



Ecological Alienation of West Bengal's Buxa Hill Residents in Alipurduar Area: An Assessment of the Environmental Development Process

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Abstract: The people of Buxa Hill and their surroundings are significant in terms of their sociocultural considerations. The historical background of the Buxa fort, centring on which habitats are enjoying the feelings of attachment and togetherness, finding a way of representing the self-identity, as every history does, is towards extinction. To preserve their rich history and the deed of historiography, they are much waiting for being in the least recognition, which speculates and extends the philosophical ground of the paper and tries to analyze their marginal condition. The ecosystem without humans is being formed through hypernaturalism in the name of ecosystem preservation and collaborating with different forces of globalization, implementing different programs and policies, and offering tourism activities to outsiders, a packaged field of entertainment that has reduced the human quality of life of the insiders. Unemployment, regional disparity, and state indifference push them into more marginal conditions. Only the third party defines and imposes development and other relevant processes; neither nature nor the concerned group can speak. Such a setting and the underlying reality broaden the sociological field and merit attention. The study attempted to illustrate the respondents' marginalization by recounting their perspectives and investigating the topic.

Keywords: Compartment, Ecosystem, Globalization, Historiography, Naturalism.

Introduction

Buxa Hill is situated at an altitude of 867 meters (2844 feet) on the *Sinchula Range* of the *Eastern Himalayas* inside the *Buxa Tiger Reserve* area in the Alipurduar district of West Bengal, India, which guards an important route to the Kingdom of Bhutan. Buxa is the region in the eastern part of North Bengal in the Alipurduar district,

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surrounded by the Kalimpong and Sikkim border and a little away from the Bhutan border (<https://alipurduar.gov.in/> accessed on 10/02/2022). It is the homeland of several tribal groups and some other categories of population (the *Rava*, the *Mech*, the *Dukpa*, the *Garo*, and many others) where they have lived for several generations with the contemporary history of Buxa and its kingship and consequently the fort. It is surrounded by several small villages, consisting of ten to twenty families and households in each village, with approximately twenty thousand living in the area (<https://alipurduar.gov.in/> accessed on 10/02/2022). The minimum growth rate of the population makes it a very low-density populated area. The significance of contemporary history and the present socio-economic condition have become the two ends with complete delink condition. Although the enclave with complex natural landlock conditions removes the place from significant consideration, their condition reflects a marginal condition from the rapid mainstream society that consequently suffered from total isolation and segregation.

From the ecological concern, the Buxa Tiger Reserve within the range of Buxa forests was declared the Tiger Reserve in 1983 (*BTR*). Geographically, it is situated in the southern sloping range of Bhutan. The existence of an enormous variety of creatures in this place incorporated it as a recreation centre, among which the tigers, civets, red wilderness fowls, etc., are significant wildlife. *Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR)* is being counted in the Alipurduar sub-division of the then Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. The northern part of the space runs along the global fringe of Bhutan. The *Sinchulaslopes* reach lies up and down the northern side of BTR, and the Eastern boundary touches the Assam State. The *Santalabari* is a wonderful habitat for the population in the Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR) central territory. This area stands out among the most well-known ranges in BTR and is the best place for natural significance and its geophysical location. It is the gateway with motor vehicle communicable concrete roadway (a few meters upside towards Buxa fort) to enter the BTR territory. After that, for the whole population, the only way to commute is to walk for an average of three to eight kilometres to reach their villages. Hence, to get some basic elementary commodities necessary in everyday life, they are compelled to cover the distance to *Santalabari*, where few shops and weekly '*haat*' (a small local market) take place. Beyond this basic need of commodities, they moved to Alipurduar (20 kilometres away from Santalabari) for which they depended upon a few numbers of medium vehicles such as *mini doors*, *sumo*, *jeep*, etc., which are moved once in a single day. It simply puts limitations and constraints on their necessities and severe conditions in case of health and other emergencies.

