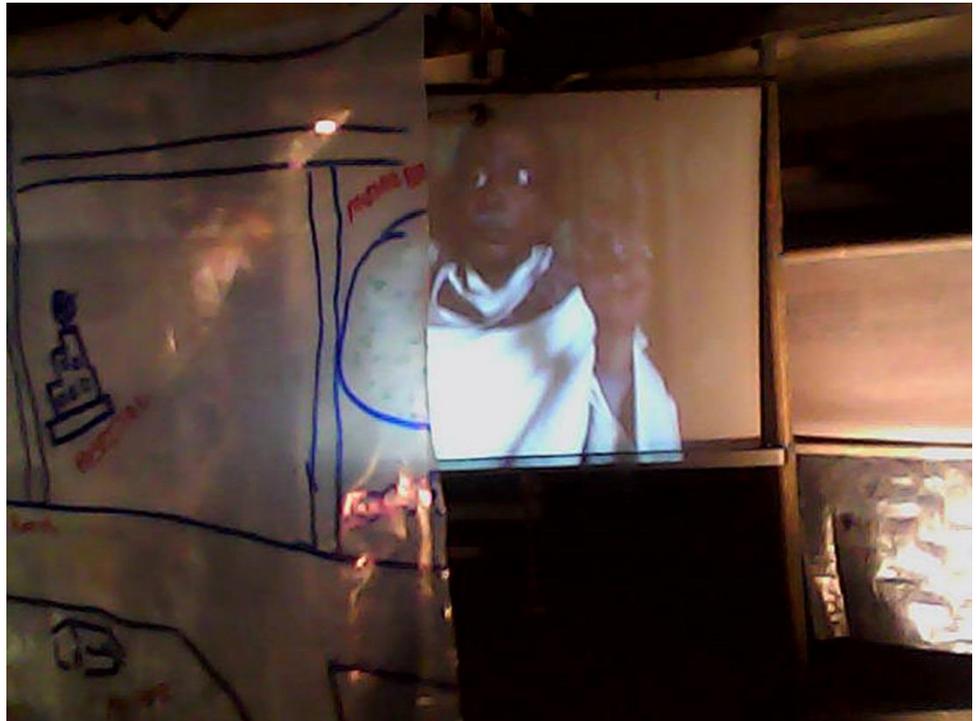
3.43 Lakhipur Workshop: Working with the Cane Mats and Text, March 2012.



3.44 Lakhipur Workshop: Cane Mat with Text, March 2012.



3.49 Lakhipur Workshop: Setting up the Mise-en-scène, March 2012.



3.50 Lakhipur Workshop Mise-en-scène: Ganesh Dey Interview, March 2012.

East Pakistan after the partition.<sup>375</sup>

Gupta's tales have two different dimensions. One is pedagogic and social when he observes that the British government was very shrewd to have made use of the able-bodied Naga tribals for loathsome jobs. On the other hand, he expresses happiness at the Nagas' demand of independence from India (which has been partially met by the formation of a separate state). He speaks of Manipuris who he saw as a partly-detached and non-confrontational community living next to the gentle Bengalis. He recounts the cultural confrontations in the form of boyish pranks, which left him simultaneously with a sense of fun and guilt. In the text selected from Mujtaba Ali's fragmentary writings on Sylhet, he speaks of his sadness for the Barak Valley that he feels would have benefited as part of the Bengal of Bangladesh, but has remained instead as a scar left on earth by the partition of India, in at least linguistic and cultural terms. These scrolls turn out to be the main area of attraction on the stage, till the performance begins. The people milling around in the market, who are finished with the day's work; residents of the place, labourers and teachers from nearby institutes are drawn to the scrutiny of the scrolls. I can see them provoke a lot of reaction and discussion among the crowd.

In the two corners of the stage-like setting thus created, are two obliquely placed projection screens. One screen is projecting an interview with Ganesh Dey. The second screen runs a constant loop of the video-interviews with the people of the Thursday market and a collage created by the assembly of small video cameos playing in the backdrop of a virtual map of Cachar. In the video of my interview with local writer Ganesh Dey, he speaks about his play *Khanchar Moina* (The Caged Bird). It was written and first enacted in the 1980s, when Assam was turbulent. Dey has a way of circumventing and attending to the crisis obliquely; as a member of the Barak Valley, he neither opposes nor condones the exclusivist nationalist call of the ethno-Assamese students on the other side of

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<sup>375</sup> Syed Mujtaba Ali (1904–74), born in Karimgunj of Sylhet of Bengal Presidency, went to East Pakistan in 1947, moved back to India in 1948, returned to newly-formed Bangladesh in 1972. He was a great admirer of Tagore, studied in Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan, taught there (1956–64) With a vast knowledge of various languages (15), cultures and literature, and variety of experiences from his travelling days, Mujtaba Ali was a travel-writer, among the other genres of writings. Ali never really settled down for long in a vocation or place. His ever-young spirit and energy drove him on to new places to try new facets of life.

the conceptual divide (the Brahmaputra Valley), but perhaps suggests the unrest and dismay among the Assamese students, in the depiction of the educational anomaly and the frustration of a student with the academic system, ending in his tragic death. (ILL.3.50)

The space in the centre of the stage is charged with the personalised maps, which have been suspended from the ceiling. They are distributed so as to form pathways for movement. They are displayed carefully to avoid completely obscuring the view of the two projections in the background. However, the views are partially overlapped by the map-displays when seen from certain angles and the audience has to make an effort to position itself variously and move closer in order to read the complete scenario. The participants walk in from the green room in a line, weaving a path through the space and around the audience. They are in Follow-the-Leader mode. In the flow of things, the identity of the leader switches every once in a while, changing the direction of movement and the enactment and sounds produced. Together with Sanchayan, the group has already improvised a set of sentences related to the market and life around Lakhipur; these are recited in turn by the group as they weave around in the centre of the market. (ILL.3.51 – 3.52)

I ask Sarat Singh of the Meitei community, who is a farmer as also a lawyer and participant in the politics of space, about his experience of the evening. He is thrilled by the invocation of the map drawn by them, which shows the Chiri, and the Barak rivers that enclose Lakhipur. He points out that the Map of Barak is now no longer neutral, it involves politics. For, if the planned Tipaimukh Dam is built at the origin of the Barak River in Manipur State, then the river will run dry in the plains. He tells me, they are already running a battle against the defiance of the cadastral mapping on the part of the government.<sup>376</sup>

The insider's experience of the archipelago, which is Assam, comes alive in the presence of outsiders.

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<sup>376</sup> The repercussions of the failure to address the public issues are already visible. Two days after I leave the Lakhipur area, seven people, including four engineers related to the Tipaimukh Dam project are kidnapped by an unknown militant faction. Retaliatory actions against state indifference are on the rise.

### 3.7 Emerging Communities: A Summation

Assam is the last of the sites to be studied. By the time the curatorial events are conducted here, we already have behind us the experiences of Coochbehar and Sikkim; the former having provided a basic preparatory map for the itineraries of the later workshops. We realise that we have been handling increasing ethnic diversity in the course of the project, with Lakhipur displaying the maximum. The research and field-mapping trips reveal that in the internal complexities of the micro-sites and their responses to the world outside, Assam is very different from any of the previous sites. The workshops also grow more complex in terms of the variety of exercises and the multiplicity of mediums involved as means of expression; photography and video-making are introduced. The idea of utilising wall texts for interjecting and enlivening the *mise-en-scènes* is also new in Assam. The efficacy of locally produced material as provocation for the dialogic process is a lesson we learn in Sikkim and reuse effectively here; cane mats and boxes are used in the Lakhipur *mise-en-scène* construction, and in another register, quotations culled from Assamese literature for the wall texts, in all the micro-sites. The adoption of the locally produced Meitei map also helps the catalytic process in Lakhipur.

Sanchayan observes that the workshops have grown progressively public with the sites. He especially has Lakhipur in mind as the culmination in terms of publicness of the *mise-en-scène*. Though, for him, it is close to a live art event, while for me its significance is still as part of an ongoing process, part of the means to the end of knowledge-generation. About his personal gleanings from the Assam events of knowledge, Sanchayan says:

I have been adopting different Badal Sarkar theatre techniques in generating community interactions, previously. But, during these short, time-based activities, I realised the possibility of these games being placed in a specific geographical situation and how they can create spaces for dialogue, even with the site.

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This final part of my research is centred in South Assam, where the majority of the population speaks Bengali, as opposed to the rest of Assam where language issues are more vexed. Hence, I approach my area with an expectation of familiarity of culture and language. But, I get a jolt when I fail to understand the Sylheti dialect of the Barak Valley Bengali. Though there is a persistent attempt by the people of this area to bridge their cultural gap with mainland Bengal in their adoption of its dominant literary tradition in the writing practices, their spoken language sounds like a separate entity, and not just a dialect of Bengali. Ideally, I think I should have no problem of outsidership here, yet I find myself having to train my ear to understand even a part of what is being said, let alone communicate in the language. The local people have to access their knowledge of Calcutta Bengali for my sake and that becomes our language of exchange. Whenever they speak among themselves, some considerately remember to speak in my Bengali, while others fall back to Sylheti and I am left at the mercy of a polite translation. I am struck by the irony that I can perhaps understand Assamese much more than this version of Bengali. I also find the societies in southern Assam very dependent on closely knit communities and each community eager to protect itself from any outside invasion. My status as an outsider unexpectedly becomes a point of rescue once, when on accidentally reaching Silchar on a day of *bandh*, our car is allowed to move along, because as outsiders we were not aware of the call for *bandh*. On another occasion, this outsider position becomes a bane when we are refused access to the local Manipuri community's religious congregation on *Janmashtami*.<sup>377</sup> The local Bengalis have free entry. This helps to establish the outsidership in an unexpected way. The feeling of alienation is further increased when I come across Bengali shopkeepers speaking in the unfamiliar dialect and not responding immediately when they hear me speaking the mainland language. This, I am surprised to note, does not happen in Guwahati – a place known for its anti-Bengali attitude (where the local language is Assamese). This could be because it is a more cosmopolitan location and the community, more adapted to seeing outsiders, in comparison to a provincial town of South Assam entangled in a memorial past. Interestingly, Calcutta Bengali seems to have more currency in Guwahati than the official national language Hindi, which is the other

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<sup>377</sup> The birth of Lord Krishna is celebrated all over India on this day.

alternative for an outsider. There is thus, a lack of trust, and suspicion about motives, more in the remote locations than the cosmopolitan. Outsiders seem welcome as long as they come for a short while and with authentication and credibility acceptable and useful for them. When they learn that I am from a prestigious central university, I am entertained; after the workshop in Lakhipur, the local art school authorities click a photograph of Sanchayan and me, and when I visit Lakhipur later again, I am shown the framed photograph ostentatiously hanging in the office. Even so, in both Lakhipur and Karimgunj, during my interactions preparatory to the holding of the workshops, the one anxious query that meets me is whether I am going to ask any political questions. I find out that their perception of 'political questions' is limited to the local; questions related to local politicians, their antics, coercion and corruption issues and grievances against them. They make it clear at the outset these questions will not be attended to. (Curiously, developmental issues, or the stakes the local representation is likely to have in them, are not considered political questions at all.) Another incident that helps to underscore my outsideness in Barak takes place in Lakhipur during my December 2012 trip, as I wait on the river bank for a motorboat to take me upstream to the Tipaimukh Dam site. The people manning the jetty question me closely and advise me against visiting the site, because the journey would be long and I would be unable to catch a return boat the same evening. Earlier, during the workshop, when I had suggested the prospect of our visiting Tipaimukh to the participants, I had received conflicting signals from two groups; the Manipuris had said it was possible, while the Bengalis had been discouraging. In January 2013, only a few days after my cancelled trip, the implication of this behaviour dawns on me when several people working on the dam project in Manipur, including some engineers from Calcutta, are kidnapped from the riverside – very close to the spot from where I was trying to hire a motorboat.

I meet the people from the cultural and literary world of Barak with an expectation of similarity of concerns. However, in the three sites, I have three experiences that thwart my expectations to an extent. In Lakhipur, Ganesh Dey, who has taught for 30 years in the locally well-known Nehru College, communicates a sense of deprivation – it seems, when he tried to get his works published in Calcutta, they were returned by the publisher with suggestions for improvement.

He points this out to me in the tone of the bitterness that connects and segregates the two lands of Southern Assam and Kolkata. This argument, which otherwise should not have mattered, touches deep when it acts on the assumption that I represent my locality of origin. The feeling is much intensified when Subir Kar, a literary-scholar-turned-local-historian from Silchar, suggests that city-bred historians from Calcutta 'dabble in theories, which have no local value'. He has particular issue with the use of Bakhtin and his model by literary scholars who are 'trained in the cities and have no concern for the local facts'. As an alternative, he suggests the use of an absolute empiricism that tries to probe the past events. This attitude, I find out later, seems to be the fall-out of his continuing rift with an ex-colleague at the Assam University, who happens to be from Calcutta. Like Ganesh Dey, Kar has taken me for a representative of 'the Bengalis from Calcutta', i.e. an external agent. In Karimgunj, I discover first-hand that the cultural community is not exempt from the suspiciousness shared by all closed communities and the paranoia about any kind of critical engagement with those they see as outsiders. The local Extra Canvas group that comes to our help initially and lends us their resources at the Law College campus, for the workshops, solicits Sanchayan and my opinion on a particular theatre production, which is based on Tagore's play *Tasher Desh* (The Land of Cards). But, when we comment on the costumes in the play, it quickly grows into a heated conversation and increasingly hostile insider-outsider debate. Defensive and confrontational, they state that it is not possible for outsiders from privileged locations like Calcutta and Santiniketan to understand or appreciate the economic and material constraints they work against. We finally manage to engineer an amicable end. This incident leaves me with the feeling that any comment or input from outside the locality is considered potential bias against the locals. Another rather disturbing incident, again in Karimgunj, occurs in the middle of the workshop. I overhear the participants referring to us as *Kaltus*. On asking, we are informed by a girl that this is their slang term for mainland Bengalis from Calcutta. Kaltu, I realise is a derogatory label, suggesting some kind of negative attribution, which they see as quality of the Bengalis from mainland. Our outsiderness is obviously firmly etched in the minds of most of the participants.

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My encounters in the Barak Valley include study of literary texts and cinematic productions, actual physical travel and ground level research involving casual interactions and interviews with people. And in all the different types of narratives, what prominently comes through, depending on the dynamics of the location of production – distance or closeness – is multi-vocality.

I come across two kinds of textual creations; those produced by long term settlers of Assam, like Ganesh Dey's theatrical texts, Sanjib Deblaskar's texts and Sandipan's films, and those by people like Manindra Gupta, who have moved away from their places of origin and settled elsewhere. These two not only display a difference of attitude to memory (in case of distances), but also of positioning vis-à-vis this memory. Sandipan Bhattacharya's visual texts reveal a particularly engaged migrant's memorial sensibilities; Gupta seeks out a way to escape the burden of memory; Dey's voice is that of a conciliator; Deblaskar puts forth an empirical view of history. They are not in resonance with mainland Assamese literature, but are to an extent local; their desire for thematic, which is often translocal, betrays their locational entrenchment. Time is endlessly linear in Sandipan's work, its voice turning to pastiche; it is circular in the quasi-mythic/quasi-real novella of Dey; Deblaskar represents a contemporary time of activism; and, these, together with Gupta's recounting of a time-past being revisited via parallel experiences, form an uneven archive. This can be contrasted with the remote projections of futurity by the governance from above – such as in the DONER scheme of LEP.

The interviews and informal interactions with local ethnicities again reveal diverse complexions. Sarat Singh from the Meitei community of Lakhipur, Kaga Sung of Binnakandi and Maynang Singh from the Rongmei community of Hatir Had, represent three different discontents. Kaga Sung's story is about discrimination against the Rongmei Nagas, who are not allowed to open bank accounts. Ex-serviceman Mayang Singh lives in his village without electricity, though electric poles are installed close-by. Sarat Singh relates a long saga of unfriendly government policies and apathetic action. He tells me, the Manipuri villages of the locality constantly exist with the anxieties of eviction and the irrigational system drying up, as a consequence of the impending Tipaimukh Dam on the Barak, a fall-out of DONER and LEP. Also, more than 25 years ago,

the government had acquired land from the Manipuris to construct canals and install pumps, as part of a projected irrigation system for their fields. This land now lies disused and in recent years has been encroached upon by fresh immigrants from Bangladesh. Thus, they now have the added anxiety of losing their land to illegal settlers. This has begun to affect the relationships between the different local communities.

Yet, when I move away from Assam to other scholarly interactive circuits, their narratives conflict with my encounters during the field trips. Political scientists in Kolkata inform me that the stateless petty-businessmen of Tamil origin (who had settled there after being thrown out of Myanmar in the early twentieth century) are being forcibly evicted and systematically replaced by the ethnic Manipuri populace at the Moreh-Tamu border; a tale that Sarat Singh would never tell me. Nor would the local Bengali gentries buy Sarat Singh's anxious tales of encroachment. I realise that often the conversational method can turn out to be an event defined by mutual planting of stories – each event of communication passing through an inter-ethnic filter.

