Urbanisation, Conservation and Eviction: Geography of Resistance in Guwahati City, Assam

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Abstract

The question of development is closely linked to the urbanisation in the 21st century. But most cities in India are being built up without sustainable urban planning. Guwahati city, located in the plains surrounding the hills of Meghalaya and North Guwahati is no exception in this regard. The lack of sustainable planning has aggravated the reduction of green cover in Guwahati city. Most of the peripheral areas in the city are home to the economically poor and displaced, migrated, landless, working classes. The efforts of the poor to settle in the peripheral sites of Guwahati city make them vulnerable in several contexts. Keeping this in mind, the study employs qualitative research that opens up a space to discuss the ethnographic accounts of the evicted communities in the fringe of the Amchang Reserved Forest. The increasing rate of evictions in Guwahati city highlights that everyday resistance becomes a part of the everyday lives of the marginalised, landless communities at risk of eviction. So, the chapter discusses the geography of resistance of the evicted communities amidst the pressures of urbanisation and eviction between 2017 and 2020.

Keywords: Urbanisation, Conservation, Land, Eviction, Resistance.

Introduction

Urban ecology does not only constitute the urban landscape with infrastructural changes; it is also relevant to understand the political struggle over resources, especially in the context of the cities of Northeast India. Ecological sustainability in urban centres emerged as a significant concern, although the ongoing discourse of urban development in the emerging cities like Guwahati reflects a contradictory picture of urbanisation and conservation. Therefore, the growing tension over land in the fringes of Guwahati city is relevant to articulate the meaning of 'urban' for those suffering from land insecurity. The struggle for land is the primary reason for resistance movements exercised and organised by marginalised communities to draw attention to the political meaning of land in Assam. In this

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context, the geography of resistance is a consciousness among the grassroots communities that encounter the lack of land accessibility and demands for land rights. Therefore, it is difficult to separate the land issue from the resistance of the communities that are displaced and evicted in the Brahmaputra Valley.

The conflict to dominate land is visible through various forms of statist ideology, such as evictions in Guwahati. Eviction drives conducted to protect forests, eco-sensitive zones, hills, and wetlands reveal a continuous pressure on landless communities and the working class by the state. A section of these communities is flood and erosion displaced, subsequently landless. Inter-district migration plays a central role in this context. Most displaced communities migrate to Guwahati, the nearest metropolitan city, for economic opportunities. Unable to afford accommodation in the city's heart, they are left to settle on the fringes (Baruah, 2023, 3). The indigenous/tribal and *Miya* communities occupied a significant portion of this section.

Another section of tribal communities, who were originally the settlers of the erstwhile tribal belts and blocks[†] had to shift gradually to the periphery of the city due to the pressure of urban growth. The indigenous tribal communities, such as Bodo, Karbi, and Mishing families, earlier became part of the tribal belt and blocks. Xaxa (2008) stated that land is the "life-support system of tribals" that consistently transfers from the tribes to the non-tribes in the form of "fraudulent transfers, forcible eviction, mortgages, leases, and encroachment despite legislation restricting the alienation from tribes to non-tribes" (8). In the contemporary urban landscape, the city witnesses a geography of dispossession, degradation and resolute resistance by these communities who are evicted with brute force.

The disappearing land and emerging conflicts between the state and the landless communities reproduce some new dimensions of the land issue in the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam. The disappearance of land implies not only physical disappearance in floods and erosion but also the inaccessibility of land rights for specific communities in Assam. Various colonial policies have distinguished land from forest and revenue. This distinction is more visible under the bureaucratic divisions of the post-colonial state, with the interference of Revenue and Forest departments. Grazing land and protected forests are traditional forest lands that are entitled to conservation. The Eco-Sensitive Zone is a recent intrusion under the Forest department. It is regarded as a transition zone between the forest and settlement that inevitably emerged as a conflict between the communities and the Forest department in Amchang.