Background: Although the region is part of an independent nation, nothing has changed the condition of everyday life of its dwellers and their social reality. In the close part of Buxa, several villages depend upon a single primary school in the *Sadar Bazar* area near Buxa fort, which also lacks infrastructure and other non-availabilities. In this scenario, at the very district level, Alipurduar has an average literacy rate of 78 per cent, higher than the national average of 59.5 per cent. Still, the area has a below 50 per cent literacy rate amongst its population (Report on Economic Scenario & Prospects of North Bengal, 2016). No single family member has reached secondary education nor any possibility to go beyond that because to get into such an academic arena, they have to move more than twenty kilometres, and a large portion of this distance is a complete walking road only. Although the government has adopted several literacy programs and policies in several phases, the plight is different for the concerned group of people in the locality. They are compelled to cover a walk of six to nine kilometres down to have basic primary health services, and the situation becomes horrible in case of emergency issues. At the same time, while the nation is focusing on the issues of measuring the distance between people and nearby hospitals, the people of Buxa are in such a critical condition that to think about modern medicine and treatment is bleak. The district hospital is nearly fifty kilometres away from the concerned villages.

Moreover, in terms of communication availabilities, the area is in terrible condition; the nearest railway station is *Rajabhatkhawa*, approximately twenty-eight kilometres away from Santalbari and around 36 kilometres away from the BTR central territory, where the villages are concentrated. There are two kilometres of metal road from Santalbari towards the forest available. After that point, everyone has to cover an average of 6 to 9 kilometres walk, irrespective of vulnerable groups such as children, women, aged persons, and patients, to reach their villages. Neither a road nor any smooth walkway; only a trace of the foot with rough terrain and slopes is the only way to commute within this core territory. Residents depend entirely on the traditional nature-based treatment culture or occasionally visit nearby cities in severe cases. It is a hard challenge to find any alternatives to get into proper hospitalization or medical facilities at any cost in any immediacy except covering roughly 50 kilometres down to Alipurduar city. In most cases, such efforts eventually brought worthless results in severe conditions. Hence, this paper tries to delve into the root causation of such plight of the concerned population as well as this is to interpret the socio-economic condition and political ignorance and its consequences with some significant sociological insights which deserve an intense theorization to find out the social reality and may bring some positive changes.

Aims and Objectives

The present study focused on the community marginalization in the Buxa area of Alipurduar District in West Bengal, which is the residence of many tribal groups. The author aimed to examine the process of alienation of people from their habitat and the reason behind their lagging sociocultural conditions, which the modern approach and attitude to conserving ecosystems and biodiversity have conditioned. In doing so, the study has tried to enquire about the significance of contemporary history and its recognition with which people have a sense of belongingness and identity. The study has also aimed at understanding the impact of several policies and the intrusion of capitalistic order through the extension of the tourism industry upon the lives of local dwellers that gradually promoted and intensified the process of alienation. The study intends to examine the impact of controlling and reordering the interaction between people and the natural ecosystem and how it has ruined forest-dwelling communities in the area.

Methodology

Methodologically, the study has solely focused on the qualitative approach to understanding the authentic voice of the respondents. Therefore, qualitative observation techniques, case studies, and in-depth interviews have been conducted to collect the primary data and information. It remains significantly helpful to consider the respondent's inner voice and feelings. Several secondary pieces of literature were used to know the historical background, and more significantly, considering the oral history of respondents immensely helped the researcher sense the actual reality.

From twenty similar villages, the author has randomly considered three villages near the Buxa Fort as they bear the significance of history and visited two more villages to observe the present condition. For interviewing the respondents, the researcher applied the snowball sampling technique and was liberal in the selection process to those interested in expressing their opinions. In doing so, ten respondents were considered of adult age, seven male and three female. Beyond these, opinions and expressions of many other people have been observed, which remains crucial for the study.

Marginalizing History and Community

A compartmentalized world is detached from the totality, isolated and segregated from the larger part of the country, and consequently from mainstream interaction. It can be traced back to the history of the *Kamtapur kingdom*, which has become decaying as

the evaporated history (Burma, 2018, p. 6). Rather the total historiography indicates a more marginal condition of the region and its residents. As the nature of history, history is about the struggle for existence made by different classes, which are always formed and documented by the elites or the bourgeoisie of the society, where the opposite classes always remain neglected throughout the discourse of knowledge. After the independence of India, the formation of such historiographies eventually bypassed the history of several regions and confirmed the decaying history (Guha 1989, 335).