In a completely different voice, Deblaskar recounts to me an incident of personal experience that underscores the peculiar predicament of the Sylheti-speaking Bengali community of Barak. He received summons from the court to prove his Indian citizenship, despite the fact that his family has been settled in the area for three generations and possesses all the required paraphernalia of citizenship – like voter ID cards, job and property. It took him six years to settle this matter in court. Continual occurrences of similar incidents – seen in the light of the history of discontent shared by the Bengali-speaking population of the Barak – along with the increasing efforts towards making Assam a nation province for the ethnic-Assamese, would provide background to Southern Assam's rising demand for a separate state for Barak Valley, made under the aegis of Barak Valley Coordination Committee. This was modified to a demand for union-territoryhood, but the recent granting of statehood to Telangana in Andhra Pradesh has rekindled the secessionist fire.

Obviously, the communities are working from different positions, requirements, and to different ends. Local crises situations, like in Lakhipur, splinter the

relationships further – physical proximity exposes the splits between the communities. The borderland syndrome in Assam has reached such a sensitive point that public sociality, in reaction to any critical event – real or perceived, is always ready to form an action-group with a confrontational stance towards the state mechanism. For instance, the Committee for Protection of Land in Border Fencing was formed on the Tamu–Moreh border in reaction to alleged encroachment by Myanmar into Manipuri territory. This accusation is currently under investigation and the report is awaited.

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In the midst of so many conflicting indicators, the artificially constructed workshop helps to bring a semblance of coherence to the community situation. I hope to find contingent community emerging under the closed workshop situations, if only in limited and temporary manner and under very specific conditions. This is because there is an element of conscious deliberation to the activities and efforts. For three days the participants are thrown together with no escape from each other. They are made to go through activities specially designed for focusing on questions of identity and alienation. In the created neutral space, they are able to overcome natural reservations and inhibitions to address identity and alienation perceptions and articulate their otherness issues. The mapmaking exercises see maximum animation and the sharing of each other's knowledge and experiences of otherness, paves way for a temporary sense of community.

In all the three micro-sites I encourage the participation of young people with similar educational backgrounds, who are poised on the start of their careers. The maximum ethnic diversity in the participants is seen in Lakhipur, though most of them share a cultural platform – they are students of a local art school. And, contrary to expectation, in case of this multi-ethnic congregation, we find the emergence of empathy. The making of the market videos exposes the participants to the different alien communities cohabiting with them in the physical space. We find them trying to address each other's alienations and in this, cohesiveness is formed over the period of the three days. It remains to be seen whether the resultant curiosity that is kindled about neighbours would encourage future interaction and sympathetic exchanges.

We do have an unexpected experience of otherness on the first day of the Lakhipur workshop, when 59 year old Samar Singh, participating in the exercises, turns out to be the parent of the Manipuri girl Riyasena Devi and wants to excuse himself after two hours of the workshop. He explains that he had actually come to keep an eye on his daughter as he could not trust us outsiders, but since Sanchayan and I had clarified in the beginning that no non-participants would be allowed to hang around, he had decided to participate. He is embarrassed while explaining this, but states confessionally that he now trusts us. What emerges in the end is that for the participants, the workshop is a unique and intriguing exposure that they express willingness to repeat. In the end we are asked by them, their parents and the local populace in general, whether the workshop is going to be a recurrent event. We are further vindicated when, on the day of our departure, we bump into Samar Singh in the marketplace and he thanks us profusely for the 'remarkable changes' in his daughter since the workshop. He tells us that she has now become more sociable than ever before and interacts freely in the neighbourhood. In Karimgunj on the other hand, despite the participating body of people forming a homogeneous ethnicity, we get to see a strange self-consciousness and competitiveness that to an extent impacts the sense of community. In Silchar, members from several communities participate, the dominant being Bengalis. What is revealed in this economically urban, but culturally suburban site is an underlying insecurity about spaces. A multi-ethnic community does not emerge here; there is a resistance to porosity. The Silchar workshop is an eye-opener for Sanchayan and me, as it helps in locating a wide variety of outsideness. For outsiders like us, it helps build a sense of proximity to spaces due to the travelling involved and the stories we hear, or our realisation how certain words like Dukhar may have unpredictably widespread implication. At the same time, it also makes us constantly aware of our own predicament – as Bengalis from the mainland, unfamiliar with the local dynamics of life and the struggles involved, as also with many words being spoken here. Despite the fact that we probably seem privileged in the eyes of the locals, we are at a disadvantage without direct access. The participants are also partially outsiders here, because they have a fractured sense of belonging to the place and many are constantly on the lookout for escape routes. The closest (international) border is about 50 km from Silchar, but various locations of the city, its migrant colonies, the riverbank experiences are potential replicas of the

border anxieties. The closeness or distance from the actual border increasingly becomes illusive. It seems much closer than it actually is.

Thus, we see no formula effectively emerges as to the outcome of the workshop experiments. The temporarily emerging sense of community in Lakhipur is but a construct of the event of knowledge and may not direct us to a reconciliation path. Scott tells us that in closed social sites there are seclusions created among the members of a found community.<sup>378</sup> There are generally hidden transcripts using codes internal to the affected people, which help communicate and keep their communication hidden from surveillance. Our workshop situations in Assam (especially Lakhipur), bring us to the edge of the censorious and closed communities. At one point it looks like a programme with a pedagogic end, at another there is a cynical streak in the exchanges. On the evening of the *mise-en-scène* in Lakhipur, a drunken Manipuri gentleman walks into the middle of the performance and insists on supervising the scenario. He is equipped with a bag of merchandise, and seems to be on his way back home. He says he wants to ask a question. We agree to humour him. He asks whether this is a theatre performance. I tell him it is not. After a brief survey, he is assured it isn't and concludes, "*Oh, tahole chetana jagroto kora hocche!*" (Oh, so this is all in aid of consciousness raising!) He turns towards us in the wings, winks and leaves.

Assam's ethnic situation is extremely complex and layered; it cannot be approached by a single linear method, nor can any two places be generalised about with a single parameter. In the end, I realise it was perhaps overambitious to choose three sites in Assam, since a single site in itself has too many complications to it. At the same time, I also realise that perhaps one was left with no other option, but to attend to the multiple, in order to avoid both, the stereotypes produced by blinkered ethnography with its idea of fixed community and pragmatic generalisation with its statistical or cartographic tools that instrumentalise data mostly in favour of governance from above.

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<sup>378</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 120-121.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

While the purpose of summation is to draw a provisional closure to a project, it is also suggestive of the emergent possibilities of the evolved situation(s), where the involvements are many; in this case – those of sites, disciplines and inferences.

This thesis was conceived as a curatorial project encompassing multiple border locations. The process involved anthropological probing into physical and metaphorical borderland(s) in their micro-social aspects, culminating in the precipitation of knowledge platforms in the form of workshop situations that engaged multi-sensory tools. Thus, it became a project with a multi-disciplinary complexion, wherein anthropological methods of site-research led to the curatorial in the workshop situations at the selected sites.

The research was performed with more than one aim in mind. At the outset, the purpose was to study the relational aspects of the multiple border sites – the issues of community and outsideness as encountered through the methods of multi-sited anthropology. The purpose was also to study the implication for an anthropologically constructed multi-sitedness and how this brought up a site-relational model for the curatorial in a workshop event. The event of knowledge thus brought on the same plane, the curatorial with its contingent aesthetic and multi-sited anthropology – at times with circumstantially-activist potentialities, for an epistemic consideration.

There were certain key aspects to this project, which it may be relevant to reiterate. Primarily, there were several disciplines whose orientation or methods found their way into the research – such as multi-sited anthropology, performance studies and their intersection with anthropology – as also an engagement with crisis geography and resultant geographic visualisation, elements of activism and finally the curatorial. The project attempted to bring the different layers of the interdisciplinary research and the different temporalities to a single platform of a performative event (of knowledge). In this manner, it tried

to address the inflections and flows of the selected border sites of north-eastern and eastern India.

The research design attended to the obsolescence of a single site identity, or the erstwhile relevant site-specificity. As a thematic, border-thinking has gone through several phases of renewal of interest, but none matching the period from the end of the twentieth century to the present day. With globalisation entering a new phase, there is a differentiation in the order of traffic through the transnational borders. While, separate and limited disciplinary attempts have been made to address the issues related to the evolved or evolving borderland predicament such as the enclaves, there are only a few scholars (Willem Van Schendel, Brendan Whyte, David Ludden, Zou and Kumar among others) who address these questions from the broad frames of confluence of history and anthropology. In most of the cases, the frames are macro and the expectation is that of grounded theory.

Macro frames are seen to produce essentialism on behalf of the nation, state and the globe, and hence are seen to perpetuate the dichotomous dominator-dominated narratives. Generally, the borderland living experiences are seen as translated into a confrontational situation between nations and states and territorialities. However, in a multi-sited study of smaller border situations the internal and lateral questions of cohabitation and micro-conflicts prevail over the abstract enemies across the border. These subtle conflictual situations are smaller – the micro-social or infra-national differences are spread laterally. Methodologically this seems to be gaining distinct attention in experimental and interpretive anthropology.<sup>379</sup>

Single-sited anthropological ethnography as well as social science divides the fieldwork into different contexts – that of gathering information and that of articulating. There is an expectation of a match between the two contexts, to

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<sup>379</sup> “The attention to the micro practices and/or everyday life is extremely important, because it demands a time commitment and there is no way to rush everyday life.” Paul Rabinow et al., *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 95.

make the conclusions tenable and logical.<sup>380</sup> By nature, the single-sited anthropological approach lives with the anxiety of finding a cohesiveness and the implications are largely local. In case of multi-sited research, the shift of sites makes it already prospectively global. The singular community anxiety and absolute locational identity dissipates. Marcus writes:

Something of the mystique and reality of the conventional fieldwork is lost in the multi-sited ethnography... Still what is not lost in the multi-sited research is the function of translation from one cultural idiom or language into another. This function is enhanced since it is no longer practiced in a dualistic 'them-us' framework of conventional ethnography but requires considerably more nuancing and shading as the practice connects several sites that the research explores...<sup>381</sup>

An urgency was therefore felt for unpacking the macro-frames, for addressing the more palpable aspects such as that of everyday living, raising the questions related to the locally situated global concerns (such as the enclave issues, land questions at the borders between countries, migrancy or citizenship). Though these are serious global issues relevant to the entire world, they have particular resonance for South Asia and the parts of India that I engaged with in this project. What the thesis processually tried to open up are micro-sites, micro-disciplines, everyday aspects of lived experience and continuing questions around community and notions of outsideness.

Apart from the reasons of access and relative familiarity, the selection of the specific sites in Coochbehar, Sikkim and Assam was governed by a long nurtured curiosity about micro-sites within a state-defined territoriality and the alternate registers to the statist view that might be thrown up by a study of such. These were issues hard to address with a single-site method, but I felt could be

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<sup>380</sup> "To get a handle on the problems of philosophy of social science in the post positivist era, I would like to draw a distinction between the *context of investigation* and the *context of explanation*. The context of investigation refers to the social and intellectual context of the sociologist herself. The context of explanation refers to the reality she wishes to investigate and in particular the social actions she wishes to explain and surrounding social context or environment she explains them with." Isaac Aarail Reed, "Epistemology Contextualised: Social-Scientific Knowledge in Post Positivist Era," *Sociological Theory* 28, no.1 (March 2010): 22.

<sup>381</sup> George E. Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Rise of Multi-sited Ethnography," *Anthropological Review* 24 (1995):100.

done through protracted interactions in different sites. Also, this, being a thematic that I thought lacked an approach from the curatorial point of view, was treated in the project via cross disciplinary experimentation.

### **Distinctions Between the Sites: Themes, Actions and the Emergent**

In this research, knowledge does not prefigure the inquiry, nor is it superposed on the resultant writings, it is emergent. In the processual method all things – actions, thoughts, words are also apropos for another stage, another site, another time. Thus, the process of following the metaphor (of border) has involved juxtaposition at the enquiry as well as the writing stages; and this has brought out the self-other divide often sharply into focus, so that we find, “What once was natural is exposed as cultural and thus malleable.”

### **Community: Commons, Networks and Outsidedness**

During the field research, the selected sites were initially approached with certain assumptions based on available secondary and tertiary material. These were unsettled as various configurations that destabilised the fixed notions of community were discovered and complex layers of inside-outside relations were exposed.

The course of the field interactions brought me to several dialogical situations. The dialogues were conducted to get to know the sites better and were, to a large extent, useful in that direction. But, while comparing notes with others, I realised that there might be a complex web of performance implicating the conversations; making them performative circumstances, where at any point unsuspected by me or not immediately known to me, a change of script could occur, under pressure. This factor was especially true of some of the conversations I had in the enclaves of Coochbehar (Chapter One) and in Banskandi in Assam (Chapter Three). Goffman talks about two kinds of performances – the sincere kind (in which the actor believes in the role he plays), and the cynical (faking a role – often under the influence of the audience expectation and/ or pressure). He

marks them as signs of porous societies that define communities in difference – through “appearance” and “manners”.<sup>382</sup>

In the site encounters with communities, the major exposure was to what Turner called a liminal situation – postponement of regularity, which produced transitional communities. These transitional communities could be the ‘*communitas*’ of Turner’s classical description – fixed communities waiting to be delivered to another state (as was the case in Sikkim), or a threshold of civility (as in the Coochbehar enclaves), or from the uncertain transitions of developmental projects (as in Barak Valley). This observation on transition is somewhat common to different schools of anthropology that build on micro-observations and reflexivity.<sup>383</sup>

In Southern Assam (Chapter Three), the ethnic majority lives in a state that might be identified as liminal. This is a product of the geographic predicament, as it is a product of historical and administrative processes. The alien and citizen divide is buttressed throughout by what is thought to be statist coercion. In contrast, there exist unplugged porosities that are locally utilised sometimes also for illicit traffic. There is also simultaneously, projection of a global future connecting China and Central Asia with mainland India, through these terrains. What my interactions with locals revealed was that, paradoxically, this global projection and the related developmental projects were responsible for creation of further liminalities; the residents of the sites like Lakhipur (ethnically dense and non-urban) earmarked in the road and dam projects, live in constant uncertainty about their state, as they are completely in the dark about the blue-print or progress of the projects and how they are implicated in them or will be affected by them. The workshop exercises in the Barak (Karimgunj and Silchar) revealed another prospective liminality. Most of the younger generation complained of confinement and lack of opportunities. They were poised outward – there was a

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<sup>382</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1956), 15.

<sup>383</sup> “The transitional periods all have properties of the threshold, a sort of sacred boundary between two spaces, where the antagonistic principles meet each other and the world is reversed. The rites of these moments also obey the principle already encountered of the maximisation of magical profit.” Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 130.

desire to travel to coveted lands, usually abroad. The closer the site was to Bangladesh, more was it affected by a mercantile attitude. The present generation had feelings of being trapped and visualised their future in an escape plan. They had also a developed knack for networked urbanism. For the older population, the escape route is via memory/ collective nostalgia.

In the cocooned Lepcha reserve of Dzongu, intense knowledge event interactions led to the discovery of the current liminal state of the community due to the conditions created by their ongoing anti-dam movement (Chapter Two). The community faces both literal and symbolic extinction, because their sacred forest ground, their lands and properties are under serious threat of inundation as fall-out of several under construction hydro-electric dams. For some time now, a section of the affected population has been actively protesting against the dams and facing the wrath of the government that does not take opposition very kindly.

But there are sites prospectively of more global significance (by international relations and human rights discourses); the enclaves of Coochbehar and their question of freedom (Chapter One). Following the root metaphor of border, here one encounters starkness of contrast in the statelessness of the people. The human predicament of being trapped without freedom, here, surpasses many other questions elsewhere.

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At the micro-level I encountered unevenness in local concepts of belonging and attitude towards outsiders. In South Assam, where the major local language is a Bengali derivative by which the residents distinguish themselves from the rest of Assam, the expectation of familiarity with which the sites were approached, was unsettled. Access was not very easy in many places. Nor were the responses even and equal in the micro-sites. In Karimgunj, which has an affinity towards Calcutta culture, competitive desperation got translated as hostile undercurrents towards the 'outsider from the coveted land'. Thus in a borderland situation the entrenched concept of citizen often gives rise to a quasi-oppositional concept of alien. The more familiar the ethnic group, the more complex the situations tend to become. On the other hand, in Silchar – not very

close to the border and comparatively more cosmopolitan – the border aspects were found to only rumble like distant thunder and did not have immediate implications; it translated into a live anxiety about neighbouring ethnicities. The majority community here created its borders with respect to different zones within the city; with relation to the pockets of minority ethnicities existing alongside – who formed their Other.