The Janasimalu village, Amchang eviction happened on 27 November 2017 due to the gap in transparency between the Forest and Revenue Departments. The eviction drives have distinct

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[†]Under the provision of Section 161 of Chapter X of the *Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886 (Amendment) Act, 1947,* the State Government has constituted 17 Tribal Belt and 30 Tribal Blocks in the State so far in areas predominantly inhabited by the people of notified classes. The Belts are larger units, while the Blocks are similar ones. Land holders in tribal belts and blocks are barred from transferring their land to any person who is not a permanent resident in that belt or block.

features in understanding the connection between urbanisation, conservation, and eviction. First, the eviction site is located on the fringe of Guwahati city and is inhabited by mostly flood and erosion-induced displaced communities. Second, the eviction drive was conducted by the state as a requirement to protect the forest for the sustainability of the urban ecosystem by highlighting indigenous/tribal and *Miya* communities as encroachers. Third, the eviction drive articulates the indigenous people's rights over land amidst tensions and debates around indigeneity.[‡] It is important to understand the current political nuances around indigeneity and citizenship from the perspective of land. The autonomy demands of several tribal communities in Assam indicate that there is always pressure on them from the major Assamese-speaking non-tribal groups. The alienation of tribals from Assamese sub-nationalism is a major concern, while the desire of the *Miya* community to assimilate into Assamese majoritarian society is not fully accepted. This dichotomy is a primary fact because of which civil society is silent in evictions against the *Miya* community but raises its voice for the indigenous or tribal. The polarisation of eviction in this way matters for the communities that are landless, displaced, and evicted.

The dichotomy between the indigenous/tribal and *Miya*communities is historically a debate over the political climate of Assam which gets transformed into encroachers versus protectors in the process of displacement and eviction. *Miya*has been used in the public domain in Assam to denote the Bengali origin of Muslim peasants. However, academic discourse has increasingly used to imply the Bengal-origin Muslim peasants as an ethnic entity.[§] The context of the use of the term in the article is not in a derogatory sense. The community members have used *Miya*in the public domain as neither Axomiya nor Bengali. Here, the term is used to denote the difficulty of not being included within the cultural mainstream of the Brahmaputra Valley. The article uses the term to signify the poor working class, who are primarily engaged in the informal economy of the state and who suffered from natural disasters such as floods and erosion, as well as the political nexus of the state. Furthermore, these tensions are historically reproduced in addressing the land issue of the *Miya* community regarding citizenship.[**]

The eviction drive in Amchang discloses that the indigenous political claim is a claim over land central to the state's politics in Assam. In contrast, the rights over land of the *Miya* community are substantiated through various legal provisions such as citizenship. It is more

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[‡]These issues became more prominent with the final Report on the Committee for Protection of Land Rights of Indigenous People of Assam, 2017 and the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA). The Citizenship Amendment Bill became Citizenship Amendment Act on 12 December 2019, under the Ministry of Law and Justice, India.

[§]For instance, Miya poetry is one of the radical emergence which draw attention towards Miya identity and the double disadvantages that they face during the NRC process due to their Muslim and of Bengali heritage (Barbora, 2019, p. 8).

[**]The complicated history of the state of Assam and its changing demography plays a dominant role in the state through politics of autonomy, indigenous rights, and control over land. NRC, as legal and political documentation, plays the role of massive digitalisation on identity to verify the citizenship question, while the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 is contradictory that reveals anxiety against the Indian state, especially among the Miya communities on their existing Indian citizenship (Sur, 2021, p.147).

visible in the eviction drives in Janasimalu village, Amchang which failed to deliver that "urbanism is a way of life" (Soja and Kanai 2006, 58). Irrespective of its close proximity to the heart of the city, the eviction drive in Amchang differs from the statement of Soja and Kanai. Rather it raised the question why urbanisation is a process of marginalisation of landless indigenous/tribal and *Miya* communities? Based on such question, the article is divided into three sections. The first section explains conservation versus eviction in Guwahati City. The second section discusses the politics of urbanisation in the context of indigenous geographies. The third section emphasises urbanisation amidst the geography of resistance of the grassroots communities who become the eviction victims.