After being taken over from Bhutan by the treaty of Sinchula on November 11, 1865, the fort was used as a cell to incarcerate the contemporary Indian freedom fighters by the British authority. In the later phase of 1959, due to the Chinese invasion of Tibet, it served as the shelter for the refugee monks from Tibet. With all these phenomena, the local people have witnessed everything which still carries a kind of importance to them as a significant tradition. Some of them are dazzling in the tales of bravery of the marching soldiers & the fearless freedom fighters, while some are cruel ones with the sadistic prowess of the ruler over the subjects who dared to protest. Such forts or other monuments bear the social significance as the historical shreds of evidence for any community, group, or country (Keulartz 1999, 89). Unsurprisingly, the study's worried group wants to emphasize who they are and their connection to history since history provides identification and recognition in their eyes and voices. The state they experience is the opposite. As time passed, the fort's significance gradually declined and became completely vacant and abandoned, and eventually, the forces of nature took over it. Trees began to grow on the structure, the roofs and walls crumbled down, and the whole structure became a ruin and debris the fort.

In the present day, while the fort is considered the second-ranking central jail in Indian history, it also adds another petal to preserving and promoting historical potentiality for the local people who believe it deserves to be preserved and promoted. Even though every element in the space from which the concerned history could have been constructed and kept alive for preservation was available, the negligence and irresponsibility of the concerned authority and state role has completely lost its historical potentiality and caused it to be abandoned. Such a decaying reality of the graph of making history pushes the region and its community far away from consolidation with the greater society. The enormous evidence of the history of Buxa Fort centring, in which people enjoy feelings of attachment and togetherness, representing self-identity to others, is on its way to extinction, as every history does. Rather it has become a subaltern space with marginalized populations, and history has decayed to a remarkable level.

Tribal or peasant insurgents have not to be seen as merely 'objects' of inquiry but as makers of their history (Chakrabarty 2000, 932; Dhanagare 1988, 135-39). The central issue of preserving history has been neglected, even to the point of extinction, which increases the sense of separateness and isolation from the larger society and, ultimately, creates a subaltern world completely disconnected from the larger arrangement of society. Deduced from Gramsci's formulations with a tradition of scientific Marxism, Guha believes that the task of historiography is to interpret the past to change the present world, and such a change involves a radical transformation of consciousness (1989). The concerned community is not only engaged in counter-insurgency but also in the pre-political phenomenal phase of creating its own history, which fuels discontent and insurgencies.

With the involvement of several capitalist forces, a new graph of history has been created by projecting the significance of nature and its resources, while the true motive is to compress everything into mere commodification and generate profit through commercialization. Potentially, another approach is emerging nowadays to promote tourism in the form of packaged entertainment in the locality, with the paramount objective of making profits that cover and transform the social reality of the community and region into a peculiarity.

Ruminating Colonialism

As part of the Indian subcontinent, the area is an unrecognized compartment. It appears to be under intense scrutiny, which would successfully keep them in such isolation regarding environmental concerns. Beyond the historical compartmentalization and its creation, the currently concerned authority delineated the given area for two species: man and animal. The state authority and its apparatus promote such compartmentalization and isolation of humans, which is considered necessary and obligatory to improve environmental sustainability (Hussain 2008, 60-63). Such a group of humans is now considered an unnecessary and rather problematic group of individuals for the greater benefit of society. According to them, the history of British colonization was more favourable to them, and liberation brought them more ruin (personal communication). In terms of identity and recognition, the previous condition was more satisfied. Their voices express greater dissatisfaction with the state's role after independence, in which nothing has been allotted for their development or basic amenities. Instead, they are waiting to be forcibly evicted. In such conditions, they appreciate the contemporary period of colonization, where at least the community was considered part of the environment.