In Sikkim, what emerged was a different experience. In Gangtok, with its hybrid culture and the different ethnicities existing in a loose community orientation, I had to somewhat negotiate through the ambiguity of an inconstant insider-outsider status. In the workshop, eventually, my outsideness was resolved in the participants' realisation of the relativity of outsideness. In the group of mixed ethnicities, many were educated outside the state. This exposure enabled them to identify largely with Sikkim instead of their specific ethnicities. At the same time, this differentiated them from the general populace, as they did not share the latter's entrenched sense of ethnic divide. Consequently, as one sense of outsideness dissolved inside the workshop, another one simultaneously came into existence. Rhenock, with a similar multi-ethnic situation, was however a transit place. This made almost everyone a relative outsider. As a result, outsideness did not surface prominently. In a remoter location like Dzongu, however, because of the natural reticence and shyness of the ethnicities, the communities were closed and took more time to access. It took the created workshop situations to ease the communication, but because there was no ambiguity about my outsider status due to my obvious ethnic difference, there was no resistance on that count. Once the ice broke, the interaction was fluid and easy. The activist sections of the community became enthusiastic participants and made the performative platform their own.

### **Temporalities**

In the sites, I encountered layers of temporal and spatial overlaps indicating different crossroads of cultural behaviour and gestures. The different time zones and the different imaginaries of space and belonging were revealed through the conversations and micro field-observations of everyday-living, and in the fictive and/or biographical articulations of the local writers and filmmakers.

In Assam, there is a criss-crossing of several time zones – mythic and historical time zones overlap with memorial time. These temporalities were revealed in the interviews I took during the fieldwork, in my conversations with locals and in two different modes of creative expression – Ganesh Dey and Manindra Gupta’s writings, and Sandipan’s films. These narratives perform the function of multi-sitedness; being at the same time here and elsewhere – desirous of travelling and encapsulating the historical and the present together. Their characters travel to different sites and act as mobile signifiers suturing spaces – often locations (as in Ganesh Dey’s *Kalangmar Kuley*). Manindra Gupta’s autobiography performs a similar function, differently. Thereby they form parallel ethnography from inside and outside the site, and was thought worth juxtaposing to bring out the disjuncture of time that inhabits resident and alien imaginary, alike. My conversation with Bruce Allan presented a position of absolute outsidership and suggested a memoriality seen through a visitor’s eye; it seemed to exist at the juncture of different time zones.

Coochbehar has contrasting pockets of completely trapped and relatively free zones. This stark contrast is not available elsewhere. However, memoriality circulates around the princely monuments that encapsulate its history. The present day imaginary is largely occupied by this royal history of relationships with its neighbours. The minority non-citizen enclave dwellers are overlooked even by the local historians. These are their blind spots, or one could say – their political unconscious of exclusion. Curiously, I found the minority history addressed by outsiders Dam and Sanyal in their travelogue. Within the enclaves, I discovered the temporal registers through my conversations with Mansoor Bhai, whose last memory of freedom goes back to before August 1947 (ironically – pre-independence and pre-partition days of India), when his house had been robbed and the police had responded to his call. Presently, he has relinquished hope of being free again in his lifetime, but prays that his progeny and future generations will be able to taste freedom.<sup>384</sup> I see him as an index of his age

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<sup>384</sup> In one of our conversations, he told me: “My time has passed. I don’t think I will survive to see the future. If you can do something to ensure freedom for the next generation, it would be nice. I no longer require it personally, for myself, what use could I possibly have of it. But I worry for my children and grandchildren – the next generation should be able to free themselves from this trapped situation.”

group; while he seems to exist in a strange limbo between memorial time and time that is yet to come, his next generation lives with all the ambitions of contemporary time. Some of them are familiar with and hanker after all modern day trappings, finding loopholes that enable them to participate in contemporary life in the legal society, while keeping a foot inside the enclaves. On Independence Day these last few years, the enclave dwellers have been hoisting the Indian tricolor in anticipation of future absorption into the Indian republic. One of them has also participated in the last Panchayat elections as an independent candidate, finding a way to get her candidature accepted by the Election Commission.

The Sikkim exemplars of narrative imaginary were more heterogeneous. They needed to be identified and extracted. Thus, a banned Ray film, scenes from a detective fiction, an ethnographic documentary on the Pang Lhabsol festival and a scenario from the annual monastic ritual were juxtaposed – paralleling how different and to all appearances, contrasting, temporalities cohabit in the same border site and how the distinction between secular and sacred diminishes. I found that the temporalities of these creative articulations develop a subtext of their own; ‘the monarchic misrule’ in Ray’s *Sikkim*, ‘complex web of fractious ethno relations’ in his detective fiction – *Trouble in Gangtok*, ‘developmental imposition amid slowness’ in Arghya Basu’s film.

There is also a sense of mythic time that lies beneath the rational and linear order of everyday, in Sikkim. Under conditions of duress, this mythic time is invoked in the form of esoteric Buddhist rituals showing parallel temporalities. Similar temporality is revealed through the Buddhist monastic rituals like Chham and seasonal monastic performances. Unscripted oral and theatrical performances capture the cycle of life and elements of morality play their role, including aspects of good and evil.

These temporal imaginaries find their articulations of homeland through the narrative in literary and oral forms alike, and mark the uneven habitations of the present borders. When these were brought together in the workshop platforms,

the multiple layers of temporality converged, to throw up a new temporality that belonged to the moment of emergence of knowledge.

### **Interpretive Directions: The Event of Knowledge**

The workshops were poised at the culmination of the site researches, and were the meeting points between the anthropological field research and the curatorial interpretation.

In each case, I, the curatorial interlocutor, had come to the workshop location equipped with a certain understanding of my own. This was a form of local knowledge, which I had largely shared with the coordinators, but not with the participants. Hence, the participants carried their own form of local knowledge without directly being 'influenced' or 'imposed upon'.

It is also significant to remember that the workshop was a closed artificial situation with no non-participating audience present that might have made the participants self-conscious. Yet, despite the informality, the workshop was strict enough to demand full time commitment from the participants, during its tenure. Because of the closed-door seclusion, combined with a free atmosphere without the surveillance of any authoritarian agent, for some, it became a free space of expression and interpretation.

The curator's role was to suggest moves and catalytically intervene so as to precipitate the event of knowledge. Using the selected methodology and designated theatre game tools, mapping and writing exercises, the curatorial catalyst and the workshop coordinator initiated a dialogue through verbal exchanges. The responses and inputs of the participants progressively helped to bring out the daily living and its dynamics.

Despite the overarching borderland dynamics connecting the three main sites, the differences between them came out to inform the overall project. The knowledge events took different shapes through similar moves or contraptions; the obvious reason for this being, Coochbehar, Sikkim and Assam have different

ethnic configurations, different geopolitical situatedness and different sets of crises. These are the factors that impinge on the daily living in a location; their manifestations, however, would be different in the workshop and in the fieldwork scenario.

The nature of the workshops was such that the sequence of events could not be pre-fixed. But the events usually progressed from the simple to complex. The moment of realisation came differently at different points in all the places, as the types of games attempted and their sequences varied.

All the workshops began with simple bonding exercises derived from theatre practices, but the physicality of these introductory non-verbal components at first confused the participants. The resultant hesitancy gradually dissipated as movements began to occur along a thematic thinking and new dimensions came out. In the end, a certain cohesiveness was born in the participating groups. While this happened in all the workshop sites, the transition to spontaneity in Karimgunj was almost instantaneous; in Lakhipur, it took the longest. This could be because most of the urban Karimgunj participants were theatre people and many of them knew each other, while in suburban Lakhipur the participants were a very mixed ethnic group and there was also mutual awkwardness between the genders.

The Follow the Leader game proved a useful device. In this play of power, driven by performative utterance, the onus of taking up the lead was on the participants and each one was free to initiate the lead at any point in the game; the moment of empowerment occurred as each person took the lead and started a movement, action or sound that the others had to instantly replicate. People who got the hang of it used it to make others do what they wanted, breaking hierarchies. Here, by instructional design, a congeniality emerged. At some point, the coordinator and I devised a reciprocal ploy to increase the openness of the workshop. We started slipping in sarcastic, self-critical observations in the course of the game. At first the participants began by following blindly, but when they realised we were making fun of ourselves, a situation of mutual reflexivity set in. Everyone started enjoying themselves immensely. There was thus a movement from alienation to congeniality in the workshop atmosphere.

Out of all the sites, this congeniality was unexpectedly, more noticeable in Lakhipur where the ethnic variation was most extreme and the workshop started with the maximum stiffness between the communities and genders. The enjoyment of freedom was also most evident here. The intimate, everyday knowledge that had not been revealed in my personal one-to-one interviews in the sites, came out in these exercises. One of the girls, while initiating her leading movement based on the theme of outsidership, observed that in her locality, neighbours of different ethnicities did not invite each other during festivities. Immediately, the next initiator stated that in her house, during festivals the whole neighbourhood was invited.

The reflexive device worked in all the sites including Coochbehar, where the enclave people soon became at ease with the rest of the participants. Though, in most of the workshop sessions the issues of distance, complicity and cynicism quite justifiably dominated, the ability to laugh at ourselves paid off; the existential distances remained, but the cultural gaps were gradually reduced.

In Dzongu, the little reflexivity opened up the site for us; for the performative moments, we were incorporated into a conviviality, or the site's own moment of solidarity, which many perceive as the founding moment or 'degree zero' of community.<sup>385</sup> A particularly noticeable aspect about this community was the intuitive coordination that existed between its members. This came out in the free improvisation Mirror game; the anticipation and mutual replication of actions between the participants were uncannily perfect. This could only be possible in a very close society. Also remarkable was that though literacy levels varied, the Lepchas displayed enormous facility for their own language and many of them expressed themselves in poetry. In Gangtok and Rhenock, this poetic coordinate was absent. But, even in Dzongu, when it came to the map, the spontaneity was

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<sup>385</sup> "The only hope for positive forms of action, capable of resisting co-optation or complicity, lies in the singular moment of orchestration of a singular moment of joyful collectivity that is so brief so ephemeral and, so utterly disconnected from any broader and more sustainable narrative of resistance or emancipation that it vanishes almost at the moment that it is expressed." Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 75.

replaced by strategic positioning – for they were suturing a protest, it was not just intimacy, it was an urgency.

In the word association games and writing exercises, each site generated its own variety of outsides and insides. In their lists of misunderstood, defunct or newly incorporated words, almost every word seemed to have memory associations, and we found that they led to a series of distances between communities, generations and spaces. The sites identified different locations as alien – for Coochbehar town participants, this was their immediate border; in Silchar these were locations of neighbouring minority ethnicities; in Karimgunj the ambitious younger generations' feelings of alienation rose from claustrophobia – related to their surroundings and family constraints. In Lakhipur, there was limited inter-community mingling in the younger generations, perhaps regulated by the elders and social normativity. What came out was the sense of an alienated group of ethnicities tied together by a marketplace. For Dzungu, the dam sites were locations of alterity. The community is organically so connected with the Teesta River that anything that stops its flow is like an intruding alien for them. The developmental establishment constituted the Other for them.

The themes for the human sculptures grew out of the workshop writings on the locations of alterity. In Coochbehar, the enclave participants and the citizens quite spontaneously took to portraying respective subaltern and privileged roles in the tableaux; there was reflexivity and a sense of easy collaboration between the two sections. The Karimgunj tableaux were particularly noteworthy in contrast. The participants were ordinary people with local vernacular education, but huge aspirations and sense of alienation. Their desire for mobility and self-projection came out in elaborate narratives and biographic and event-specific tableaux. Presentations of travel photographs, along with these helped them situate their past and project their futures. One of the participants highlighted her achievement at a festival in South Africa, countering which another participant threw open a tableau of apartheid. A couple of participants announced their desire to settle in London, where their relatives worked. These nuanced interventions transformed the atmosphere and turned the event into a platform for desire and its critique, through a semantic relay.

Mobility is increased by the anxiety of getting stuck in an archipelago situation, which is perhaps why the Bengalis and other ethnicities in Assam are comparatively more mobile than their ethnic-Assamese counterparts. This was in evidence in extreme form in Karimgunj. In this instance, the field study inference matched with the theoretical argument made by sociologists – ethno-Assamese in Assam are not very mobile.

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In a crisis geography, maps are very good tools of communication. However, the public use of maps is a tricky area in India, with prohibitions especially applicable in border areas. Hence, while critical mapping was useful for the subjective exploration of various dimensions of the sites, the public outreach of the project was limited. Inside the workshops, counter-mapping exercises proved to be the most exciting. In all the sites, the ability to intervene in a somewhat familiar official map in an inter-subjective way – shift the strictures and protocols of a state map a little, produced a certain animation. This was particularly heightened in Coochbehar, Dzongu and Lakhipur.

In Coochbehar, people were divided over their attitudes to the map. This almost defined their locations; the enclave people were reading the map topographically – trying to chart the paths to their spaces, check the accuracy of distances and routes, while the citizens were interested to identify their home locations and isolate their homes, expecting personal landmarks – known cinema halls, familiar bylanes – in a general map of the district. Ironically, the stateless *Chhit* people were eagerly attempting to identify their territory. There was an overt cause of rallying around freedom, where the statist map is instrumental. In the personal maps constructed as home task, the enclave dwellers showed intimate details – markers of their shared spaces, like a fig tree in their enclave where the community gathers – these were elements that signified their belonging. (ILL.1.41, 1.42)

In Dzongu, the participants were animated by the discovery of counter-mapping, because it was a whole new process by which they could remake the cadastral map, thus symbolically destabilising the quasi-developmental projects of the big dams. The community displayed forms of knowledge embedded in local

experience – forms which are generic, codified and recursive – in registering their protest on the map.<sup>386</sup>

Lakhipur participants had a locally generated map instead of the official map, which was overlaid on the official map and worked upon. Those members, who were not at all vocal during the word-play events – especially some of the girls, became hyperactive and prolific in writing the marginalia. They registered their anxieties about the space; lack of interactivity between the ethnicities, uncertainty about the future and so on. Finally, in an expression of self-awareness that had evolved over the duration of the workshop, the girls voluntarily suggested a title for the map – Map of Otherness. In conversation, the reason for their initial restraint was revealed as shyness, growing out of the fact that they had studied in all-girls schools and were not used to public interaction with males outside their familial environments. They were unexposed to the ways of urban life – with its larger visibility of active women participants in the public sphere. When the time to write down their thoughts came, however, this medium gave them the opportunity to articulate freely.

Thus, the confluence of the aesthetic and the ethical or moral undercurrents of a site brought forth another form of knowledge at the workshop – to do with perceiving and investigating the world in an engaged way, negotiating paths between the specific (bound) and generic (unbound).<sup>387</sup> This negotiation scenario of precipitation constituted the event of knowledge, a recursive “rehearsal” without necessarily an end in view.

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<sup>386</sup> “Scott calls it ‘Metis’ and contrasts this with the traditional western episteme. Metis is ‘place specific’. It has the implication of ... a form of knowing root in the specific conditions of the site and the aggregated wisdom of the inhabitants of that site over time.” Kester, *The One and the Many*, 143.

<sup>387</sup> “The singular recognises no limits. The specific on the other hand exists, only on the medium of relations with other...” Peter Hallward, “*The Limits of Individualism or How to Distinguish Deleuze from Foucault*,” quoted in Kester, *The One and the Many*, 179.

## The Curatorial Experiment

Though certain guiding principles and cues from the multi-sited theories had been considered, this project was started in an experimental vein without any fixed a priori theoretical framework. In the process, the anthropological field study and the workshop as an event of knowledge worked separately, but in parallel, pushing the borders of both, anthropology and the curatorial. Some formation of knowledge was expected to come out of the *mise-en-scène* of the workshops, where the borders performed themselves – through the devices that included gestures, words, images and narratives.

No essential borderland theory emerged from this exercise. What did emerge was an open-ended realm of contingent knowledge about the multiple sites, taking us in many directions. Various situational predicaments were identified for each site. Some possible future orientations and modes of action were also thrown up. Marilyn Strathern says:

Ethnography throws up the unplanned, the counter-intuitive, the unpredictable. It tolerates disconnections. You don't have to tie up all the loose ends; on the contrary there may be data that will become a resource only from some vantage point in the future...In an extensive mode, this precipitates potentially infinite differences between contexts.<sup>388</sup>

In the mode of curatorial thinking, this could translate as – a post-positivist knowledge formation, born out of a processual engagement and multiple disciplines meeting, without totalising each other. In such a curatorial event, the participants become spectators and produce knowledge together, where “predictability and unpredictability go hand in hand”<sup>389</sup> and “identity and outside dance together in an uneven homily”,<sup>390</sup> in a recursive mode.