Designing Urban vs Defining Urban

Geographically, Guwahati city is unique in its location, surrounded by numerous hills and wetlands connected to the Brahmaputra River. The Master Plan for Guwahati Metropolitan Area 2025, notified on 9 July 2009, stated that "all notified forest, water bodies, rivers etc. are classified as Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZ)." In the case of Amchang eviction, the conservation of ESZ was highlighted as a major concern for the Forest Department because the villages residing in the fringe of the ESZ were evicted. Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZ) are proposed for protected areas such as National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries as a transition zone from areas of high protection to areas involving lesser protection. ESZ is essentially isolating layers where humans and nature can be at peace with each other. However, creating these zones formed the meaning of urbanisation for the marginalised and precarious communities who faced displacement in floods and erosion and were later evicted in the name of encroachment. In reality, these communities suffered in dual displacements and became landless proletariat.

Although the conservation of forests is highlighted as an objective for the ecological balance of Guwahati city, the city's decreasing urban forest reflects the poor conservation, protection, and management of forest and revenue policies of the state. The empirical evidence and observations from the field revealed that the expansion of urbanisation is a major reason for decreasing forest cover in the city. There is a huge pressure on the fringe areas, mostly the hills. The Master Plan for Guwahati 2025 reflects such objective "to conserve Guwahati's sensitive natural environment," which according to the Plan, includes "the hills, water bodies and the vast Brahmaputra River." Developing new towns in the fringes of Guwahati city is one of the major objectives of the Master Plan 2025 that became another pressure on the forest cover. In such a situation, it is significant to emphasise how the communities struggling in the fringe of the Guwahati city interpret the meaning of 'urban.'

A respondent from Amchang eviction implied,

> It seems like only those who are residing near a forest or in the hills are encroachers. If we receive proper resettlement after being displaced in floods and erosion, then we would never buy land here and struggle for livelihoods. We also need conservation; because as a marginalised community we are more dependent on forest resources. But

government departments never identify us as the protector of forests, rather we are blamed as encroachers. Gradually, the rich and powerful sections only have land rights in Guwahati. Urbanisation is not for us but for them, although the poor, displaced, landless sections have to suffer the most.

The empirical evidence resonates with the "ratchet effects" that make "poor people permanently poor" (Chamber1983, 114). The 'ratchet effects' can be emphasised in the Brahmaputra Valley as an episodic process of displacement originated from floods and erosion but contextualised with poverty and indigeneity. Although both the indigenous and *Miya* communities suffer from landlessness, they are not addressed as a precarious class; rather, their identity receives more attention while addressing land rights. The individuals in question canrather be seen as a representative social group within the already susceptible region of Assam, frequently experiencing a sequence of interconnected calamities, hence impeding their ability to effectively recuperate from one calamity before encountering another.

A respondent from Amchang eviction stated,

The Forest Department is the most corrupt. The stone quarries, the cement factories, and the big bungalows cannot be constructed without prior notice from the Forest Department in Amchang. It has become their routine to occasionally carry out such evictions for forest conservation. Certain economically powerful people settled in the region by taking advantage of the corruption of the Forest department. Then they blamed the landless sections as encroachers although we paid revenue to the Revenue Department. The conflict between the Forest Department and Revenue Department is a major reason of Amchang eviction.

The empirical evidence implies that the organised encroachment of forest lands by certain economic classes is patronised under the "shadow state" (Barbara Harris-White 2003, 77), such as the Forest and Revenue Departments. The meanings of forest and land are different for different bureaucratic departments, grassroots communities, and the state. Each department intends to exercise power over the resources such as land and forest, and in this process, certain communities are marginalised. It later made the working class more precarious and powerless, who mainly suffered from eviction, not the patronised class. The Forest and Revenue Departments thus became a part of the "shadow state" that emerged as a powerful entity, primarily benefiting the interest of the post-colonial state of Assam.