In contrast, after several decades of independence, they are marrying with many lacks of basic services and several inconsistencies, which shows the state's negligence. The whole region became an enclave where the Government of India, after passing over half of the century of independence, never felt to look back nor has taken any initiatives which would bring satisfaction to them; moreover, they are surprised with the proclamation of eviction. Such a situation and scrawling situation inevitably leads to insurgencies and conflict with the authorities. Along with this reluctance, malevolent powers gradually exploited the new government-sponsored colonialism regarding resource access. According to the respondents, the consumption and valuation of local environmental resources are always more important to national authorities than to the human resources who live there. It is limited to the requirements concerning the local community's role in environmental degradation. Furthermore, their version resurrects the thrust for other histories (Thapar 1990, 7). Such feelings of negligence and the internal ethnocultural consciousness raise a completely different context where the demand for liberation is emerging even by being in a so-called independent nation. Their protest is tagged as illegal, and the authority violently humiliates human quality.

Following the end of British colonialism, a newer form of colonialism emerged in which the state was the colonist or oppressor. That wretched region is the colony, and the people of it are oppressed and colonized. As a result, the concerned voice calls for a thorough challenge to the current situation, which they perceive as a response to such a re-colonialism. Subaltern historiography seeks to restore a balance by highlighting the role of the people's politics against elite politics in Indian history (Dhanagare 1993, 129-35). The contributions made by the masses in making society have gone unrecognized and unwritten due to their social placement and ignorance regarding means and mechanisms of speaking recognition (Spivak 2015, 92).

Process of Alienation

This region encompasses an area of approximately 760.83 square kilometres, with geographical hills and slopes mostly covered by forests. It has 35 villages with a total population of more than 20,000 people. Out of which, a total of 15 villages are there in the core region of the forest. The BTR harbours a wide range of animal diversity, which includes 68 species of mammals, 41 species of reptiles, four species of amphibians, 33 species of fishes, and 264 species of birds. The floral diversity includes 352 species of trees, 133 species of shrubs, 189 species of herbs, and a wild array of climbers, grasses, and orchids. It is a natural ecosystem with a variety of animal species and flora and fauna. Hence, a frequent number of man-animal conflicts usually occur in the region.

Given the situation and the approach to environmental protection and preservation, the National Forest Policy (NFP 1988) was implemented, and human intervention in protected forests was immediately prohibited. After independence, foresters in India decided they needed to save the Tigers of the Buxa region. Buxa forests were declared a Tiger Reserve in 1983, with 33 recorded forest villages and four Fixed Demand Holdings (leasehold lands under the control of the Forest Department), (<https://alipurduar.gov.in/> accessed on 13/02/2022).

From 1990 onwards, forestry activities dwindled and almost halted in many parts of the Reserve area. The old Dolomite caves and mines inside the Reserve space were closed down. Non-Timber Forest Produced collection has been prohibited in many areas, and cattle grazing has been declared an offence. Living inside the forests where they had spent years became a nightmare as foresters began to plan relocation strategies to other areas such as Jayanti, the lower part of the same hills. It has been declared part of the no-human activity permitted 'core' (Karlsson 1999, 2088). Thousands of people suddenly found themselves bereft of their daily livelihood. As jobless and hungry people were forced to take to the forests, the old Sal trees (known as the Pride of Buxa) began to disappear.

Even though we would find recognition, interpretation, and elaboration of different animal species from various available sources in these circumstances, there is no record and information about the species of humans that also belonged to the same place ecologically for years from the same ecosystem. Naturalism, taking care of nature, reservation, and preservation of the forest and its biodiversity are the environmentalist perspectives adopted by the government of India (Gadgil 1992, 269 and Chakrabarty 2009, 86). It has completely ignored species such as humans, as if humans are aliens who should be alienated by forcible eviction from their natural habitat, despite humans being part of a preexisting ecosystem. Concerning such social reality, it would be pertinent to enquire why only humans are omitted or not protected and preserved in their culture and society (Sivaramakrishnan 1999, 185-87).

Such connotations of naturalism and advocacy for ecosystem preservation have heightened human eviction from time to time (Sachs 2011, 1-7). The peculiarity is exaggerated by the fact that a sighting of a tiger by travellers on the roadside adjacent to the core area heightens the urgency to declare and prompts the preparation of eviction of existing communities from the affected region. In contrast, such happening is mundane in their everyday life, according to the voice of local people (personal communication). The Global Tiger Forum, Wild Life Institute, National Tiger Reserve Authority, and the Regional Forest Authority proposed to import tigers from different sources to this place.