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<sup>388</sup> Marilyn Strathern, “Abstraction and Decontextualization: An Anthropological Comment”, *Cambridge Anthropology* vol. 22 (2001), <http://aaaaarg.org/thing/51c58bfe6c3a0eda0b338000>.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>390</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 129.

Augusto Boal's theatre games contributed significantly in the construction of the participatory platform of the event of knowledge, though the curatorial strategy of Project Borderland differed from the approach of the TO workshop. Both the circumstances being interactive and dialogic, the differences lay in their situations and projected functions. The TO workshop is always preliminary to a complete theatrical performance with a story-line specifically designed for a 'given' and usually homogenous community that is united by a common oppression. On the other hand, the borderland workshop was conceived as an end in itself and not aimed at theatrical staging. It was a participatory platform built on the basis of multiple interactive games and exercises, including Boal's TO games, where the curator worked with members of diverse communities or groups of heterogeneous individuals, who were poised to emerge as, what could be called, a temporary 'found' community in the course of the process. Unlike in the TO performance, the participants, in the borderland workshop, did not share an identifiable unifying oppressor; they were connected by their belonging to the same site, which was in one way or the other, related to the border. Their different predicaments rising from their various associations with the border, were revealed in the course of the workshop. This was true of all the micro-sites except Dzongu, where the activist participants belonged to the same community and were incidentally, united by the oppression of the big dam. All the Project Borderland workshops were essentially related to the dynamics of specific sites. They emerged out of the anthropological study of multiple sites and were developed against the backdrop of the anthropological research. Whereas, the subjects of the TO workshops and performances are culled from contexts, and the performances are defined by these contexts (e.g. factory workers' rights, labourers' wages, sexual violence and so on). Unlike Boal's avowedly emancipatory projects, the borderland curatorial events can be said to have provided a platform for the participants, for their issues to be aired or to lend "eyes and ears" to their misfortunes.<sup>391</sup> The transformations, whenever they happened, developed from processes that continued outside the workshops.

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<sup>391</sup> McKee, *Non-governmental Politics* (London: Zone Books, 2006), 328.

The curator in the borderland workshop had a counterpart in Boal's Joker. He was in the centre of proceedings and played multiple roles. The difference lay in the natures of their interventions. Boal's requirement from the Joker is complete neutrality. He considers the Joker a "difficultator" rather than a facilitator – because from a position of critical intervention, he is supposed to constantly discourage catharsis.<sup>392</sup> He is somewhat like a signalman, regulating the action according to pre-fixed parameters. With no such pre-determined brief, the curator worked within a comparatively less structured atmosphere, as a facilitator and provoker. Also, the curator's role extended beyond the workshop in his anthropological connect with the site; because of which he was also anthropological analyst and sometimes complicit observer.

Boal's frames are overarching – broader and totalising. Mine were more directed towards fragments. As the curator, I followed the thematic of borderland as it evolved through workshop situations, where many voices added their own inflections and punctuations. As a participant observer and interlocutor, I tracked the transformation of the thematic from place to place and from person to person, as the different aspects of the experiential everyday were repeatedly addressed in the sites visited.

Perhaps the communicative possibilities of performance could have been further explored with a public staging in each site, but that seemed too ambitious to be accommodated within an already complex experimental process. This remains, therefore, with the possibility of proliferation as a model.

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This mode of curatorial research with the help of anthropology involved a set of mechanisms that might superficially resemble traditional curation; the workshop events could be thought of as a substitute for the exhibition, the maps for works of art or objects in display, theatre activities in the workshop for performances in the exhibition and the dialogical processes for audience interaction. The resemblances however dissipate on scrutiny.

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<sup>392</sup> Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton, *Applied Theatre: International Case Studies and Challenges for Practice* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), 70.

In traditional curation, the curator works with a specific axiom, towards the setting up of an exhibition – showcasing concrete end-products in demonstration of a fixed concept. Unlike which, in the sense of the curatorial that emerges in this project, the curator is a facilitator who brings together circumstances in order to generate knowledge fields in the selected area. In the specific case of this project, the workshops were the knowledge generating situations. The end in view here was the creation of knowledge densities that would open up analytic possibilities. Unlike in traditional curation, the conclusion was not predetermined, nor was the path fixed. Hence the curatorial idea was open to processual possibilities.

What happened in the workshops was always open to contingent and variable. In each micro-site, the nature and flow of the interactions were determined by the contiguity to the border and other local and immediate factors. Thus, the workings inside the workshop were dictated by a changing outside; accommodating factors more random and qualitatively different from those of a regular exhibition.

The selection of maps for the mapping process varied in each micro-site, guided by the geographic dynamics of the place. Similarly, the nature of the mapmaking exercise shifted between addition of marginalia, appending of personal maps and registering of dissent or counter-mapping. The dissent perspective of the exercise deferred or deterred a simple unification, and by implication, the formation of a single meaning or object-identity. Unlike objects in an exhibition, the maps in each site formed an inflexion in the process of borderland knowledge formation. Hence, they cannot be regarded as the end-products or replacements of traditional art work in an exhibition; nor the workshop, as a replacement of the exhibition.

The theatre activities and tableaux in the workshops were also not analogous to performances incorporated inside an exhibition, because they were reliant on improvisation and adjusted with outside input each time, since the sites were shifting and participants changing. Neither can the dialogical processes in the workshops be regarded as parallel to audience interaction in a curated show, because the life experiences, comments and critiques shared by the participants

became part of the *mise-en-scène* of the workshop. The roles of the participants, unlike the exhibition audience, were constantly shifting between viewer, active participant, collaborator and commentator. In fact, the participants' subjectivities played a major role in the drawing of the maps and writing of the marginalia.

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It is evident that at every stage, the initiation and orientation of the curatorial was informed by the registers of the anthropological research and the multi-sited and collaborative dimensions of the project design.

Neither the workshop interactions, the dialogical processes nor the production of maps were completely controlled by a single agency – authorship was distributed, between curator, artist-coordinator and the local participants. Also the curator-catalyst's role, unlike that of a traditional curator's took on a more nuanced, dynamic and participatory character. The curatorial experiment in this thesis was markedly different from traditional curation in this aspect of destabilisation of singular authorship and in the multiple role-playing of the curator.

Collaborations happened at different levels and in different configurations in the different sites; usually the collaborators changed with the sites as did their scopes and possibilities. In 'The Collaborative Turn', Maria Lind looks at some attempted formulations relating to collaborative practices within contemporary art; at how collaboration is structured and motivated. According to her, in their recent developments, collaborative practices show:

A pronounced affinity with activism and other current ways of getting together around shared concerns, as well as a marked interest in alternate ways of producing knowledge...Collaborations as an instrument challenge artistic identity and authorship and therefore stimulate anxiety.<sup>393</sup>

Though, Lind discusses collaboration largely in the context of artistic practices that deal with some form of cultural production, her descriptions of contemporary

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<sup>393</sup> Lind, "The Collaborative Turn," 183–184.

collaborative practices in many ways closely resemble the current curatorial. She sees collaboration as a transitional device that enabled historical shifts in perspective from modernism to postmodernism. She also calls collaboration an umbrella term and speaks of different degrees of collaboration that include interactive collaboration and participation. About collaborations between members of different disciplines and the possible directions leading from it, she says:

Many of today's collaborations in art contexts operate horizontally and consist of agents from different fields; very often these collaborations lie on the border between activist, artistic and curatorial activities and they tend to be self-organized.<sup>394</sup>

In the present curatorial context, the collaborative strategy opened many avenues bringing in questions of community, participation and activism. In fact, collaboration in its interactive and participatory dimension seemed inevitable to the nature of this multi-sited enquiry into the borderland.

The multi-sited feature of Project Borderland influenced the curatorial experiment, in that a unified summation of the gleanings of all the knowledge events was not possible. While, there was a general unity of method in the workshops, the responses they elicited from each micro-site were different – in effect different discourses were generated. Consequently, the inferences read as an assemblage of differences. Hence, it was difficult to conceive of one single platform for the selected sites, to produce a unified discourse of borderland; the sites could not to be defined by a single term or essence.

An evolved sense of relationality was displayed in the events of knowledge, where the communities were found and not culled from the available communities or commons; the workshops created the contingent communities. Lind also speaks of circumstances where collaborations are not based on

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 201. Lind mostly quotes Western, Central European or Pacific examples of collaborative practices, where some kind of institutional support is a possibility for even experimental forms of work and any self-organised effort, wherever present, is a deliberate decision. This institutional support is completely absent in India; any project of this nature has to be, by contingent, self-organised, as was this curatorial venture.

available communities, but produce their own communities.<sup>395</sup> This prospectively creates a space for manoeuvring and is a gesture, and sometimes, in effect lives with the possibility of agency creation.<sup>396</sup> This circumstantial activism comes very close to what the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe calls ‘agonistic pluralism’, which suggests ‘an ongoing exchange marked by conflict’. According to Mouffe, “Agonistic relationships involve struggle with the adversaries rather than with an enemy, as in antagonistic relationships”.<sup>397</sup> Thus, the sharing of a lateral relationship is suggested where a conflictual situation need not be an antagonistic situation, but may be a dialogical situation with sharing and difference as an ongoing process.

In the current project, the curatorial participant lives with the prospectively new role of a circumstantial activist, while precipitating a knowledge situation, in the company of trapped participants – particularly in Coochbehar and Dzongu, the sites waiting for stability and access to a pragmatic and worldly relation – as also (differently) in other sites.

### **Future Possibilities**

In conclusion, it might be right to touch upon some of the future possibilities of the project. These possibilities either relate to its thematic of Borderland or to the multi-sited interdisciplinary design of the curatorial.

The curatorial dealt with fragments, uncertainty, the contingent, the multi-vocal and the processual. The Project Borderland curatorial design could become an allegory of curation, where each fragment is a totality, but will not lead to an overarching unification. In an allegory, a fragment generally suggests a totality

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<sup>395</sup> In this context, Lind refers to Adrian Piper’s Funk Lessons as “Not focused on already existing community, but instead the work itself produced a community which did not exist before.” Lind, “The Collaborative Turn,” 194.

<sup>396</sup> “This urge to create a space for manoeuvring, or ‘collective autonomy’ to borrow a term from Brian Holmes, through a strategic separation is both a sign of protection and an act of protest” Ibid., 203–204.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 188.

whose plane of emergence is not fixed – creating a ‘profferal and deferral of meaning’.<sup>398</sup> In the case of this prospective allegory, the fragments would have different roles to play in a relational manner; the curatorial would be a relay of meanings and relations leading to other prospective research-based interactive situations.

So, if the regular mechanism of curation has to find a fit in the present curatorial, it has to address an in-between space; an inter-institutional, interdisciplinary, inter-community space. This suggests a space between an entrenched inside of the disciplinary curation and the implied ‘outside’ of the institutional space. This would mean the tabling of social spaces and open-ended relational possibilities for discourse, much like a research process. In this way, the curatorial of this project may act as guiding factor or radar for regular curation and the opening-up for a new critical space.

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Another significant possibility of this project that one would look forward to, would be the transformation of the predicaments of the three borderland sites; improvement in the status of the stateless people of Coochbehar, change in the government’s stand on the hydel dam projects in Sikkim – thereby saving the villages from inundation, and the Indian government’s planning-level inclusion of the affected communities in the transnational highway developmental project.

Having become involved in the circumstances of these border sites, I had brainstorming sessions afterwards with the local activist groups. Several ideas were thrown up about the future of the sites. It was gratifying to see that later, some of the suggestions I made in Coochbehar were taken up by the self-organised pressure groups in the enclaves. One such, a direct fall-out of the workshop, was the building of networked educational projects within the enclave communities, involving voluntary services by local youth – who aspired to become teachers, but were unable to access regular jobs. Poaturkuthi has started schools and the community is actively trying to build awareness to resist entry of criminals and

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<sup>398</sup> Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse,” in *Art After Modernism*, ed. Marcia Tucker (New York: MOCA, 1986).

trafficking. Another idea was to ensure the participation of the women of the enclaves in the citizenship movement and in the translocal groups built for addressing the local predicaments. This was to give them a suitably emancipated role in preparation for a balanced future society. A sign of this was the recent candidature of a woman from Poaturkuthi in the Panchayat elections. The setting up of a mobile library and constitution of cooperatives for essentials like medicines, and financial and legal matters were other suggestions that might prove helpful if implemented.

As far as the change in their statelessness is concerned, the see-saw uncertainty continues. After 67 years and 13 governments, the enclave communities are still learning to live with disillusionment.<sup>399</sup> However, in Sikkim, I am in touch with the ACT activists and learn that the dam movement has been gaining ground. Five out of the seven dam projects they were fighting against have been shut down.

Some of the central concerns related to the borderland (as a presence and a metaphor), addressed in this project are open themes that live with the possibility of future site-interactivity leading to a discursive platform. This discursive platform could form an alternative curatorial practice based on multi-sited research, which can be generative.

But, over and above, this research and writing has brought me to a self-realisation that can be expressed via Boal's suggestion to his 'spect-actors' (in a conflict situation of the workshops), "The idea is not to win but to prepare for 'real life' actions."<sup>400</sup> This realisation is also a possible fall-out of the project – the predicament of an anthropologist-curator as a circumstantial activist.

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<sup>399</sup> The people of the 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India voted, as citizens of India, for the first time in May 2016 in the state assembly election.

<sup>400</sup> Augusto Boal, *Games For Actors and Non- Actors* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 144.

## ILLUSTRATIONS



1.1 Coochbehar Town: An Old Princely Structure– Now a Government Building.  
Nov. 2009



1.2 Coochbehar Town: Old Administrative Building with Gandhi Statue.  
Nov. 2009



1.3 Coochbehar Town: The New Shopping Location.  
Nov. 2009



1.4 Coochbehar Town. Vaishnava Temple: The Wish Wheel in the *Janmashtami* Rasalila, Oct. 2010.



1.5 Suniti Bhavan: Site of Coochbehar Workshop, Jan. 2011.



1.6 Coordinators in Coochbehar: Sanchayan and I Surveying the Workshop Venue.  
Jan. 2011  
(Photograph by Arindam Sircar)





**1.9** Coochbehar: Mashaldanga Enclave Residents Standing at the Border of their Area, Feb. 2011.



**1.10** Coochbehar: Children of Poaturkuthi Playing in the Fields, 2011.



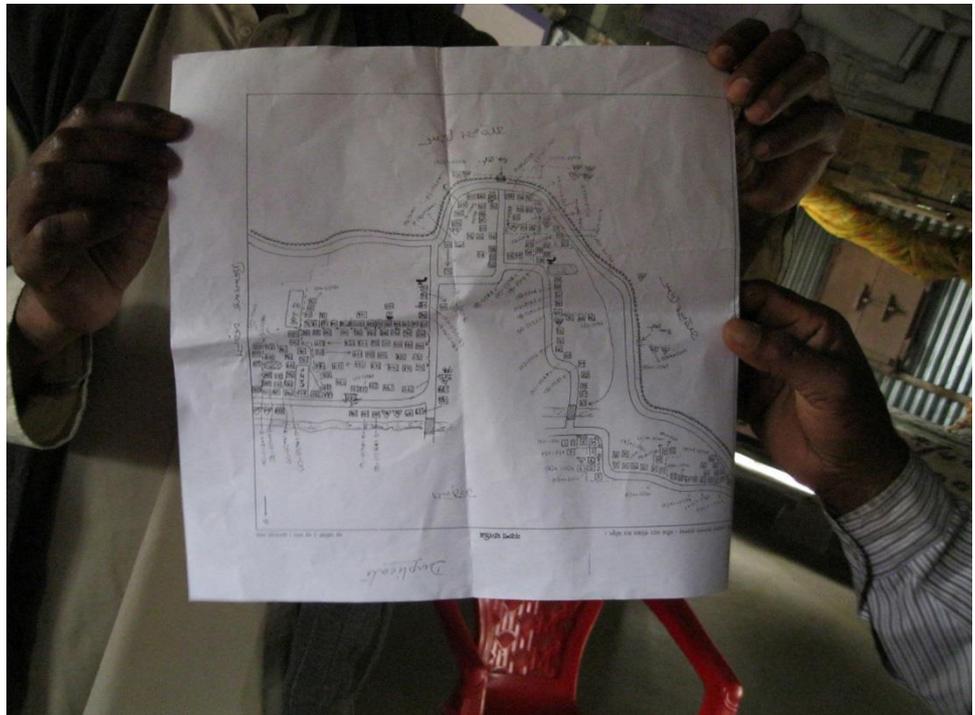
1.11 Coochbehar, on the Outer Edge of Poaturkuthi:  
A Quack Doctor's Open-Air Chamber, 2011.



1.12 Coochbehar: Two Generations of Poaturkuthi Enclave, 2011.



1.15 Coochbehar, Karala Chhit: Indian Census Official Sitting in an Enclave House  
Feb. 2011.



1.16 Coochbehar: Karala Enclave Residents Holding up Their Census Map of Feb. 2011.



1.17 Coochbehar: Torch Procession in Demand of Ratification of Enclave Treaty, 5<sup>th</sup> Sep. 2011.



1.18 People of Indian Enclaves in Bangladesh Submitting Demand for Protection to D.M.'s Office, Kurigram, Bangladesh, 2011.