The above empirical evidences reveal two distinct aspects of eviction drives in Assam. Firstly, eviction against encroachment in the name of conservation implies the inadequate steps taken by the Forest Department to give prior protection to the forest. Secondly, the poignant and distressing struggle against eviction makes certain communities more vulnerable in the larger discourse of land rights. These two pictures adjoin as a permanent conflict between the state and the landless communities where the Eco Sensitive Zone

emerged as a new regulation for the control of forest resources along with the massive pressure of urbanisation. The increasing urbanisation induced constructions in the fringe of the city reveal the lack of serious interest in preserving the urban ecosystem. In such circumstances, the urban governmentality of Guwahati city gradually transformed the ecologically sustainable landscape into a vulnerable urban sphere.

Urbanisation and Conservation – The Missing Links

Urbanisation plays a major role in terms of synchronising tribal land rights in the post-colonial state of Assam. The capitalist production and the continuous systems of accumulation regarding land issues in Assam imply that a certain landless section in the Brahmaputra Valley became a landless proletariat. It constantly pointed towards the nature of the political economy of land, which reveals the increasing land price in a rapidly urbanised capitalist structure. It resonates with Harvey's (2006) discussion on eviction as a process that manufactures a 'landless proletariat' working class with a lack of property who only has labour to sell (149). For instance, Dispur, the capital of the state, was a part of the South Kamrup Tribal Belt (Baruah 2019, 90). During the post-independence period, the tribal lands of South Kamrup were obtained by the state by enforcing eviction on the tribal communities, and this forced the tribal communities to gradually move to forests or hills.

A respondent emphasised on the expansion of the Dispur capital area and stated,

> "The capital expansion under the *Assam State Capital Region Development Authority Act,* 2017 will exclude 378 villages of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council, along with 268 villages of the Tiwa Autonomous Council which are originally located in the tribal belt and blocks. Currently, the government is silent about the Act and its implementation, but it is not withdrawing. If it implements till Jagirod, Palashbari and Tamulpur, most tribal inhabitants who have been here for centuries will be in a risk of eviction. These tribal people in this entire region are mostly belong to the Karbi, Tiwa, Rabha and are already in a precarious condition; they will be impoverished after the implementation of the Act."

The empirical data thus reveals that various state-sponsored provisions are responsible for the pressure on indigenous and tribal land. This process is silently extending, transferring tribal land to non-tribal land, especially in the emerging urban centres of the state. The disappearance of indigenous geographies can thus be observed in three very distinct ways. First, the indigenous population loses land to floods and erosion in rural regions. Second, the tribal lands in central locations are in high demand and are occupied through the process of urban extensions. Third, and most importantly, the segregation of indigenous and tribal populations from the buffer of the forests is the most recent yet profound factor in transferring valuable lands from tribal to state hands. Among these, the first process is addressed as natural, the second aspect is adopted as a part of development, and the third part is titled as conservation. However, all three interventions can be emphasised as a politics of the capitalist state rather than the protection of tribal land as mentioned in the regulation of

tribal belts and blocks. Therefore, the transformation of indigenous/tribal lands to non-tribal also implies to the nature of urbanisation in Guwahati city as 'a class phenomenon' (Harvey, 2008) where the post-colonial state of Assam became an actor of capitalist state.

The question of the state occupies a central place in the present study due to the historical intervention of the colonial and post-colonial states of Assam. The responsibility of the state is highlighted concerning the role of the state of Assam in addressing flood, erosion, and eviction. Johnston (1989: 70) interpreted the colonial state as a dominant actor over the environment in the process of exclusion of resources. Johnston suggests that "states must be there to do certain things; otherwise, capitalism will fail." It can be emphasised that the colonial state of Assam was not only a state of domination, rather resource extraction was the prime target of the state that generated revenue production.