It is believed that such community residences within this space will disrupt the tiger's mobilization landscape. Every such need regarding the nature and decisions is being made and ordered by outsiders, whereas locals are usually not considered in the decision-making process. Beyond nature and its humans, such a third party did not value the natural existence of those declared groups of people within the forests and hills, nor the sociocultural preservation of communities (Merton 1972, 38). As a result, the study attempts to uncover the reality that whatever exists within, including the conflict between humans and animals, is also a natural functioning of nature. The exercise of forced alienation through eviction from their habitat and replacement by importing wild animals is not concerned with nature; rather, it may increase doubt and incite feelings of insurgency among the inhabitants. Therefore, The approach of the study is to consider humans as a part of nature that is violated by state implementations and policies. Although the state's role in environmental protection appears positive, it violates nature's natural functioning. It considers humans to be outside of the natural empire. In such a way, different (Wild Life Protection Act (WLPA) 1972), (National Forest Policy in 1988) Acts and policies forcefully create a detachment of humans from nature. It would not only result in an unnatural human-free ecosystem but also violate individual rights. Eventually, it works as a *hyper-naturalism* and removes the human category from the ecosystem's biodiversity.

Commoditizing Community

The hypernatural activity and tourism procurement strategy negates humans' importance and shifts the emphasis from nature preservation to political control over resources. The land that indigenous people have held for centuries is now strategically in the hands of a third party in the form of an authoritarian government that has once again collaborated with various private business corporations. There are many instances where the particular forest land has been ceased for the local tribal people and transformed into a reserved area, reducing the ties of people with nature in the name of ecosystem preservation. These may eventually come under the control of corporate business houses. For instance, just the incident of the founding tiger may intensify the decision to displace the local community, exposing the situation where human qualities are being humiliated and violated. It is very surprising for the locals while they are experiencing that such lands after eviction are being used later for establishing different resorts and bungalows by the government authorities and as many private enterprises as well. The lessening of welfare attitude by the state and such activities of handing over the natural resources and properties traditionally owned by the community to

private ventures shows the transformation and manipulation to capitalistic gain. The state has sponsored this as a means to gain profit. Exploitation continues and promotes government-sponsored capitalism through which a particular subordinate community becomes marginal (Nash 1977, 13-15). Eventually, it becomes more surprising that such private and government enterprises offer a tourism package to the visitors to enjoy the beauty of nature as a category in the entertainment business field. Few local households are kept intentionally within or close to such resorts, which would serve the taste of ethnic and cultural tourism through the package of *homestays* (an arrangement of staying with a homely ambience) and other forms. Thereby exploitation intensified as they were being used as the source of profit altogether, increasing the attraction of the tourist enterprises by providing the taste of local culture to the visitors or tourists (Nunez 1963, 349). It is again lucrative for the particular capitalist activity and exploitative for the local people. Such a government-sponsored capitalistic arrangement offered a packaged field of entertainment to others.

Tourism and Alienation

According to Cohen (1984), the scientific study of tourism helps us understand the motivations, roles, relationships, institutions, and its impact on society. Tourism growth in the study area has a commercialized orientation that eventually forms industrialized hospitality (1984). In such a condition, different taglines are being used for advertising for marketing and expanding tourism business activities in those places. Phrases like *Paradise Unexplored*, *Duars- doors of heaven*, *a taste of nature and culture*, and many more are in use to make the attraction in the tourism market. They usually ensure the animal safari, pleasant weather, closeness to natural beauty, landscapes, wild and other photography. Like an open zoo, they offer the opportunity for excitement to show the animals like tigers, elephants, deer, yak, and leopards. In continuation of the excitement, such a marketing approach offers the taste of local tribal cultural representation by participating in different events of daily living and cultural occasions.

However, these do not remain true occasions; they become a planned presentation. It has been felt from their miserable voice that no local people own any homestays; their share is the contributions of different cultural activities and earning their livelihood under the command of business people from the outside (Nash 1996, 15). Such colonized voices understand the intention of national colonists and capitalists and prepare to oppose the exploitation they are subjected to. The oppressed colonized are aware of all of this and laugh whenever others call them animals (Greenwood 2012, 181). And, as it approached the boiling point, they would begin to sharpen

their weapons in preparation for victory. In the compartmentalization of the country, this particular compartment attracts the rest of India. The great laboratory serves throughout the century for many successful social pieces of research.