1.19 Diptiman Sengupta, Secretary of BBEECC, 2011.

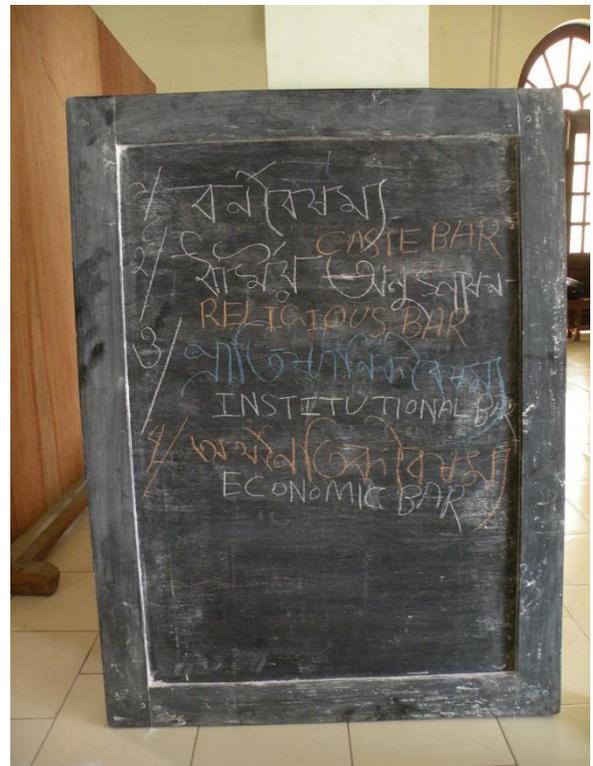


1.20 Enclave Women in the Forefront of the Freedom Rally, Sept. 2011.

(The banner in Bengali reads- *Onek hoeche mithyachar, ebar chai manabadhikar*,  
Meaning – Enough of false promises, now we want our human rights.)  
(Photos 1.17, 1.18 and 1.20 courtesy BBEECC)



1.21 Coochbehar Workshop: Discussion Session, Jan. 2011.



1.22 Coochbehar Workshop: Blackboard Work, Jan. 2011.



1.25 Coochbehar Workshop: Religious Bar Tableau, Jan. 2011.



1.26 Coochbehar Workshop: Cultural Bar Tableau, Jan. 2011.  
(Photos 1.25 – 1.26 by Arindam Sircar)



1.29 Coochbehar Workshop: Border Bar Tableau, Jan. 2011.



1.30 Coochbehar Workshop: ID Bar Tableau, Jan. 2011.  
(Photos 1.29 – 1.30 by Arindam Sircar)



1.31 – 1.32 Coochbehar Workshop: Language Bar Tableau, Jan. 2011.  
(Photos 1.31– 1.32 by Arindam Sircar)



1.33 – 1.34 Coochbehar Workshop: Generation Bar Tableau, Jan. 2011.  
(Photos 1.33 – 1.34 by Arindam Sircar)



1.35 Coochbehar Workshop: Political Bar Tableau, Jan. 2011.  
(Photo 1.35 by Arindam Sircar)



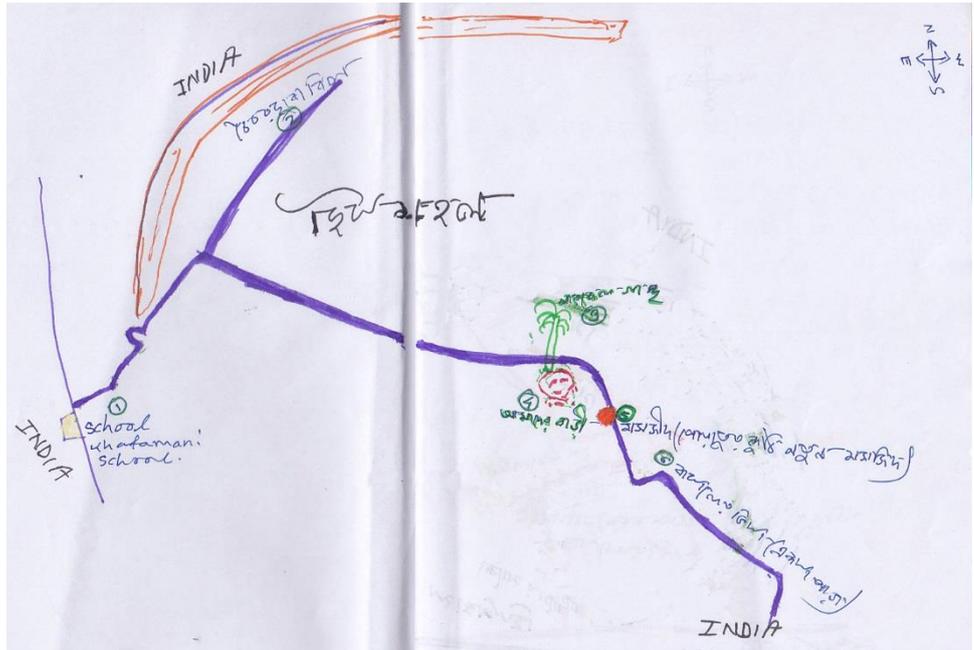
1.36 Coochbehar Workshop: Gestures and Movements Games, March 2011.



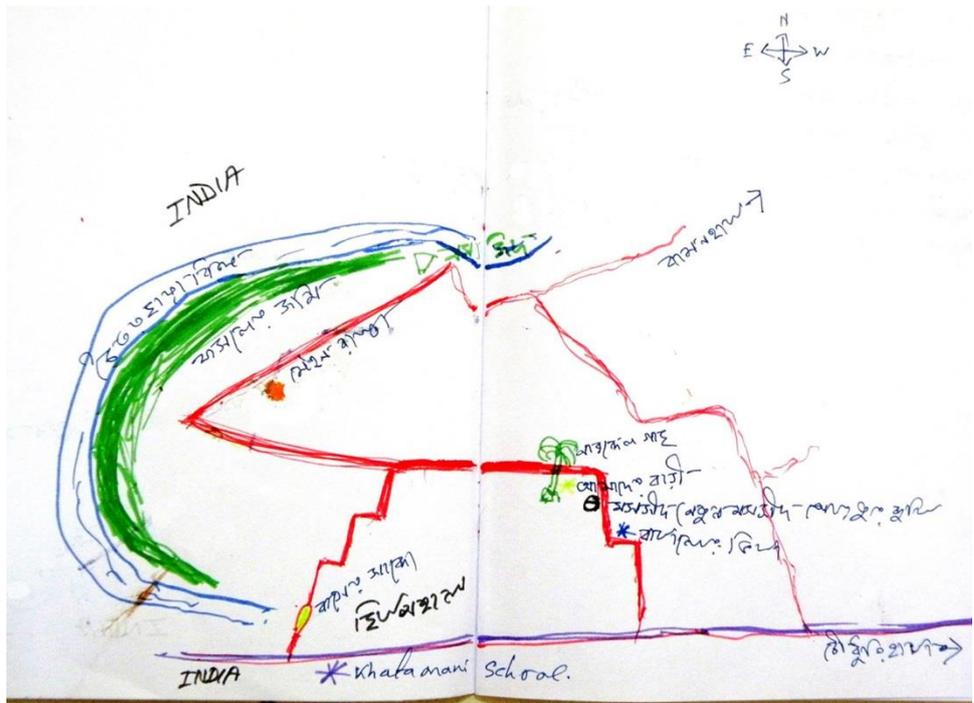
1.37 – 1.38 Coochbehar Workshop: Gestures and Movements Games, March 2011.



1.39 – 1.40 Coochbehar Workshop: Gestures and Movements Games, March 2011.



1.41 Coochbehar Workshop: Burman's Notebook – Route to Poaturkuthi Enclave. March 2011



1.42 Coochbehar Workshop: Burman's Alternate Routes to Poaturkuthi, March 2011.





1.47 Coochbehar Workshop: Town Participant Ayesha Sultana's Notebook. March 2011



1.48 Coochbehar Workshop: Town Participant Subho's Notebook – Personal Map to Home, March.2011.



1.51 Coochbehar Workshop: Activity – Mapmaking, March 2011.



1.52 Coochbehar Workshop: Activity – Mapmaking, March 2011.



1.53 Coochbehar Workshop: Putting in One's Own Bit on the Enlarged Map, March 2011.  
(Photo 1.53 by Arindam Sircar)



1.54 Coochbehar Workshop: The Borderland Map, March 2011.



1.57 Mise-en-scène of the Coochbehar Workshop, March 2011.  
(Photo 1.57 by Arindam Sircar)



1.58 Coochbehar Workshop: Hurdles Games – Following the Leader, March 2011.

# জট কাটাতে মরিয়া মমতা, আপ্লুত ছিটমহলের মানুষ

এই সময়, কোচবিহার: আইন অনুযায়ী ভিনদেশি হলেও মুখ্যমন্ত্রীর প্রশাসনিক সভামঞ্চে দেখা গেল বাংলাদেশি ছিটমহলের বাসিন্দাদের প্রতিনিধিদেরকে। খোদ মমতা বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের কাছ থেকে স্বীকৃতিও পেলেন তাঁরা। ছিটমহল বিনিময়ের দাবিতে আন্দোলনরতদের মধ্যে বাছাই করা ১৪ জনকে নিজে হাতে শাল পরিবেশিত সংবর্ধনা জানালেন মুখ্যমন্ত্রী মমতা বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়। অন্য দিকে, ছিটমহলবাসীদের পক্ষ থেকেও ভারত ও বাংলাদেশের মধ্যে ছিটমহল সংখ্যার সমান ১৬২টি গোলাপ মুখ্যমন্ত্রীর হাতে তুলে দেওয়া হল। সন্দেশ দেওয়া হল অভ্যর্থনাপত্রও।

সাধারণ ভাবে বাংলাদেশের অন্যান্য নাগরিকের মতোই ভারতের মাটিতে এসে কখনও কখনও বিদেশি আইনের ১৪ নম্বর ধারায় এত দিন গ্রেপ্তার হয়ে যেতেন ছিটমহলের বাসিন্দারা। ফলে এমন একটা সুযোগ বৃহস্পতিবার অভিজুত করেছে তাঁদের।

মঞ্চে এসে কেঁদেই ফেললেন মনসুর আলি। বৃদ্ধ ভাবতে পারেননি জীবদ্দশায় পরিচয়হীনতার অভিষাপ ঘুচতে দেখবেন। মুখ্যমন্ত্রীর সভামঞ্চে উঠে বৃহতে পেরেছিলেন সেই দিন এল বলে। মমতা বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের হাত থেকে চাদর নেওয়ার সময় কোচবিহার লাগোয়া বাংলাদেশি ছিটমহল পোয়াতুর কুটির বাসিন্দা ৭৪ বছরের মনসুর আলির আবেগ বাঁধ মানল না। জড়ানো গলায় বললেন, 'যেহু রাখব চাদরটা। এটা শুধু উপহার নয়, মুখ্যমন্ত্রী যে পাশে আছেন, তার চিহ্ন।' সংবর্ধনা নেওয়ার সময় চোখেমুখে যোর বিস্ময় লেগেছিল শিবপ্রসাদ মুস্তাফি ছিটমহলের বাসিন্দা সুমনা দাস, বাক্রিগাছের বাসিন্দা আলোমা বিবিরও।

সারা বছর যে মানুষগুলি বিএসএফের কড়া পাহারায় থাকেন, বাংলাদেশি ছিটমহলের সেই বাসিন্দারা কী করে পৌঁছলেন মুখ্যমন্ত্রী মঞ্চে?

সূত্রের খবর, আগাগোড়াই মুখ্যমন্ত্রী চাইছিলেন ছিটমহলের বাসিন্দাদের কাছে যেতে। ছিটমহল বিনিময় নিয়ে চূড়ান্ত সিদ্ধান্ত নেওয়ার আগে সেখানকার বাসিন্দাদের মুখেই তাঁদের দুর্ভোগের কথা শুনতে চেয়েছিলেন। সেই কারণেই কোচবিহারের দিনহাটায় ছিটমহল বেষ্টিত নয়রহাটে সরকারি অনুষ্ঠানের আয়োজন করা হয়। ছিটমহলের প্রতিনিধিদের দেখা করা নিয়ে আইনি জটিলতা থাকলেও, তা মিটে গিয়েছে নিমেষেই। কিন্তু আইন ভাঙা হল যে? কোনও প্রতিক্রিয়া দিতে চাননি জেলাশাসক পি উলগনাথন।

চেনা ছন্দ থেকে একেবারেই অন্য রকম ছিল



ছিটমহলের বাসিন্দাদের সঙ্গে মুখ্যমন্ত্রী মমতা বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়। (নীচে) সংগঠনের পতাকা হাতে স্থানীয়রা — প্রবীর কুণ্ড

মুখ্যমন্ত্রীর এ দিনের ভঙ্গি। বোঝাই গেল, সরকারি অনুষ্ঠানের হাজারো ব্যস্ততা সত্ত্বেও আজকের এই দিনটা আলাদা করে রাখা ছিল ছিটমহলের বাসিন্দাদের জন্য। মাইক হাতে মমতা বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়কে বলতেও শোনা গেল, 'কিছু ডিসট্রিবিউশন, কিছু শিলান্যাস তো হয়ই। কিন্তু আজ আমি বিশেষ করে ছিটমহলবাসীর দুর্দশার কথা বলতে চাই। স্বাধীনতার পর থেকে তাঁদের বুকের

যন্ত্রণা, তাঁদের বঞ্চনা, তাদের লাঞ্ছনার কথা শুনতে চাই। ওপার বাংলা ও এপার বাংলার মধ্যে মধুর সম্পর্ক ছিল, আছে, থাকবে। যারা বাংলাদেশের অধিবাসী তাঁরা বাংলাদেশে ফিরে যেতে চান। যারা ভারতের অধিবাসী, তাঁরা ভারতে থাকতে চান।

▶ এর পর নয়ের (এই রাজ্য) পাতায়

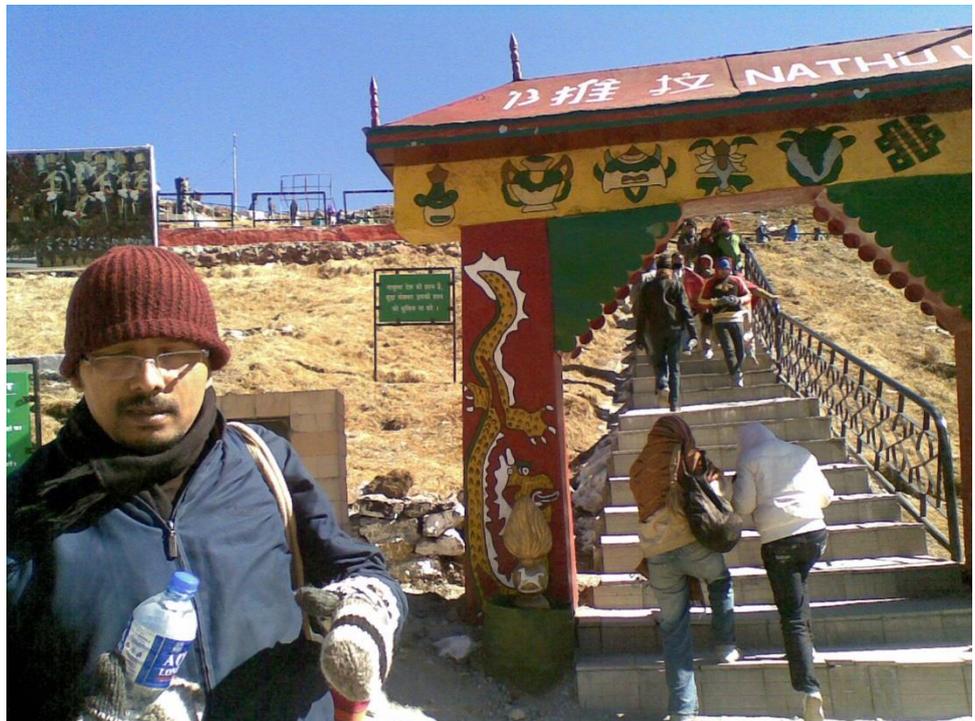
▶ ছিটমহল প্রাণে মোদীর দূত অমিতই পৃঃ ১০

1.61 Cchitmahal News: Progress on the Enclave Situation, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2014.

[Bengali Daily- Ai Shomoy: Heading – 'Jaut Katate Moriya Mamata; Apluto Chhitmahaler Manush' (Mamata anxious to remove the knots; the people of Chhitmahal – overwhelmed). Top image: Mansoor Bhai is seen in the centre, greeting Mamata Banerjee. Lower image: Residents of the enclaves carrying flags of the movement.]