Johnston (1989: 71) stated that the "state's role as the facilitator of the capitalist system links the actor to contemporary environmental problems that are essentially a by-product of the system." The intensity of floods and erosion has been observed increasing after the intervention of hydraulic engineering, which clarifies that these are the outcomes of the capitalist ideology of the colonial state of Assam

The tribal villages of Kangkan Nagar, Doni Polo around Amchang region also have to suffer the risk of eviction. The geographic origins and meanings of the toponomy[††] of these villages implies that these are mostly dominated by the Mishing tribe (Baruah2023, 3). These indicates the diversion of indigenous geographies in the form of transformation of tribal land to non-tribal. It emerged as a conflict between the tribal and not-tribal communities regarding the dominance over land in the later stage. A respondent stated,

> "Successive governmentsare ignoring the provisions of the Tribal Belt and Block. The grabbing of tribal lands is increasing and it becomes a threat for us. The main intention behind this is to fulfil the demands of the capitalists. Because, without land, nothing can happen for the big corporates. Land area is decreasing all over Assam, and the only land available are the tribal land, in tribal belts and blocks in Assam. So, anyhow the state wants to grab these tribal lands. Traditionally tribal communities/tribes live near the forest, wetlands or in the hills for so many generations. Now they blame us that we are the encroachers of the forest."

The empirical information reveals that the drastic urbanisation is not only a threat to the ecological balance but also a jeopardy for the indigenous geographies, which are closely associated with land and ecology. Twenty-first century urbanisation in Indian cities which is intimate to capitalism consistently facing problems of territorial control over land. The crisis of the urban political ecology reveals that 'right to the city' is "most precious yet most

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[††]Toponymy means the taxonomic study of place names based on historical, etymological, and geographical origin.

neglected of our human rights" (Harvey 2009,315) because of which predominantly the precarious class living in the periphery has to suffer most.

Geographies of Resistance: *BrihattarJanasimalu Janakalyan Committee*

The growing tensions over land rights are politically complex in the Guwahati city, where urbanisation and transfer of tribal land to non-tribal go on simultaneously. Geographical and historical claims over land have long been considered a source of resistance among the communities in the state. The reasons for the resistance in Janasimalu village, Amchang, emerged with some distinct spatial meanings. The geography of resistance in the village against the eviction and the demands for land rights ranges from the collective voices of civil society, student organisations, and activists to the voices of the landless. There are certain practices of resistance among the families who suffered eviction and struggled for their land rights in Janasimalu village.
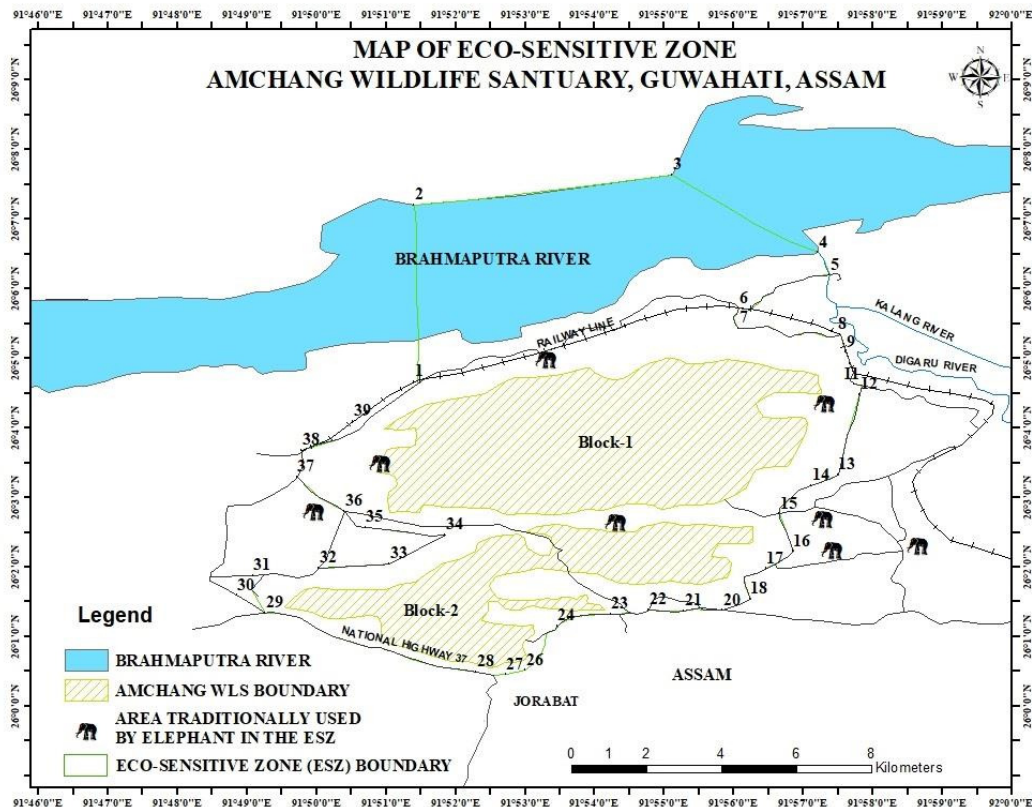