The impoverished people, cramped shacks, and cultural mosaic satisfy the appetite of the global tourism, entertainment, study, commercial, and social media industries. It becomes an amazing museum for appreciating the species of man with characteristics such as closeness to nature, unique food habits, and so on. Those communities and people with an attitude similar to zoo animals by others in their everyday lives were fabricated behind various such tags of many stigmas. It fosters a different spirit of insurgency in the community and fosters a lower level of complexity. Such knowledge of the outsider toward them as a crouched and cowering sector, a prostrate sector on its knees, fosters a sense of marginalization among them. Such people have been commoditized as part of a specific arrangement of the profit-making process. A certain group of people served as a commodity of entertainment to another group, lowering their human quality.

Discussion

In recent times, the idea of development has been heavily embedded with a specific attitude toward the conservation and protection of nature and the ecosystem. However, the dilemma persists in conceptualizing humans and their interactions and activities in the natural environment, whether to be considered natural or not. The abovementioned context has made us understand that humans and their interactions with natural ecosystems have been systematically discarded and alienated. Throughout the path of civilization, the struggle of groups and communities in the natural ecosystem has conditioned their life and belongings expressly. Considering this fact, the present study has tried to shed light on the issue of how history has been marginalized, which is a deterministic factor in framing the identity of any group of people. By discarding history, identity has been discarded for the people in Independent India. In comparison, recognition in the colonial regime is more appreciable to them.

Furthermore, the current approach and development attitude, manifested through conserving and protecting the natural ecosystem and its biodiversity, has evicted the people from their homeland. Implementing policies and laws makes people realize that humans and their activities can not be part of the ecosystem. Hence, they must be removed from the ecosystem, and activities and interactions must be controlled, which has extended the ground of humiliation and alienated them. At the same time, activities and interactions in the same ecosystem with another category of people in

the area have been offered and promoted in the name of modern cultural tourism. Therefore, the existence of remaining local dwellers and their shattered and controlled living has become a delicate saleable commodity in the modern tourism industry. Hence, a group of people's lives entertains another group, intensifying the sense of humiliation, disappointment and anger through their voice.

Conclusion

The concept of marginality has several parameters from which the particular study deals with two essential criteria; their historiography and the eco-adjustment. Although it has nationalist roots, it is associated with the political state and its bureaucratic apparatus rather than the 'nation' in any ethnic, linguistic, or cultural sense.

Their closeness to nature and less technologized pattern of living are considered inferior. According to some respondents, others are interested in their cultural heritage for entertainment and, as a result, for business reasons, but not in the same way other communities are. According to the postmodern school of thought, religious practices concerned with nature are far more scientific than other religious beliefs indicating another potential in the field. The whole thrust of subaltern historiography is on reconstructing *'the other history'* has offered a study of peasant insurgencies in colonial India. At the very moment, they are conscious of creating their version of history, starting from the counter-insurgencies for which they are sharpening their weapons. They are assigned a series of 'symposiums of culture' by spelling out their specificity and values.

Similarly, the people in this place are growing with a sense of humiliation, disappointment and dissatisfaction. The continuous force of eviction and displacement makes them vulnerable and marginalized socially. Moreover, the intrusion of capitalistic principles through the extension of the tourism industry confirmed their cultural marginalization, which sounds more pathetic and miserable from their voices.

Recommendation

Eradicating the problem should facilitate and contribute to civil society engagement, participation, and intervention in the region regarding the prevention of state-community conflict. As a result, the public, civil society activists, state representatives, journalists, academicians, and researchers can provide a better intermediate between the various stakeholders involved in the region's diverse conflict constellations while also contributing to the promotion of integration and socialization into a democratic

political culture through dialogue and civic education. More significantly, promoting research from a social science background can contribute to understanding the actual sociocultural condition of their life and living, which may draw the attention of policymakers. Establishing basic civic amenities is also necessary in the area, which could slightly improve their living. However, eliminating the approach and attitudes towards the conservation and protection of natural ecosystems and biodiversity, which forces to prove the humanless ecosystem may bring real good to them, and their culture and heritage may get recognition.

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