2.1 Sikkim: Nathula Pass, Dec. 2010.



2.2 Nathula Pass: At the Gate to the Climb, Dec. 2010.  
(Photos 2.1 – 2.2 by Mandira Chatterjee)

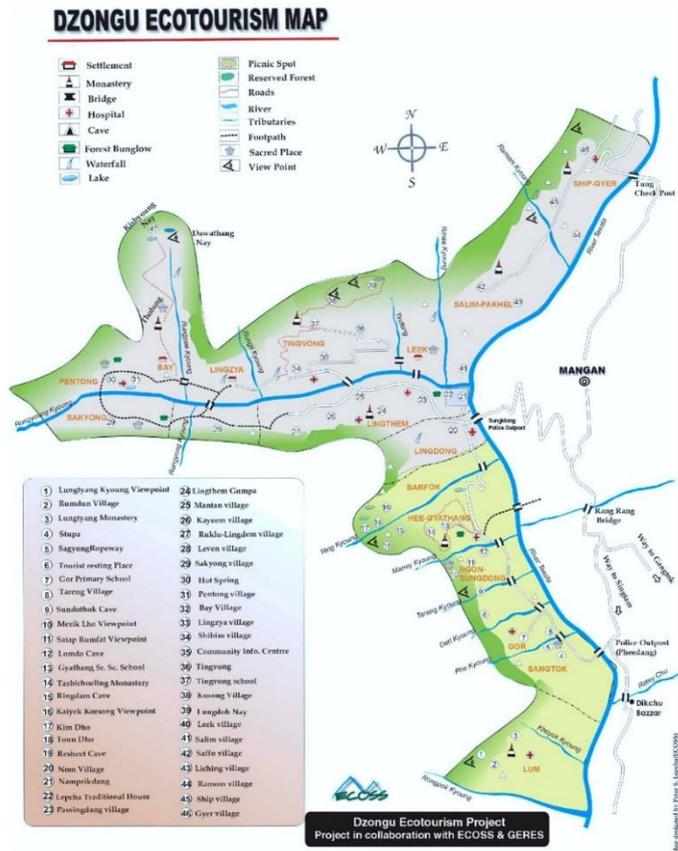


2.3 Coronation Bridge, Dec. 2010.

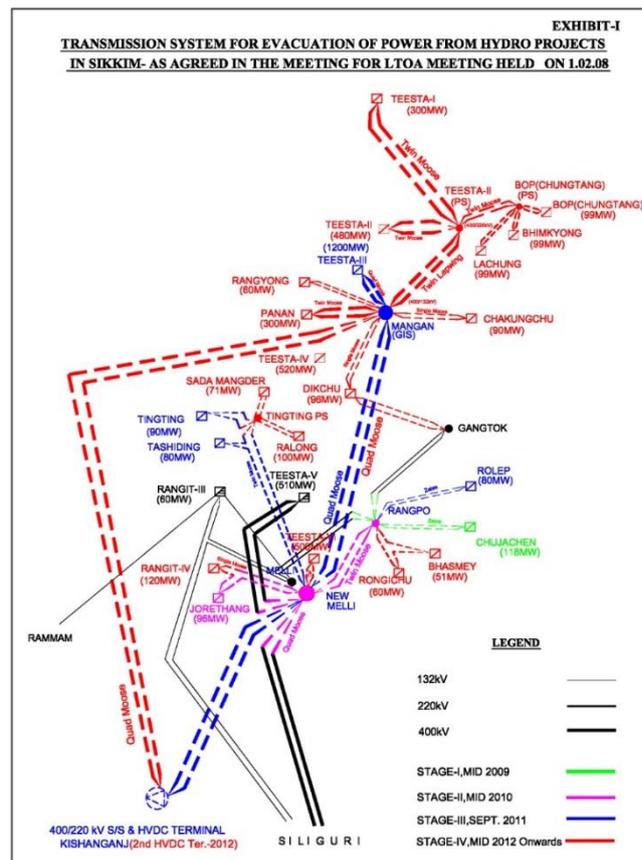


2.4 Sikkim: The Flowing Teesta near Dzongu, Sept. 2012.



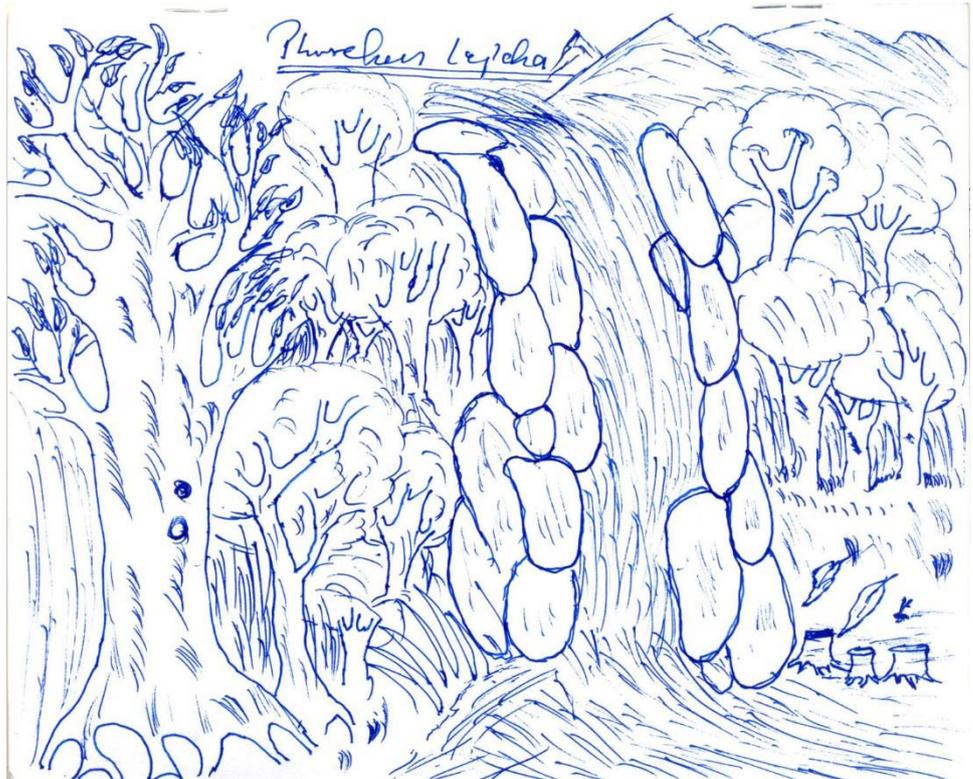


2.9 Dzongu Workshop: Eco-tourism Map of Dzongu, 2012.

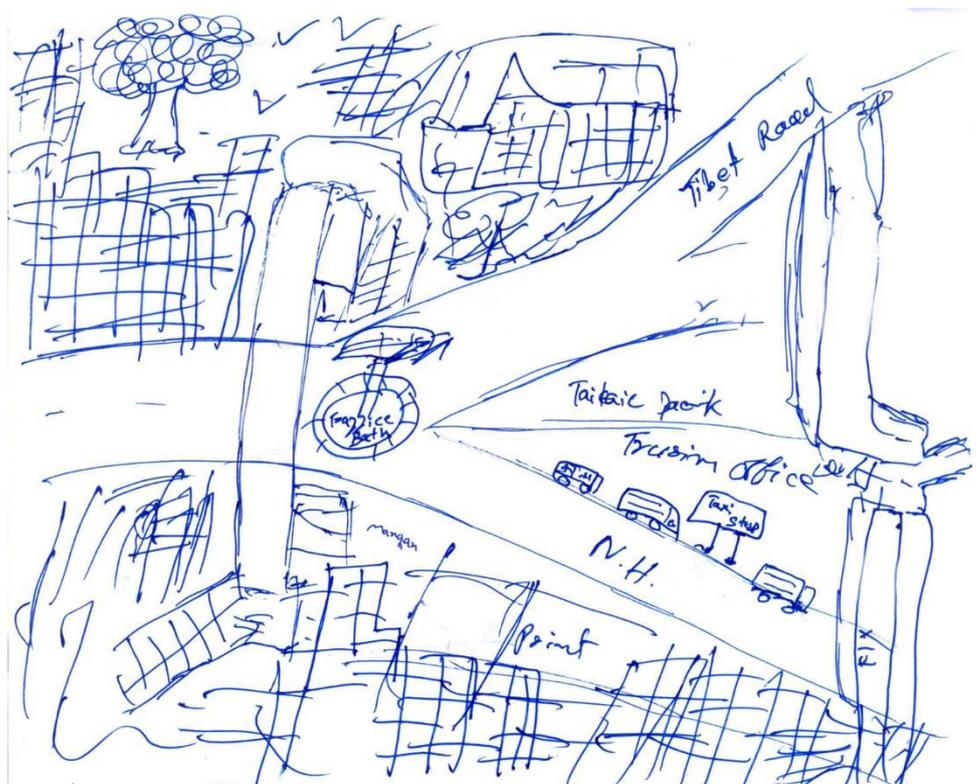


2.10 Dzongu Workshop: Hydro Projects Map, 2012.

(Photos source: Internet)

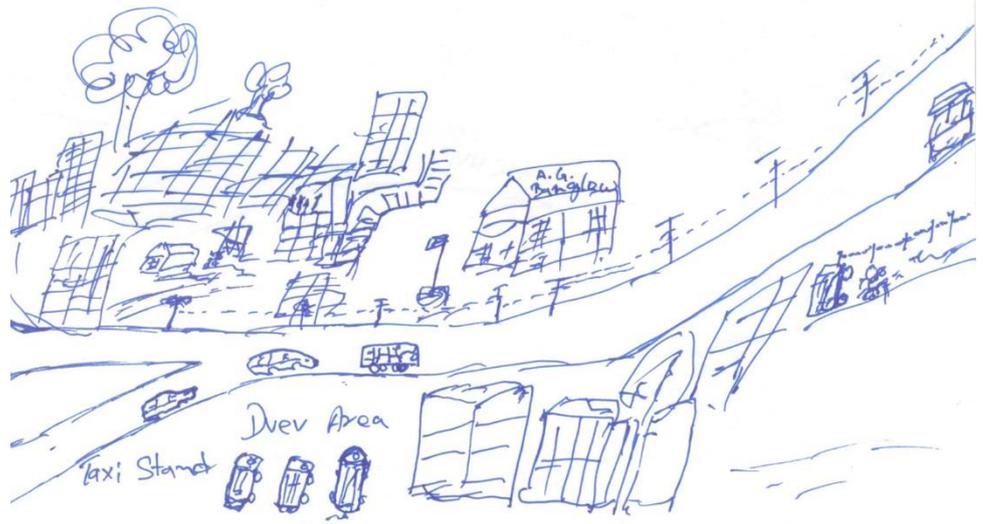


2.15 Dzongu Workshop Drawing: Visualising Mayalyang, Sept. 2012.

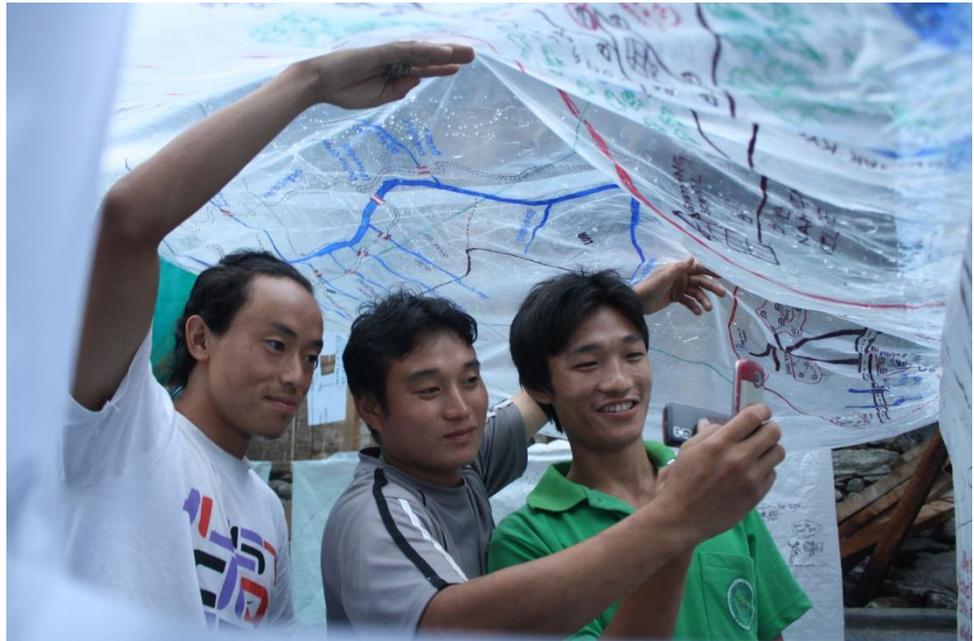


2.16 Dzongu Workshop Drawing: Sites of Anxiety – Encroaching Urbanisation. Sept. 2012

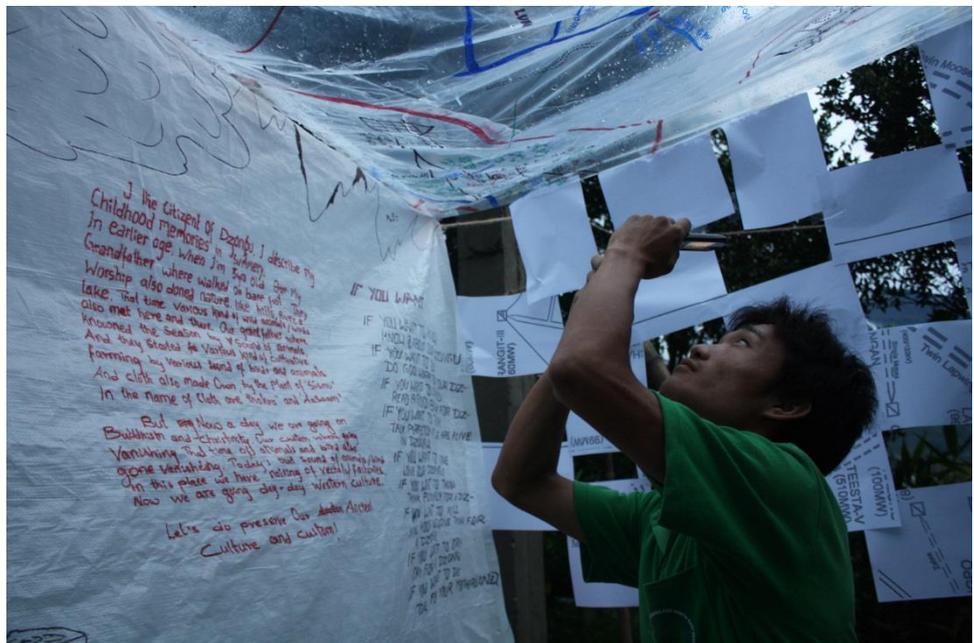
Dorice Tsuning Lepcha



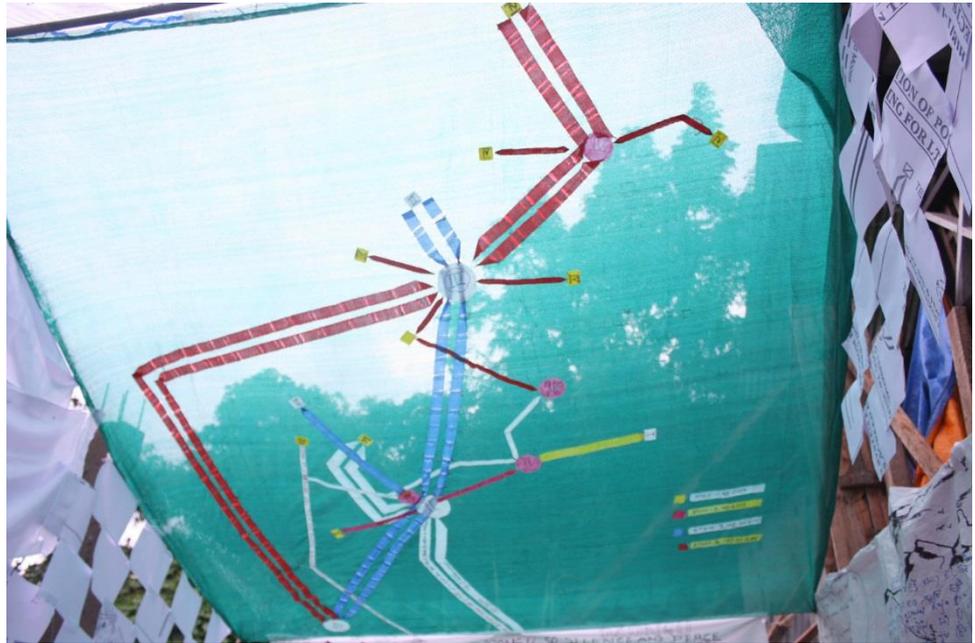
2.17 – 2.18 Dzongu Workshop Drawing: Sites of Anxiety – Encroaching Urbanisation. Sept. 2012



2.19 Dzongu Workshop: Inside the Tent, View-1, Sept. 2012.



2.20 Dzongu Workshop: Inside the Tent, View-2, Sept. 2012.



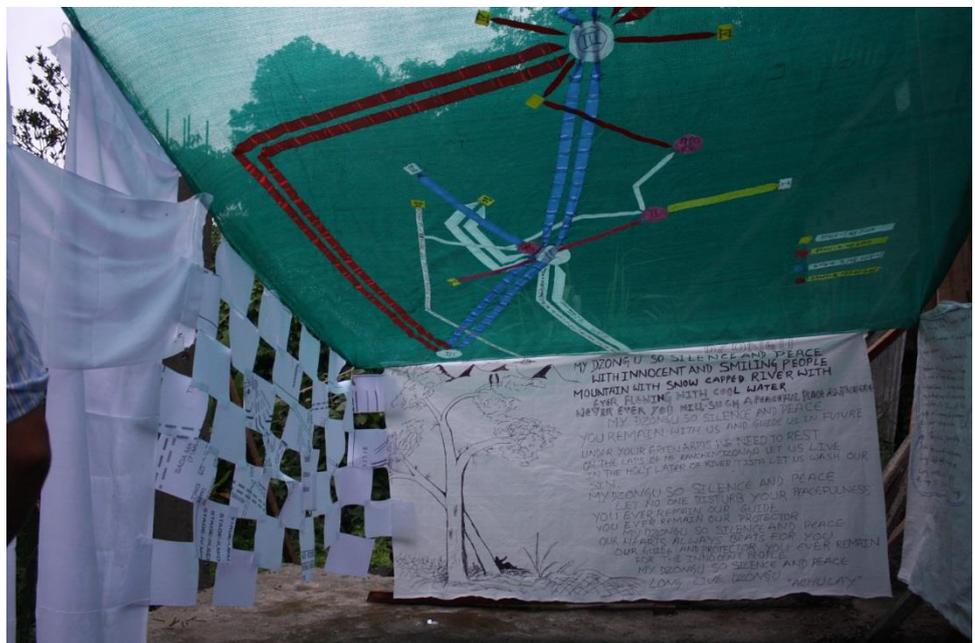
2.21 The Dzongu Sky through the Hydro Project Map, Sept. 2012.