Fig. Adopted from the Forest Department (Prepared with the help of Arc GIS)

The process of eviction has been resisted in the village immediately after the eviction with the formation of the local committees, known as *Brihattar Janasimalu Janakalyan Committee.* The *Brihattar Janasimalu Janakalyan Committee* is a local committee that became active in the post-eviction milieu in Janasimalu village. The primary role of the Committee was to organise the families on one platform to raise their voices against eviction and the demands for land rights. Committee was formed intentionally because of the

complexity of defining the legitimacy of land between the Forest and Revenue departments. The secretary of the *Brihattar Janasimalu Janakalyan Committee* stated in an interview,

> "The Committee was formed immediately after the eviction in 2017. The primary objective of the Committee is to address our basic issues, especially land security. It is the village's only organised body that regularly addresses the land issue on public platforms. Our village has been settled with a gazette notification under the revenue department. The conflict between the revenue and the forest should be solved so that people like us should not suffer again. Our committee, therefore, demands a permanent solution and demarcation between the forest and the revenue villages. For this, we are fighting court cases as a *raij* (community), although the final verdict is yet to come. We are continuously engaged in this process for justice for our sufferings."

Intentional resistance is powerful when its role is formative and organised. The empirical narrative implies that intentional resistance in Janasimalu village incorporates prolonged suffering, but it continues as a cooperation process between the families undergoing the eviction. The disagreement with the forest department and the refusal of the families to leave the village reflect a strong intentional resistance that emerged with the formation of the *BrihattarJanasimalu Janakalyan Committee*. The president of the Committee stated,

> "As a representative of the *raij*, we are dealing with the eviction issue wholeheartedly because it hurts the sentiments of our *raij*. We might not be too wealthy or might not be as powerful as the political elites, but we also have our voice. If nobody cares for us, we must raise our voices against injustice. Because we need to secure our land."

The empirical data implies that intentional resistance is consciously entangled with the "negotiation of power" (Bosworth and Carrabine 2001, 501). The conscious decision to form a committee to handle the land issue in Janasimalu village reflects organised resistance that is intentionally designed. In this case, the idea of *raij* broadens the knowledge of a structured political aim to manage the resistance among the villagers. The meaning of *raij* is a mixture of different families irrespective of their ethnic and religious identity, class, and language. *Raij* can also be defined as "the masses" (Dutt1955, 216), 'local people/inhabitants' (Hazarika 1987), or 'collected body of people' (Saikia 2014, xiii). The empirical narrative strongly implies that *raij* has similar sufferings and struggles that emerged as resistance in the village.

The political and ethical responsibility for land rights is a major concern for evicted families struggling with indigenous/tribal and *Miya* identities. The empirical narratives describe that intentional resistance emerged as a form of collective responsibility among the villagers within the context of the political effects of the eviction. The meaning and action of the intentional resistance regarding land issues in the Brahmaputra Valley have historically been mobilised among the landless communities. The communist leadership played an essential

role in the early 1940s in mobilising these peasants for their land rights, especially in the villages. Like in North Bengal, the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) started to organise landless peasants (Saikia 2014, 3). This mobilisation reached a turning point in 1945 with the slogans tin bhag (one-third share) and nangal jar mati tar (The Ploughman Owns the Land) under the leadership of the RCPI. Land rights issues became more well-known because of these slogans, which helped communist parties grow their rural support and gave them the courage to question Congress's power in Assam (Saikia 2014, 4). It began the collective action concerning land rights in Assam under the peasant leadership, which is highly relevant to studying the geography of resistance in post-colonial Assam. Therefore, the concern of *raij* in the case of Janasimalu village eviction is a political and spatial practice of intentional resistance.