2.22 Dzongu Workshop: View from the Verandah, Sept. 2012.



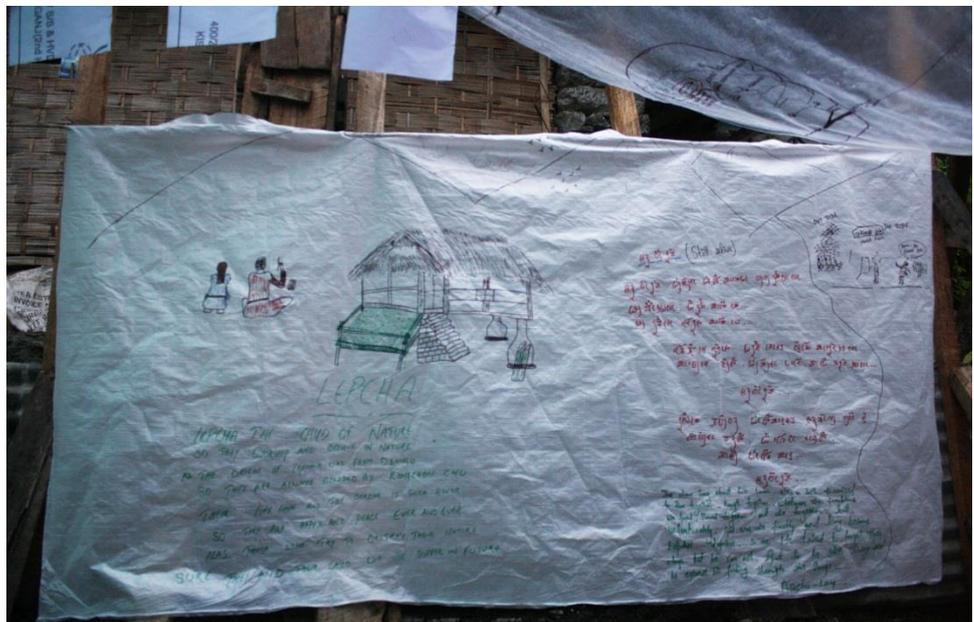
2.23 Dzongu Workshop Maps of Dissent, View-1, Sept. 2012.



2.24 Dzongu Workshop Maps of Dissent, View-2, Sept. 2012.



2.25 Dzongu Workshop: Tenzing Lepcha Inspecting the Mise-en-scène, Sept. 2012.



2.26 Dzongu Workshop: Mutanchi Achulay in the Poetic Register, Sept. 2012.

(Photo 2.26 by Sisir Thapa)





2.29 – 2.30 Dzongu Workshop: Interpretation Game, Tableau, Sept. 2012.



2.31 – 2.32 Dzongu Workshop: Interpretation Game, Tableau-1, Sept. 2012.



2.33 Dzongu Workshop: Interpretation Game, Tableau-1, Sept. 2012.



2.34 Dzongu Workshop: Interpretation Game, Tableau-2, Sept. 2012.



2.35 – 2.36 Dzongu Workshop: Interpretation Game, Tableau-2, Sept. 2012.



2.37 – 2.38 Dzongu Workshop: Follow the Leader Game – Mutanchi Achulay, Sept. 2012.



2.39 – 2.40 Dzongu Workshop: Follow the Leader Game – Mutanchi Achulay, Sept. 2012.



2.41 – 2.42 Dzongu Workshop Mise-en-scène in the Evening, Sept. 2012.

(Photos 2.41 – 2.42 by Sisir Thapa)



2.43 Dzongu Mise-en-scène: Breaking into Dance, Sept. 2012.



2.44 Dzongu Mise-en-scène: Dancing to a Lepcha Song, Sept. 2012.

(Photos 2.43 - 2.44 by Sisir Thapa)



2.45 Dzongu Workshop Mise-en-scène: A Performance, Sept. 2012.



2.46 Dzongu Workshop Mise-en-scène: Song Performance, Sept. 2012.

(Photos 2.45 and 2.46 by Sisir Thapa)



2.47 Dzongu Workshop Mise-en-scène: Song Performance, Sept. 2012.  
(Photo 2.47 by Sisir Thapa)



2.48 Sikkim- Bengal Border: Sanskrit School, March 2011.



**2.49** Sanskrit School: The Sixty Year Old Wooden Building, March 2012.



**2.50** Sanskrit School: The Ashokan Lion Emblem on the Old Barrack, March 2011.



2.51 Sanskrit School: The Ceiling, March 2011.



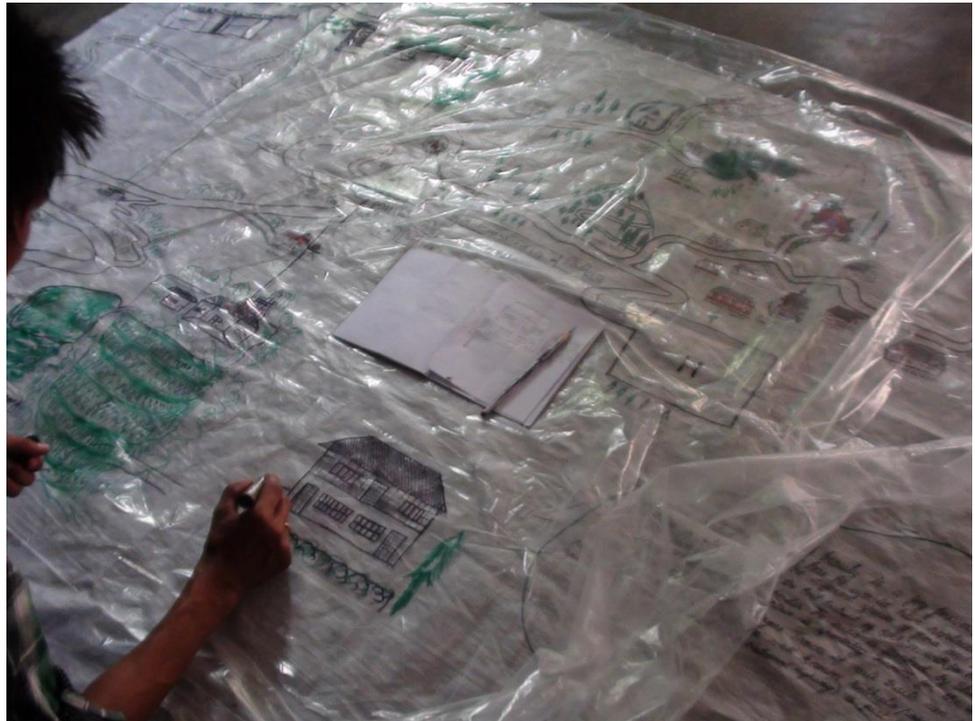
2.52 Sanskrit School: Classrooms in the Barrack, March 2011.



2.53 Sikkim: Jenny Bentley and Ongmit in Kalimpong Lepcha Festival, Dec. 2013.



2.54 Sikkim: Dam Lockgate on the Way to Rhenock, May 2012.



2.57 Rhenock Workshop: Mapmaking – Personal Routes, May2012.



2.58 Rhenock Workshop: Mapmaking – Arranging the Fragments, May2012.



2.59 – 2.60 Rhenock Workshop: Mapmaking, May2012.

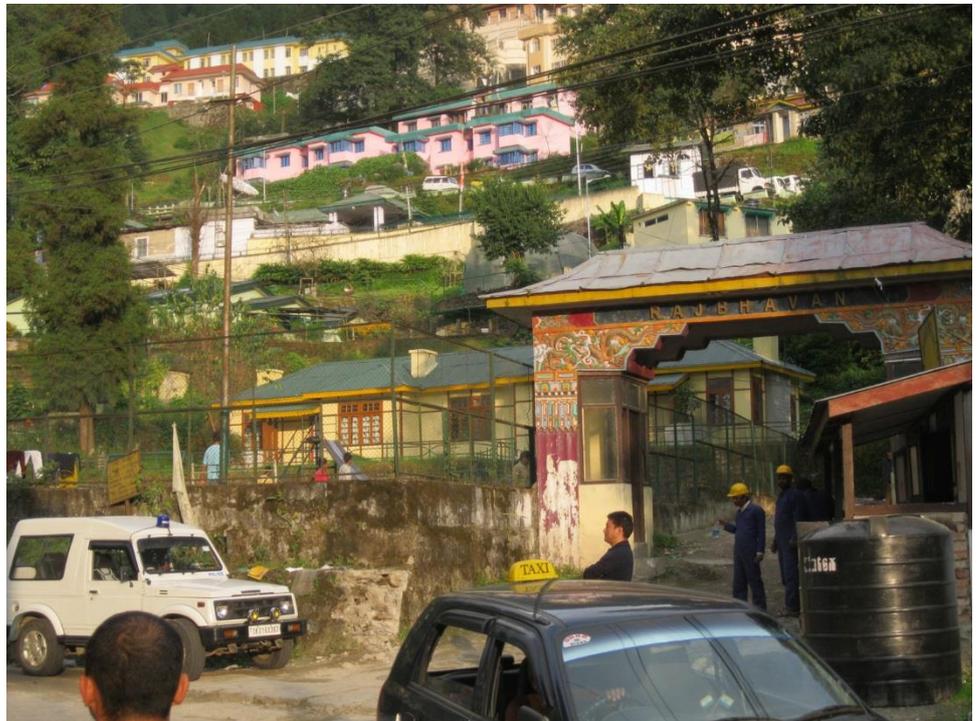




2.64 – 2.65 Rhenock Workshop: The Process of Building up the Scene, May 2012.



2.68 – 2.69 Gangtok after the Earthquake in September 2011.  
Oct. 2011



2.70 – 2.71 Gangtok Street Scene, Dec. 2010.

NYAANO - This word in pure Nepali means 'warm'. When I use it amongst my friends who do speak Nepali, they think of me as someone who has great control or mastered the pure Nepali language. They of course would use the word 'taato' for warm, but for me this word 'nyaano' is closest to 'warm' as 'taato' for me then becomes hot. I probably picked this up from my grandparents who have had longstanding relationships with people from the country Nepal.

BARTAN - This is a Hindi word for a utensil. I probably got this word from my time in New Delhi where I interacted with the Delhites a lot. Apart from picking up a lot of Delhi lingo and a few Hindi phrases I have now replaced my local

word 'Bhada' for 'Bartan' and the ~~local~~ people around me here are always amused and say 'Bartan?'

Do not give me wings,  
make me soar,  
and shoot me down when I want to fly  
out on my own.



2.75 – 2.76 Gangtok Workshop: Tableau, May 2012.



2.77 – 2.78 Gangtok Workshop: Tableau, May 2012.



2.79 Gangtok Workshop: Mapmaking, May 2012.



2.80 Gangtok Workshop: Mapping the Desires, May 2012.



2.81 Gangtok Workshop: Setting up the Mise-en-scène, May 2012.



2.82 Gangtok Workshop: Mise-en-scène, May 2012.





3.1 Assam: Speaking at the Periferry Two Rivers Symposium, Guwahati, Feb. 2009.



3.2 Assam, District Karimgunj: Latu, 150 Metres to the Bangladesh Border, Nov. 2011.



3.6 Assam, Latu: A boy at the Border, with the Union Jack, Nov. 2011.



3.7 A School in Latu, Nov. 2011.



3.8 Latu: School Children Waiting for the Mid-day Meal, Nov. 2011.



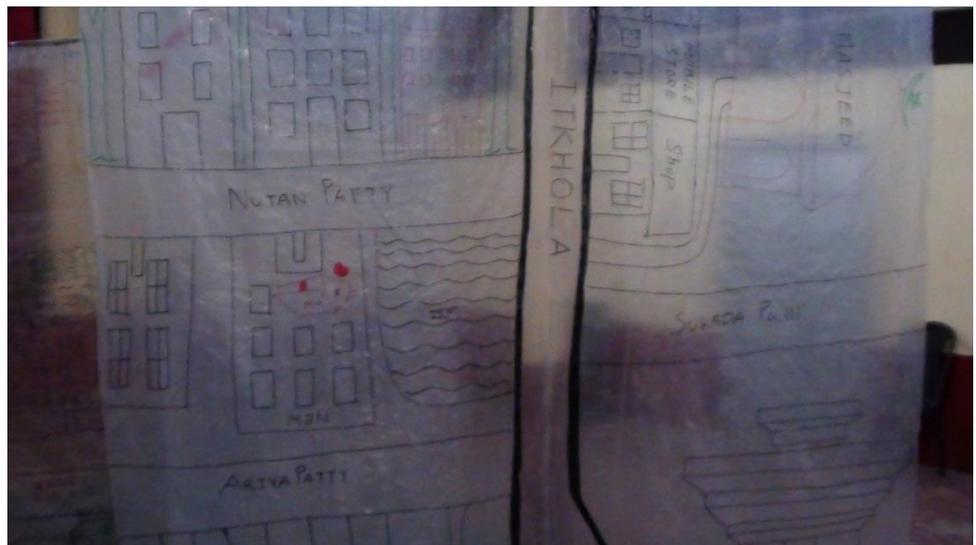
3.11 – 3.12 Silchar Workshop: Discussion and Writing Session, Nov. 2011.



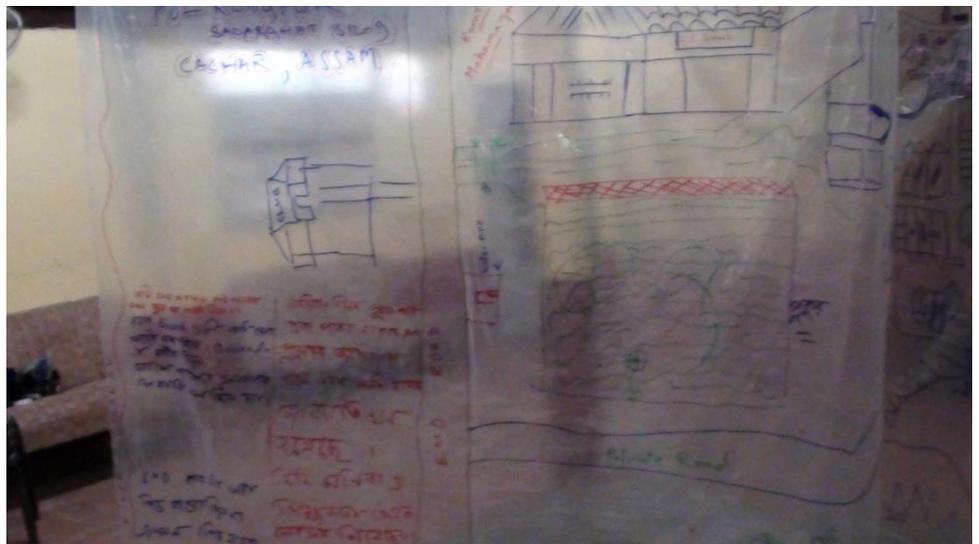
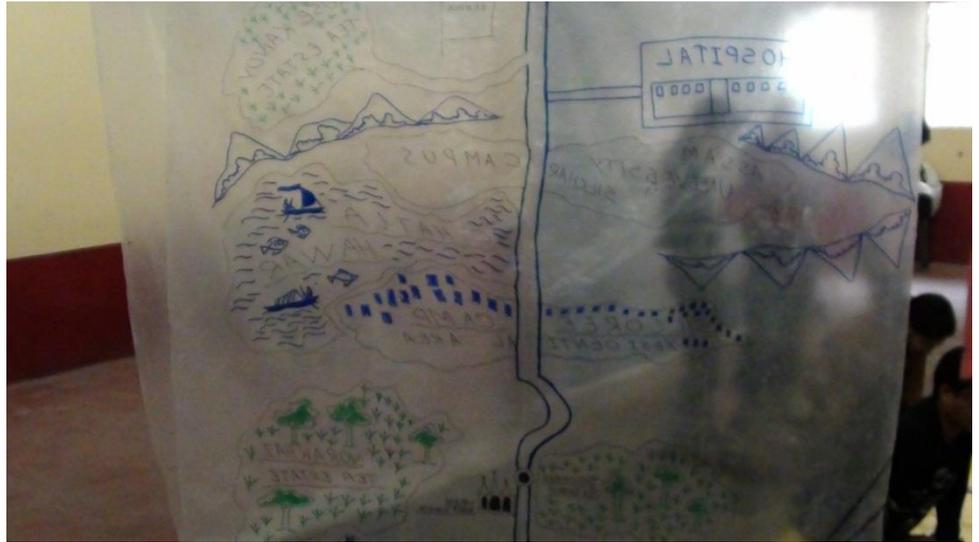
3.13 Silchar Workshop: Mapmaking, Nov. 2011.



3.14 Silchar Workshop: Mapmaking, Nov. 2011.



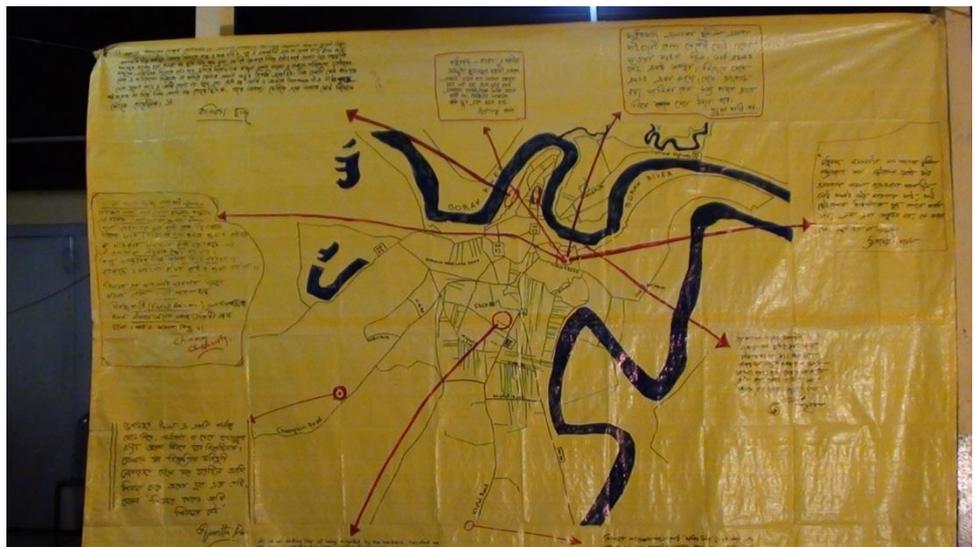
3.15 Silchar Workshop: Personal Map, Nov. 2011.



3.16 – 3.17 Silchar Workshop: Personal Map, Nov. 2011.



3.18 Silchar Workshop: Identifying the Areas of Alienation on the Map of Srihatta, Nov. 2011.



3.21 Silchar Workshop: The Infra-maps on the Margins, Nov. 2011.



3.25 Silchar Workshop: The Group, Nov.2011.



3.26 – 3.28 Karimgunj Workshop: Tableau, Feb. 2013.



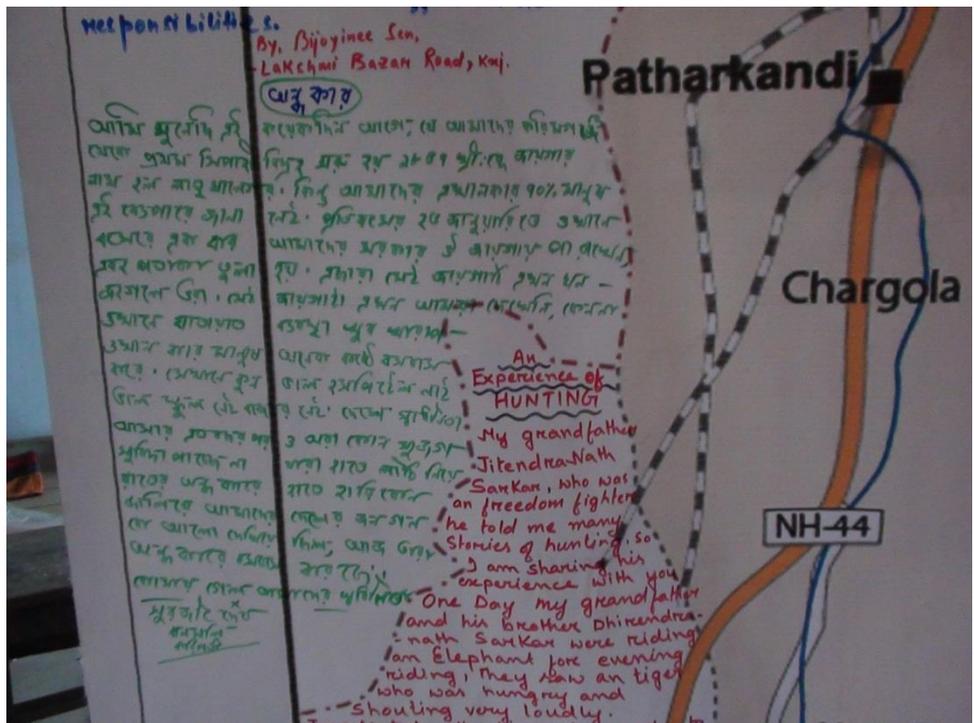
**3.29** Karimgunj Workshop: Working on the Individual Maps, Feb. 2013.



**3.30** Karimgunj Workshop: Working on the Individual Maps Feb. 2013.



3.31 Karimgunj Workshop: Writing-out the Wall Text, Feb. 2013.



3.32 Karimgunj Workshop: Map Detail – Marginalia, Feb.2013.





3.35 Karimgunj Workshop Mise-en-scène, Feb. 2013.



3.36 – 3.37 Karimgunj Workshop Mise-en-scène: Film Projection, Feb. 2013.



3.38 Lakhipur Workshop: Keri Rongmei Weaving the Map of Cachar, March 2012.



3.39 Lakhipur Workshop: Pre-Independence Map of Undivided Cachar, March 2012.



**3.41** Laxhipur Workshop: Discussion and Writing Session, March 2012.



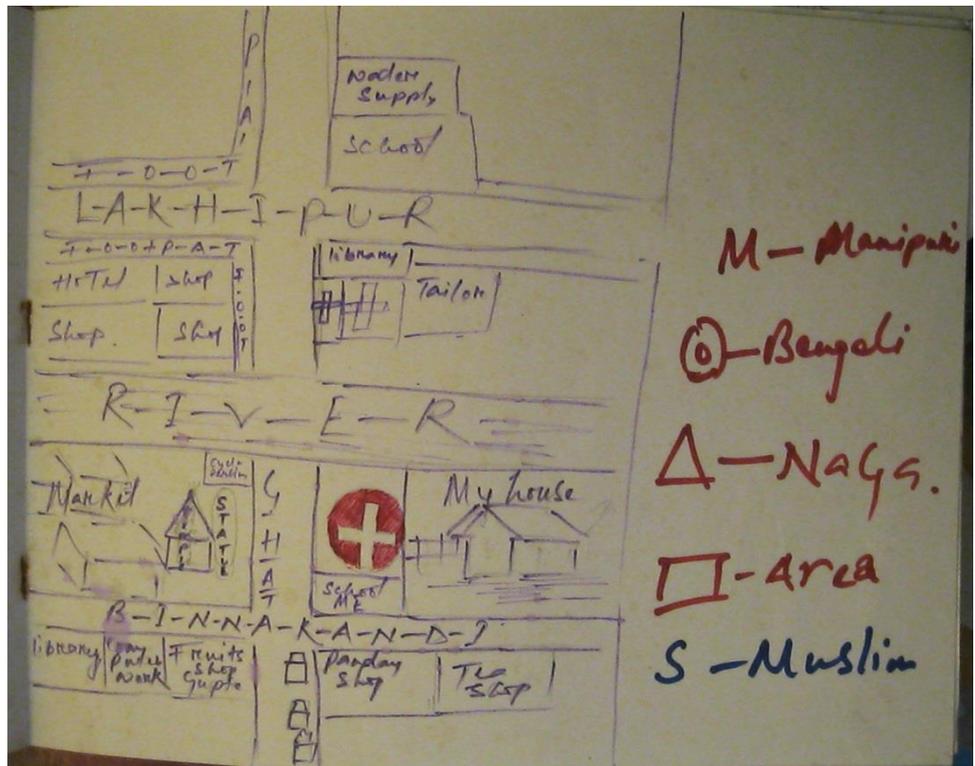
**3.42** Laxhipur Workshop: Working on the Personal Maps, March 2012.



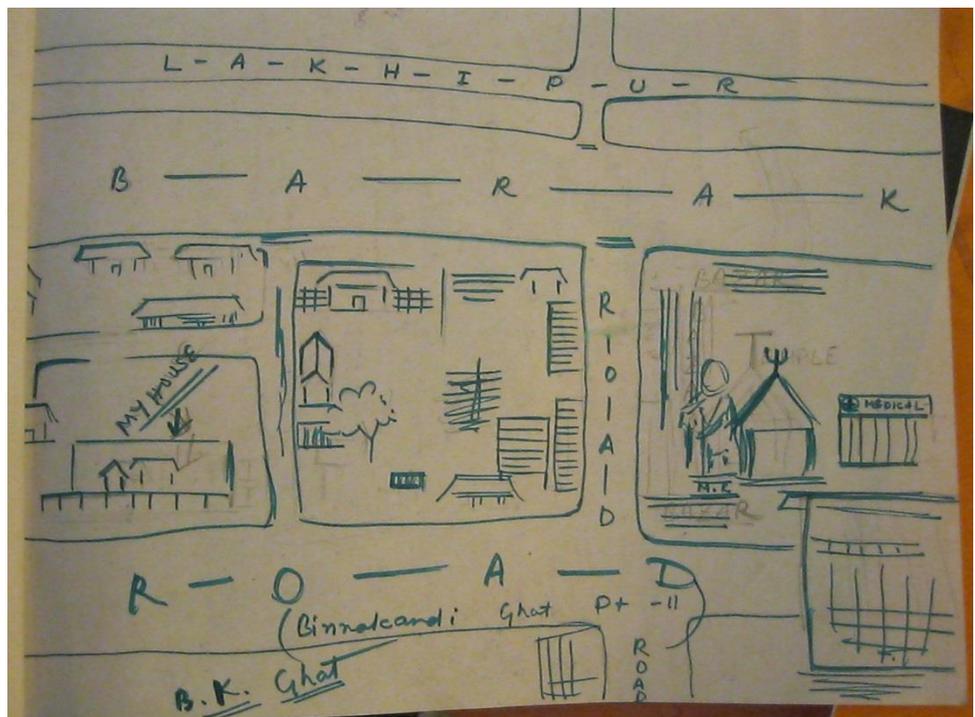
3.45 Lakhipur Workshop: Constructing the Comment Boxes, March 2012.



3.46 Lakhipur Workshop: Comment Boxes, March 2012.



3.47 Lakhipur Workshop: Riyasena Devi's Map of Her Home, the Market and the Ethnic Ambience, March 2012.



3.48 Lakhipur Workshop: Karouhauba Singh's Individual Map, March 2012.



3.51 – 3.52 Lakhipur Workshop Mise-en-scène, March 2012.

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## **ANNEXURE**

## **A DICTIONARY OF FOUR ENTRIES: KEYWORD- BORDERS**

(A Film in Partial Fulfilment of the PhD.)

### **Synopsis**

This video is a creative component conceived as an independent but ancillary part of the thesis, Project Borderland: A Multi-Sited Anthropological and Curatorial Probing in Selected Parts of India. It constitutes an initial chapter in my long-term venture of compiling a dictionary of borderland with words and phrases encountered in their performances in the sites studied. The video expounds on a few salient aspects that I have come across during the research and workshop experiences in the north-eastern borderlands, dealt specifically in the context of the site of Sikkim.

It unfolds in four sections, each suggesting a self-sufficient unit without claim to totality of meaning. The sections comprise of juxtaposition of images and words culled from the Sikkim experience, to examine how the words perform on an audio-visual register. The sequence of images and narration reference the past and present of the site, though the directions are suggested but not described, much like Jacques Ranciere's sentence-images.<sup>i</sup>

The recording is done in documentary mode. The film attempts to bring out the overlap that exists between temporalities in Sikkim's micro-sites, through an assemblage of real action, interviews and reconstructed staging of festival performances. The video dictionary unfolds via the juxtaposition of multiple narratives on different registers. Each of its four parts takes off from an alphabet as in a dictionary; the four entries being under A, B, F and S placed in alphabetical order. They are organised more like keywords, which stand out like inflections in a landscape; in combination, they bring out the connectives and the alienations in the site. In short, the key words act as metaphors for different aspects of this borderland and serve to decipher the site. The entries in this film are only four selections from within several possibilities, picked because currently they seemed to best lend themselves to interpretation.

The four keywords taken up are:

### **A: Alien**

This word is derived from the basic question of intrusion versus origin in north-eastern India. The section of the video is based on interviews of unknown visitors as well as local people in a site in Sikkim; people interviewed at random and questioned about the purpose of their presence in the particular location and their brief experience in it.<sup>ii</sup> The voices reveal people who are in Sikkim for different reasons and durations of time; they consist of tourists, visitors on work assignments, employment seekers, migrant labourers with ambiguity of citizen status, students returning home for the holidays etc. – in short, people who share different degrees and nuances of belonging and outsidership with the place.

### **B: Beyul**

This word relates to the concept of a secret land, originating from Tibetan Theravada Buddhism. The concept projects a sacred site that the Buddhists of Nyingma sect believe is hidden in the Himalayas, where people of faith can take refuge when disturbed by civil unrest or natural calamities. By default, it perceives every other citizen as a potential enemy of Buddhism, hence necessitating an imaginary homeland, hidden like secret knowledge. The presence of this belief is felt when – as an instance – natural and manmade calamities converge – through the conduit of big dams. The lives, actions and decisions of the ethnicities in Sikkim are ordered by this belief in Beyul or the local parallel, Mayalyang, and it forms a connective between the indigenous communities. At the same time it isolates them from others. This section is built through contrary pools of reference- tangible issues placed side by side with folklore, and tries to reveal a community poised at the moment of drastic change.

### **F: Flow**

This section expounds on the idea of flow as opposed to the stasis of a trapped populace in a borderland site. Working with a special feature of the northeast- the sub-cultural music groups that travel and network locally among themselves as well as internationally, this section is based on the projections made by young and upcoming musicians of Sikkim, who are self-confident about their futures. These young professionals belonging to the television age are equipped to govern their own lives and their projections suggest a future of the site swinging between the flow of cultures and confinement of border locations.

## **S: Storyteller**

The word is derived from the traditional practice of storytelling, which is found in many border areas of the lower Himalayas. These storytellers carry legends mixed with contemporary happenings. This section is presented through an assemblage of two different streams of storytelling; one drawn from the old traditional storytellers, the other mostly from children's narratives.

This four-part video presents a collage of temporalities, bringing out the human map of the Sikkim borderland in fragments.

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<sup>i</sup> 'The power of the sentence-image is thus extended between these two poles, dialectical and symbolic; between the clash that effects a division of systems of measurement and the analogy which gives shape to the great community; between the image that separates and the sentence which strives for continuous phrasing.' Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (London: Verso, London, 2007), 58.

<sup>ii</sup> The names of the interviewees have been excluded to protect their identity.