However, the nature of the demonstrations for the demands of land rights in Janasimalu village differs from the previous intentional resistances for specific reasons. First, the lack of a network among the communities residing in the forest buffers and the insecurity of eviction limited the protest to specific spaces. Second, the lack of a diverse activist network that could produce varied protest performances was absent in the resistance process in Janasimalu for a long-term demonstration. Third, limitations raise the issue of land protection and forest conservation as simultaneous processes required to sustain lower-income groups. These limitations diverted the intentional resistance mostly visible in virtual spaces rather than the continuation of physical appearance.

Conclusion: Rethinking Urban Context in case of Guwahati
The article discussed that urbanisation and the politics of conservation are two processes which are leading to widespread evictions in the periphery of Guwahati. This process is silently extending, transferring tribal land to non-tribal land, especially in the emerging urban centres of the state. Therefore, the disappearance of land rights can be observed in three very distinct ways from the above discussion. First, both the indigenous and *Miya* communities loses land in floods and erosion in riverine regions. Second, the tribal lands in central locations are in high demands and are occupied through the process of urban extensions. Third, and significantly, the segregation of indigenous and *Miya* populations from the buffer of the forests is the most recent yet profound factor in transferring valuable lands from marginalised landless class to state hands.

Among these, the first process is understood as natural although floods and erosion are not entirely natural rather colonial and post-colonial 'hydraulic engineering'[‡‡] is responsible for

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[‡‡]The hydraulic engineering introduced a new environmental geography in Eastern and North Eastern India, where floods are consistently defined a disaster. The practice of colonial flood control is an ideological construction, and it became an artefact assembled by a specific political economy. During the 19th century, there was a deliberate and organised increase in the construction of flood control embankments with the purpose of confining rivers within their main channel (D'Souza 2006b: 225). It implies that the quest to control the river in British India is not simply "a narrative about hydraulic engineering regarding triumph or failure but functionalised as a distinct mechanism of colonial capitalism for revenue generation" (D'Souza 2006a: 4). Post-colonial hydraulic engineering includes the

this.The second, as a part of urbanisation which is intensely visible in terms of concrete constructions in a city like Guwahati.Finally, the third is titled as conservation and has become a prominent reason of contemporary evictions in Assam. All three interventions can be seen as politics of the capitalist state in the name of indigenous/tribal land protection.

Therefore, urbanisation in Guwahati is challenging to discuss separately from land rights, conservation politics, and eviction. Gradually the meaning of urban in the city only remains with the concrete constructions, such as the massive extension of the overbridges. The geographical embeddedness of resistance in Janasimaluvillage eviction is linked to the growing pressure over land belonging to the marginalised working class. However, it is challenging to convey the meaning of urbanisation for the working class, who are not only landless but also vulnerable regarding their political identity. The article examined that conservation politics is a new paradigm to conduct eviction and bypass land rights from the indigenous/tribal and *Miya* communities to the state. Decreasing forest cover to fulfil the objective of urbanisation in Guwahati city alternatively pressurised eviction drives of the indigenous/tribal and *Miya* communities from the fringe of the city. The changing urban landscape, indeed, not only emerged as the transformation of land rights from tribal to non-tribal but rather the absence of sustainable urban governance and integrated and inclusive urban policy explicitly make complex the land issue in Guwahati city.

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objectives of flood control in general and the administrative control over the river in particular. The construction of embankments, spurs, using of geo bags and porcupines can be regarded as technical control of the river while formations of different flood control agencies can be regarded as a part of the administrative control over the river.

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